Hope

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Texts:  
     Jeremiah 33:14-16  
     Luke 21:25-36

Every year since I was a kid, I have kept my own personal Christmas tradition. I am not sure when I started doing this, and I am sure others do this too, but several nights during Christmas time, at night after everyone in the house has gone to bed, I sit by the Christmas tree, all lit up, and I look at the lights, the shape of the tree, the branches and, of course, all of the ornaments, and I think about everything. I reflect. I think especially about the past year – since the last time I sat by the tree. What am I thankful for? What has changed in my life and in the world? What still needs to change?

One thing I love to do now is — since my wife Marti and I were married at Christmas time, in fact, it will be 25 years the 21st! — I think about our life together. At our wedding many of the friends and family who came brought us ornaments that we still hang on our tree, so now I get to sit and think about them: how they are doing, how their lives have been the past 25 years. It really is one of my favorite things to do.

I was thinking about this when I read in Luke’s gospel, Jesus’ admonition to consider the signs of the times; to look at signs in all of creation. The two passages we read today really create a unique intersection; the Lukan passage takes place at the end of Jesus’ life and in looking at the signs of the times Jesus is urging his followers to take a hard and sober look at life’s realities; at the forces in the world that oppose his ministry. Even though there is hope in his message, it is hope in the midst of struggle and certain struggles that are to come.

At what looks on the surface to be other end of the spectrum because it is foreshadowing Jesus’ birth, but which really has much in common, is the passage out of Jeremiah; the prophetic hope that out of the branch of David will come one who will bring justice to the land. But what makes this passage similar to the Lukan passage is that Jeremiah is prophesying in the midst of tremendous crisis, for Israel has been overrun by the Babylonians and is scattered. There is no justice and as all hope seems lost, Jeremiah boldly speaks of one is coming who will make all things right.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and as I sit by the Christmas tree and reflect back over this year, the intersection of these passages seems so real and so needed for us today. We need hope because there are dark forces at work in the world and in our country and we as a Body of Christ are so incredibly divided and scattered. But like Jeremiah and Jesus, to have hope requires we recognize the struggle we are in. Hope without any sense of struggle is mushy sentiment; a delusional denial of reality. Hope gives us strength to endure through struggle rather than an escape out of it.

So I invite you to join me as I sit by the tree and reflect on this year. Of course, you cannot recount what has happened in the world this year without first starting with the insurrection on January 6; a time when most of the world watched a sitting President, in coordination with elected members of Congress from his own party and members of his family and circle of advisors, organize and incite a crowd to violently overthrow an election that, frankly, was not even close. After over sixty court challenges not a scintilla of evidence has been provided to show that the election was anything other than a blowout.

But vote totals and facts are irrelevant when somehow millions of people have been led to believe that Donald Trump, in fact, did not lose the election. They believe to this day that he won the election, that it was stolen from him when it wasn’t, and because of this, we need new restrictive voting laws in place so that nothing like this can ever happen again. Thus, rather than take action to prevent another insurrection, many states have taken action to prevent students, people of color, and others on the margins from fully accessing their right to vote.

I want to be very clear here. This is not an endorsement of one party over another. Hardly. But the truth is we have one entire political party right now that simply refuses to acknowledge any semblance of truth or reality. And the reason I bring this up is because the cornerstone of that party are White evangelical Christians. They are our siblings in Christ and yet, so many have chosen to support policies and personalities that are antithetical to the biblical Jesus.

Now, I spent the first thirty-five years of my life entrenched in evangelicalism, and I certainly realize that evangelicals are not monolithic in what they believe or what they do. There are many, many evangelical people who follow Jesus faithfully and serve other people sacrificially. But it is also true that by and large, the biggest block of voters that hold almost a cult-like obsession to one man claim the name evangelical. If we are to be a people of hope and consider the times we are in I believe we have to speak the truth of what is happening right now.

Loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving others as we love ourselves has been replaced by “America First” for many Christians. A life of following Jesus as taught us in the Sermon on the Mount where we are called to put justice for others ahead of justice for ourselves has been shelved so that Christians can protect ourselves and our faith from the supposed attacks of people on the margins. There is a growing lobbying industry aimed at defending conservative Christians against liberalism, a liberalism that wrongly gets labelled as communism, socialism, and authoritarianism. This industry has successfully stoked a wellspring of anger that can be directed towards any number of issues, no matter how insignificant or dumb they might sound. Some of the objects of evangelical Christian wrath includes football players who kneel during the playing of the national anthem to protest police brutality, gay couples who want to purchase a wedding cake from a Christian baker or flowers from a Christian florist, Black Lives Matter activists who simply do not want be shot or brutalized by the police, or undocumented immigrants who’s very presence in the United States is an affront to those who are afraid they are losing their language and culture. Undocumented immigrants especially draw the wrath of people who cry out against lawlessness even while they supported the most lawless administration in the history of this country.

And this has become all too real once again this past week with the trial of the murderers of Ahmaud Arbery and the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse. I have to admit, I was surprised with the guilty verdicts of Travis and Gregory McMichael and Roddie Bryan for hunting down and lynching Mr Arbery, and not surprised at all by the acquittal of Rittenhouse who shot three people, killing two. I was surprised by the guilty verdicts of the McMichael’s and Bryan because we have to remember that when the murder happened, the local police who came on to the scene determined a crime had not taken place and they all went home. It was seventy-four days before they were arrested and charged. In this one instance, justice delayed was not justice denied and credit goes to his faithful mother: Wanda Cooper-Jones.

The acquittal of Rittenhouse has bothered me, especially with all of the meaning that has been attached to it by those on the right. I have to say I derive little joy when anyone is incarcerated, knowing that incarceration in this country lacks any restorative value. So, I am not sure I would be bothered any less if he were found guilty for killing his victims.

But what has struck me about the trial and the entire situation is the words of his mother that Kyle went to Kenosha to “serve people.” I have no idea if the Rittenhouse family is religious or not and I am not sure it really matters, but “to serve others” definitely has religious connotations. To serve others is, for those of us who follow Jesus, a sacred calling. It is the Spirit calling us to recognize the presence of the divine in others so that we work to benefit and help others. It is a calling to the establishment of justice and righteousness in the world that we read about in Jeremiah.

Any time any of us has travelled to another context to serve people, we strive to see the light of God in the people we come into contact with. We want to lift up, speak encouragement, and most of all, we want to love. I cannot even imagine how any of that can even possibly be achieved by wearing an AR-15. I have struggled with this fundamental hypocrisy for weeks until I realized this week, this blatant contradiction has characterized the history of Christian missions since the Constantiniazation of the church in the Fourth Century.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the persecution of Christians by the Roman state ended, but so did the organic, relational, movement-based, counter-cultural growth of the church, at least as the modus operandi of missional outreach. From then on, church growth was intertwined with the interests of the state and the growth of the market. While movements of the Spirit did not, and have not ceased to give life to the church ever since Pentecost, reflecting God’s desire for people to come to know God and to see God’s Kin-dom on earth, converts to the institutional church increasingly were won through a combination of force and coercion. In many instances, the efforts of the church and nation-states were one, and violence, destruction, and cultural genocide (as well as actual physical genocide) were the inevitable result.

Kyle Rittenhouse is not a new expression of the fallenness of our collective context. He is merely the latest missionary. Ever since the Fourth Century so much of the mission of the church has been unequally yoked with the interests of the State and the interests of corporations and commercialization. Running around a context you know nothing about with a weapon strapped to your chest, proclaiming you are there to “serve” has historically been par for the course in many ways when we look at what has been done in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and here in North America where, in the name of Jesus, we committed genocide against indigenous peoples and ripped Africans from their native lands to enslave and rape them for centuries. And throughout all of our stealing, genocide, rape, murder, and enslavement, we had good Christian leaders telling us how this could all be justified in Scripture.

The history of the church has seen far too many Kyle Rittenhouses. And maybe that is why he is becoming something of a rock star in conservative circles. Even now, Tucker Carlson of Fox News is releasing a documentary on Kyle Rittenhouse where, in the view of one reviewer, Rittenhouse’s story is spliced with Christian imagery, showing him to be the victim of the attacks from liberal persecutors. Portraying Rittenhouse as a persecuted hero confirms for his supporters a not-too-distant, not-so-unfamiliar past.

There is a good percentage of our fellow believers in Christ who believe Kyle Rittenhouse is a hero, a Rambo-style do-gooder who was unfairly targeted by the same woke mob who wants to steal our Confederate statues, force people to take untested vaccines, and indoctrinate our kids through critical race theory into believing that the United States is not God’s holy nation created to offset evil in the world. I keep wondering if he has found so much support among those who deny our racist, colonial past because his Rambo-style of missional engagement represents the myth that might makes right; that force can be wedded to righteousness and holiness. We can take over the world and be merciful at the same time.

Now, when we talk about the history of Christian missions, I will be the first to confess that there have been incredibly faithful missionaries who have travelled to the farthest ends of the earth out of a pure love of Jesus and a pure willingness to serve. This continues today. I am definitely not saying missional engagement is bad – far from it! It is the call for all who follow Jesus. And in spite of commercial and state interests co-opting Christianity for its own ends, it is by the grace of God that the good news of God’s love has been contextualized in cultures all over the world and it is done every day by faithful followers of Jesus without AR-15s.

And lest the rest of us in Christ’s Body feel too settled, we should be reminded — I am reminded right now — that I am often too arrogant in my righteousness. My hope too often is not founded in a recognition of truth and reality but in the condescending attitude that I just wish the other half would go away. I shake my head, make some jokes about how stupid they are, and I feel good about how right I am and I walk away.

None of us is clean. All of us are responsible.

The truth is Kyle Rittenhouse is a beloved child of God who is taking his gifts from God and using them in deadly and destructive ways. While he is being lionized by the far-right press, he is in danger of losing his soul. He is not a hero. He is a killer who was not held accountable for the deaths of Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber, who are no less beloved of God than Kyle.

Let me say the names of those who were victimized by violence again.

Joseph Rosenbaum. Anthony Huber. Ahmaud Arbery.

Joseph Rosenbaum. Anthony Huber. Ahmaud Arbery.

Saying their names centers me. It reminds me where hope comes from. Hope is not disregarding the wretchedness of the world. Hope is not ignoring the co-opting of the church to support the nefarious interests of the State or corporations. Hope is not condescension towards the sins of our siblings in Christ. Hope is centered in the lives of those directly impacted by injustice and struggling alongside.

My hope this Christmas comes from the continued marches and rallies for justice. As I reflect on this year, I think of the tremendous work that so many faith communities engaged in to win yet-to-be-achieved citizenship for undocumented immigrants. I hope we will eventually win. I think of the tremendous victory we won from the DC City Council who awarded $41 million to excluded workers – cash-based workers who have been left out federal stimulus COVID packages. That campaign, led by excluded workers themselves, gives me hope.

Yes, we must consider the signs of the times, the fallenness of so much of Christ’s Body. But as we begin Advent today we reflect that hope is closely aligned with justice as Jeremiah reminds us that safety does not come from strapping an AR-15 to our chest and then running to someone else’s neighborhood to intimidate and kill. No. Safety and security for God’s people, as Micah and Isaiah also remind us, comes when we beat weapons of war into instruments that provide for the well-being of all people of every nation and language, not just those from our chosen tribe. Serving others is about seeking justice for them before my own. Right now we have a serious idolatry problem in the Body of Christ as far too many of siblings in Christ seek their own justice before anyone else’s. This. Is. Sin.

Jeremiah reminds us that hope is centered in sacrificial service and love for others and hope comes to the center from the margins. As Jesus is the branch out of the line of David that brings about justice across the land, we are reminded by Paul that we who follow Jesus have been grafted into this branch. This is not of our own doing, but is the work of the Spirit. This is hope. Hope that we are not lost. Hope that no one is lost. Hope that Joseph Rosenbaum, Anthony Huber, and Ahmaud Arbery will be lifted up and seated in fellowship with God. Hope that Travis and Gregory McMichaels, Roddie Bryan, and Kyle Rittenhouse (and yes, even Tucker Carlson) are not lost, but can be found and called to love others and serve others sacrificially. Indeed, if we are grafted in, surely someone who has murdered Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber can be grafted in as well. If I can be grafted in, surely those who orchestrated a failed insurrection and who continue to reap the economic and political benefits of the lies that surround that insurrection can be grafted in too. And once we are grafted in, we all share the call to bring justice to our land. This is what hope is.