

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | Mark 1:4-11

Date | January 10, 2021



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

We worship together this morning in the shadow of gunmen and the needless loss of five, precious human lives. We offer our praises to the Prince of Peace amid shards of broken glass and the wreckage of weapon-totting mobs reaping the violence that their mobster had sown. Images of infamy have been burned into the collective American mind, broadcast across the world. While it is shocking, it is not altogether surprising. It is something we should grieve and reject as a deeply sad aberration.

I wonder, what have you been telling yourself these past several days about the state of our union? Or perhaps a harder question: on Wednesday night, if you had children with you at home, what did you say to them as you put them to bed? What would you have said to your grandchildren? For it seems to me that this is a time for us to ask one another what kind of American story we will pass on to the generations to come.

As it happens the Christian story is no stranger to the mob, and is all too familiar with the mobster. The Roman power that dominated the everyday lives of Jesus and his first followers had been shaped over the final decades of the Republic by the routine use of mob violence to achieve political ends. Clodius, in his struggle with Cicero for the soul of the Roman political establishment, was adept at using mobs to prevent senators from voting. The parallels are chillingly close to home, especially when you fast-forward into the ancient Roman version of the story.

As the structures that had held together the Roman Republic's political order buckled under the weight of the movement to authoritarian and autocratic imperial rule, Roman politicians almost exclusively used extortion and violence to accomplish their goals, with the Republic finally crashing down in the bloody murder of the mob-leader in chief himself, Julius Caesar. Such an end was perhaps inevitable, for violence had been traded for truth; mob-rule exchanged for the law.

It's more than a cautionary tale, more than just an interesting parallel to our own place and time where politicians and their sidekicks call for 'trial by combat'. This story of the implosion of the Roman Republic and the emperor cult that took its place is the context of the clear and stark choice that Mark's gospel presents to Jesus' ancient first followers and also to us: the way of the Lord, or the way of the emperor - not parallel paths followers of Jesus can simply move over from one to the other, but roads that lead in opposite directions. If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. Within the cultic world of Roman mythology and the theological world of the gospels, the choice simply asks this: which son are the people willing to follow?

The living emblem of Roman imperium was Caesar. The emperor ruling at the time of Jesus' baptism, Tiberius Caesar Augustus, had inherited the throne from his step-father, Caesar Augustus, who had solidified the cult status of the emperor. Himself a son by adoption of Julius Caesar, claimed the title 'son of a god', following Julius Caesar's deification by Augustus. The emperor was referred to as 'Lord', as the 'Savior' who brought peace and stability to the known world, the pax romana established not by proclamation but by the violent brutality of Roman justice.

Given the unrivaled power of the emperor, it was less a choice to support this 'son of a god', and more a survival tactic. The people of Jesus' day subsisted alongside fantastical descriptions of the emperor's qualities and achievements through the arts and in the construction of edifices and the production of imperial currency. Loyalty to the emperor was both sycophantic and absolute. There was no middle ground allowed for dissent. The emperor's rule was a cult; the people were to be more than subjects, they were to be devotees.

It is against this backdrop of the imperial cult that Mark lays out his record of Jesus' life, beginning as we hear it today in the witness of John, as he foretells the One who will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit. One, therefore, who doesn't simply place himself above others, but invites all the people into the divine life. This Jesus, proclaims the heavens, is the Beloved, the Son of the living God.

The choice established at the start of the gospel between the Son of the God of grace and the son of imperial power, creates a tension that plays itself out throughout Mark. In response to one of Jesus' first miracles - the healing of a man with a withered hand - it is the barely mentioned Herodians - a political party aligned with Rome - that join the Pharisees in plotting Jesus' destruction. A couple of chapters later, Mark's telling of the man healed among the tombs has clear Roman political overtones referring to a 'legion' of demons possessing the man who are then drowned in the sea. Later in the gospel, Jesus warns his disciples of the 'yeast of Herod', the client king of Rome. And at the climax of this contest of sonship, Jesus stands trial before Pilate, the emperor's representative in Judea, and it is a Roman centurion who proclaims Jesus' divine sonship at the foot of the cross.

For Mark, the choice between the sonship of Caesar and the sonship of Jesus is at the heart of the good news his gospel sets forth. If Mark is to proclaim Christ he must do so decoupled from the corrupt political power of Rome. In the world of Jesus and John, extortion and bribery, arrest and execution without fair trial, land seizure and the violent enforcement of the same, the accumulation of wealth for the very few at the expense of the masses, all built a society that left the vast majority of people in abject poverty, and the infirm, widowed, indebted, and enslaved, brutalized. It was a version of the world that Jesus could not accept.

Jesus' vision for the kingdom of God, laid out in parables and teachings and through his actions, constituted a theopolitical counter-statement to the world he was born into. Jesus described his life as a ransom, as a way to redeem, to buy back the order of things that God established in the beginning of creation as we heard read this morning in Genesis. For Jesus, it is not the might of Rome that orders the world but the grace and love of God the Creator of the heavens and the earth. The gospel is clear: faced with the choice, we are to choose the Way of the Kingdom.

In this our place and time, then, what of our choice?

To be a follower of Jesus today does not require us to renounce our political affiliations out in the world, any more than it requires us to keep them hidden at church. Faith, given that it can only be lived out in the world we live in, is inherently and inescapably political. And politics, when it is alive to the angels of our better natures can indeed be faithful. With that hope, imagining ourselves at the banks of the Jordan, bearing witness to the opening of the heavens as Jesus is baptized and the kingdom of God is inaugurated before us, what choice might we make in the life of our here and now?

I choose this. Inciting a mob to march on the peaceful assembly of elected officials is contrary to the way of Jesus. For an everyday person to lie to others is against the will of God, yet for elected officials to do so repeatedly and to deadly effect is something that deserves our strongest condemnation. When a mob breaks through the glass in the U. S. Capitol, creating havoc and terror therein, leading to the loss of five infinitely valuable human lives and perhaps more, not only is our democracy assaulted, all of us are. It is wrong. It is sinful. It is far from what is intended for us as beloved children of God. The Way of Jesus is incompatible with the way of violence and the incitement to violent action.

I believe that we must now ask one another how it came to be that we settled so fully as a society with a political culture of dishonesty. We must challenge those who hold public office, at every level, to end this era of personalized and vitriolic rhetoric. We must ask our judicial system and we must ask one another why the behavior of law enforcement looks so different when the color of the skin of the perpetrators is white rather than black or brown. And we must not assume that we can simply return to business as usual because business as usual has rotted out and the sooner we can come to that sort of epiphany the sooner we can start to speak truth to what has become a demonic kind of power.

This moment demands of us to ask questions such as these, yet it is not all that we should feel compelled to undertake. For we need to hear with moral clarity and urgent commitment the first theological word of Mark's gospel and what it has to say to us right now: repent. We are in dire need of making our confession. We simply must renounce the telling of lies. For the first theological lesson of our faith teaches us that truth is not negotiable.

We need the truth. I believe that we need to confess to one another that the mob who stormed the Capitol was more than a fringe element somehow unrelated to our larger American life. We need to confess that what we saw on Wednesday night was us. If we are to ask what kind of American story we are passing on to our children today, then I believe we are obliged to say that it is a story that has failed to reckon with its past. The specter of fascism has been a clear and present danger to the principles of freedom, justice and dignity in this country for generations. We need to hear the stories from the darkness of this country's past. For without truth there will be no justice. Without truth there will be no reconciliation. Without truth there will be no future we can all find a place to live in.

As history teaches us, the story that unfolded in the collapse of the Roman Republic was one where violence and deceit begot more violence and deceit. Yet, as the history of our faith also teaches us, the worst that we have said or done does not have to be where the story ends. There have been many times in my life when I have needed to hear the hope-filled words of God's grace. Times when I have been so sure that I was right, or wrong, or lost, or powerful. Yet those words of hope, that presence of divine love in my life has been more than an exercise in my honesty to God. At those times when I have come to see something of the fullness of the grace of the God who loves me immeasurably more than I merit or understand, it has been for me as if a whole new vista has opened up.

One of the prime reasons why I believe we as Christians should speak directly to the nature of the politics in our lives is because as people of the living hope that we know in Christ Jesus, we have extraordinary good news to offer the world we live in. Fast-forward into the story of the Son of God we know in Jesus Christ. What happens after the baptism of our Lord in the Jordan? The sick are healed. The hungry are fed. The outcasts are welcomed in. The sinful are forgiven. The dead are raised. A new creation is born.

It is not only the American story that is at its best when it turns a page and starts anew, it is the human story too. This has been a sorrowful week in the life we share, yet we worship this morning, all the same, in the name of a Savior who rose out of the waters of his baptism 2000 years ago, as nobody of note yet beloved of God. Two millennia later and the course of human history has been transformed and is still being transformed because of this Jesus whom we proclaim as Lord.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, God said, 'Let there be light'. You and I now are that light, along with every wondrous and precious human life that walks the earth. Let us start to tell a better story for the generations to come. Our Savior is at the water's edge promising a way of new and abundant life for all. Let us make our way to that opening for repentance and new birth. The Lord is here. His Spirit is with us. Lift up your hearts. For the Son, our Savior, will show us the way.