

“Yes As Protest”
November 10, 2024

Isaiah 41:8-10
II Corinthians 4:1, 6-7
Galatians 6:9-10
Luke 18:1-8

There is so much that needs to be said this morning, so much that might be said, along with all you have said among yourselves since Tuesday evening. Many hearts are heavy, many souls are worried, many minds are troubled, many spirits are weary.

There is a sense of “here we go again”—only more so.

All of this is to say that there is more to be said that can be put into one sermon—even if you’d allow me to preach for an hour, which you won’t.

I want to start this morning, then, with a parable—although not the one from Jesus that we just heard.

During worship this weekend our Jewish friends read the account in Genesis of the call of Abraham—the one Isaiah called God’s “friend.” It begins with God’s word: “Go.” It is a story of sending forth into unknown territory.

In the fourth-century midrash commentary on this story, Rabbi Isaac says that Abraham’s journey was not only physical, but spiritual.

Rabbi Isaac tells the parable of a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw what is called in Hebrew a *birah doleket*. Now, *birah doleket* could mean either “a palace in flames” or “a palace full of light.”

“Is it possible that this palace lacks a caretaker?” the man wondered. The owner of the palace looked out and said, “I am the owner of the palace.” Similarly, Rabbi Isaac said, because our ancestor Abraham said, “Is it possible that the world lacks a caretaker?” the Blessed Holy One looked out and said to him, “I am the Sovereign of the Universe.”

In our time, Rabbi Geoffery Mitelman tells us: “In one interpretation, Abraham sees a world engulfed in fire, and wonders if that means there is no God.

“In another, Abraham sees a world filled with light, and says, ‘How could something so beautiful have simply come into being?’”

When we look at our nation in these days, as we go forth into familiar and yet unknown territory, what is the *birah doleket* that we see?

A palace in flames?

A palace full of light?

Both?

And what might God be calling us to as a result of what we see?

It what we see will shape what we will do.

In the wake of last Tuesday's election, many would say that the palace of our nation is aflame. Having been through this once before, more than fifty percent of our nation said, "Let's do this again." Rabbi Mitelman makes a difficult and challenging assessment: "No one went into the voting booth saying, 'I am going to make our country and our world worse.' The beauty, and the challenge, of democracy, is that people have a right to make the choice they feel is best for them, their families, and their values," even as others would make a completely different choice. ⁱ

With those choices made once again, the question that comes to us is how do we keep the palace from burning to the ground?

On the other hand, I would ask if the palace might still be full of light. While we may not like the results, this was a free and fair election in a nation that constantly reinvents itself. In spite of the horrendous actions in January four years ago, I am confident that this election will lead to a peaceful transition of power in January—that is, after all, the long tradition of the party currently in power and the tradition of the other party for most of our history as well.

Our democracy is different than the way in which most nations have been governed throughout history. It is different from the way in which many nations are governed to this day. If our democracy is indeed threatened, it is also resilient. And it is up to us, the people, to defend it. The question then becomes how do we keep the light shining?

To keep the palace from burning down, to keep the palace light shining, we need to be the people who continue doing the kinds of things we have been doing, the kind of things we've been emphasizing here in recent months: loving our neighbors, doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with our God.

If we protest, it must not be the easy "No" of marches or moving abroad.

Ours must be the "Yes" that is protest—a strong, insistent, and consistent voice of what we value, of what our faith affirms about God and human beings. Our "Yes" is the way ahead, the way to prevent the burning of the palace and keep its light shining.

Howard Thurman's words in the middle of the last century get to the root of our situation today. "The bitter truth," he said, "is that the Church has permitted the various hate-inspired groups in our common life to establish squatter's rights in the minds of believers because there has been no adequate teaching of the meaning of the faith in terms of human dignity and human worth."

Hear that again: "There has been no adequate teaching of the meaning of the faith in terms of human dignity and human worth."

We are called in these days to a deeper understanding of our faith in the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. This is the light that affirms "human dignity and human worth" and exposes the hate that currently masquerades as Christian faith.

Our "Yes" grows out of those challenging words that we hear so often in scripture: "Be not afraid."

Our “Yes” calls us to the joyful announcement of the love of God for all people

Our “Yes” calls us to continue to do the work that we are already doing, recognizing that is still unfinished. Maybe there will be a time for resistance. But for now, let us continue to:

work for interfaith understanding, cooperation, and acceptance,
 include people of all sexual orientations in the life of our nation as we do in the life of our congregation,
 strive to overcome the racism that clings so closely,
 speak the truth about the reality of climate change before it's too late—and time is running out,
 pursue paths of economic justice,
 live toward peace,
 and—I'll keep saying this until it happens: in all things seeking the good.

This is to say, let us live out the “Yes” that is protest, knowing and affirming what we believe about the God who strengthens, helps, and upholds us. Let us not lose heart, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, let us not give up. This has been the advice and the encouragement to Christians through centuries of wrong and it is the word that comes to us this day.

The palace that is our nation constantly needs attention.

Democracy is fragile *and* resilient.

Physicists tell us that “Nature seems to be less interested in *creating structures* than in *tearing structures apart*.” Yes, there are many who still want to blow up the whole system of this nation.

Left to themselves, there is a general tendency for things to decay, to fall apart. Religious words like sin help us to get a handle on some of this.

Left to themselves, things decay. People get tired. People give up.

But we are not left to ourselves.

In the physical world, physicists tell us, atoms and molecules are never entirely left to themselves. They are almost always exposed to a certain amount of energy and material flowing in from the outside. And if that flow of energy and material is enough, then the steady decay and degradation can be partially reversed. When outside energy and material enters a life, an organization, a people, a new quality of being alive develops.

We see this in our life together as a congregation, in which we constantly encounter the renewing rebuilding power of the Spirit of God.

Along with ancient Israel, we today still hear the words: “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God.” We are not left to ourselves. What might be seen by some as the certain end is not seen that way by God. We not left to ourselves and our own devices. By faith, we affirm that, in the midst of despairing and hopeless situations, there is a power at work doing

something unexpected, something undeserved. The power of God is at work in the world to bring new life where we might expect no life.

And something like this can be seen in our national life as well. There are always threats. There are always those who tear down. But we can bring a positive power that will restore and rebuild. We can be those who bring a “Yes.”

In these days, we need to keep going.

Listen, then, as Jesus encourages his followers to not lose heart, to keep praying.

Jesus tells of a judge—then as now, a symbol of power—and of a widow—someone at the opposite end of the power spectrum. The New Testament scholar and preacher, Fred Craddock, said that widows in the ancient world were “extremely vulnerable—they couldn’t inherit their husband’s property, there was no organized social welfare program, and for the most part no opportunity for independent employment for them.” They often found themselves dependent on judges for protection and fairness.

It is this widow’s misfortune to come up against a judge with no respect for God or human beings. This man is her only hope for justice. And justice is denied.

While this might have been the end of the story for some people. They are ready to give into despair, give into worry, give into fear, give into anger.

This isn’t the end of the story for widow. She doesn’t give up. She doesn’t give in. She continues to make her case. Again and again, she comes before the judge, being clear about who she is and what she wants.

Thinking about this, the judge realizes that this woman is going to wear him out. Using language from boxing, he says literally, “I will grant her justice so that she won’t come and hit me under the eye.” If even for the wrong reason, he finally does what is right.

“We have,” Paul tells us, “This treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

Pray and do not lose heart.

Act and do not lose heart.

Speak your “Yes” that is protest.

And do not lose heart.

ⁱ Geoffrey Mitelman, “Is the World on Fire? Or Full of Light? It’s Both. <https://mailchi.mp/sinaiandsynapses/is-the-world-on-fire-or-full-of-light?e=7f1a044a08>