



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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“Where Do We Go from Here?”

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On November 10, 2024, the Sunday after the election of Donald Trump, from Luke 23*

Tuesday's come and gone with the wind, and so much was swept away with it. It's impossible yet to know how much has been lost, but many fear they've lost more than an election. Many believe they've lost their rights, freedom, autonomy, safety, their future, faith, democracy, and their country. Some feel they've lost their faith in God and their neighbors. A few of my friends told me that Tuesday's wind had come and taken all their hope with it, and I understand that feeling. I've felt it myself. We need time to grieve, to cover our mirrors, rend our garments, sit in sack cloth and ashes, to scream, weep, mourn, and howl at the moon. But as we grieve, we must remember Paul's words from 1 Thess. 4. Yes, we are people who grieve, but we do not grieve as people who have no hope.

Six months into WWI, as Europe was convulsing with death, Virginia Woolf wrote, “The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be.” Dark can mean unclear and inscrutable, but it does not necessarily mean bleak. We often mistake one for the other. Or catastrophize the future's unknowability into something certain, like the fulfillment of our dread, or a place from which there is no way forward. In dark times, it is natural to feel like it's all over. But again and again, throughout history, far stranger things seem to happen than the end of the world. Living as a Jew under Roman occupation was a brutal existence. And I'm certain at 3 o'clock in the afternoon on the Friday before Passover, when Jesus breathed his last breath, the disciples thought it was over, all hope was lost, and the end had come. I'm sure they felt hopeless on Saturday too. But Sunday was coming and with it a strange and unprecedented new beginning. We may not have been able to stop the darkness from coming, but that doesn't mean the fight is over. It's only just begun.

I've been clinging to the words of Rebecca Solnit, “[They] want you to believe it's hopeless, you have no power, there's no reason to act, and you can't win. They want you to feel powerless, to surrender, and let them trample everything, but you are not giving up and neither am I. The fact we cannot save everything does not mean we cannot save anything and everything we save is worth saving. Remember what you love and what loves you. Remember in this tide of hate what love is. The pain you feel is because of what you love. A lot of us are going to come under attack, and a lot of us are going to resist by building solidarity and sanctuary. People kept the faith in the dictatorships of South America and the Eastern Bloc countries in the USSR. There's no alternative to persevering and it does not require you to feel good. Take care of yourself and remember taking care of someone else is part of taking care of yourself, because you are interwoven with ten trillion things in a single garment of destiny, that has been stained and torn, but is still being woven, mended, and washed.”ⁱ

One of Solnit's refrains is to remember, “because memory has the power to produce hope.”ⁱⁱ That's why Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” He was teaching us to remember his life and death because that memory has the power to fill our hearts with hope.



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It is why we come to the table for communion again and again to retell the story of Jesus' death, and it is why we come to hear these sacred stories read, and sung, and preached. We do it so we can remember our hope. And that's why, even though I originally had a different scripture for today, I changed it to the story of the crucifixion because this week of all weeks, as followers of Jesus, we need to remember the founding story of our faith so we can reclaim our hope.

There is only one democratic election in scripture. It was hosted by Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem where he gave the crowd a choice of who they would elect to pardon: Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus Barabbas? It was a choice between two versions of the Judaism, two viewpoints of the Empire, two valleys of which to travel, two visions of salvation and the future. But fundamentally it was the choice between a healer from Galilee and an extremist who led an insurrection at the capital where people were murdered. And the crowd chose Barabbas! It's a choice we are very familiar with! This week was not the first time a crowd has made a perilous and misguided choice. It's why Jesus last words from the cross were, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." The founding story of our faith told us that when crowds of people are given a choice, they will often (wittingly or unwittingly) choose violence and make a choice that leads to crucifixion.

One of the reasons we must grieve is because we've been told, quite clearly, the election of Donald Trump will lead to the crucifixion of people we love. It will lead to the crucifixion of immigrant families, women in need of reproductive rights, transgender and non-binary people, sick people in need of health care, government workers, poor people in need of resources. So, we grieve with our entire body, but our faith also teaches us that every crucifixion needs a witness. Even when all hope seems lost, we can stand watch and remain vigilant like Mary Magdalene and the other women as witnesses. We can be witness to the truth of what is happening. We can speak the truth to power. We can say, "This is wrong!" We can advocate for those who are being crucified by the Empire. Every crucifixion needs a witness, because even if we can't save people, or keep people off the cross, we can make sure the world knows what's happening to them and no one can look away. We can make sure the victims know we love them, God loves them, and they don't deserve this. We can make sure there is someone alongside them, so they won't be alone.

This week, an Episcopal priest named Joseph Yoo, said "the Jesus movement has always been the most effective, captivating, contagious, powerful, and transformative under the rule of an Empire. So, keep that in mind as we move forward" he said, "and let's cause some damage to this empire with the tools of sacrificial love, generosity, forgiveness, grace, and hope." Hope may be frail, but it's hard to kill. Whether it was Pharaoh, David, Ahab, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Antiochus, Herod, Caesar, or Nero, throughout the Bible, God's people stood up against every emperor and empire, whether it was inside or outside their own faith or nation. The story of God's people is an anti-imperial story that always counters the logic and impulse of empire with the vision of the beloved community of love, justice, equality, inclusivity, hospitality, and compassion. The founder of our faith was crucified by the empire, so don't think we're going to acquiesce quietly! Our ancestors have been here before, they've witnessed it, survived it, resisted it, and transformed it, and taught us how to do so as well. But we need to commit ourselves to remaining vigilant.



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Erik Larson's bestselling book, *In the Garden of Beasts*, begins "I always wondered what it would have been to witness firsthand the gathering dark of Hitler's rule. Hindsight tells us that during that fragile time the course of history could easily have been changed. Why, then, did no one change it? Why did it take so long to recognize the real danger of the Nazi regime?"ⁱⁱⁱ The answer, Larson discovers, is that few were able or willing to fully recognize the threat Hitler posed, including the American Ambassador at the time, William Dodd, who brought his family to Berlin in 1933. "Throughout that first year in Germany," Larson writes, "Dodd was struck by the strange indifference to atrocity that settled over the nation, the willingness of the populace and moderate elements in the government to accept each new oppressive decree, each new act of violence, without protest." Yet the Ambassador resigned himself to "the delicate work of watching and carefully doing nothing."

Whether from self-preservation or self-delusion, people increasingly failed to challenge what they knew to be lies and propaganda and allowed themselves to be swept up in a creeping morass of ignorance and barbarity. They failed to condemn the bigotry and cruelty they could hear in political rhetoric and saw on the streets. The terrifying conclusion one reaches in reading *In the Garden of Beasts*, is that vigilance, honesty and courage on the part of many, in and outside Germany, during those early years, could have halted Hitler and his fascist regime in its tracks. But without vigilance, we surrender our integrity slowly, by degrees; and before long we discover that we've lost everything important to us, including what defines us as human beings or Christians, like our faith and our freedom.

But there were also brave people who witnessed what was taking place and resisted the rise of fascism from the very beginning. One of the most famous was a theologian who lived in Berlin at the same time as Ambassador Dodd, named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Hitler was elected as chancellor on Jan. 30, 1933, and just two days after Hitler took power, on February 1st, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address publicly criticizing the Nazi party and their concept of a "Führer" or "supreme leader," which Hitler was calling himself. Bonhoeffer asked, "To what extent does leading and being led become pathological." He warned his fellow Germans that a leader who makes themselves an idol is a "misleader" who "mocks God," and those who concede their power to a "Strongman" or "supreme leader" promoting the rebirth of the nation will eventually, be destroyed by him.^{iv} But the radio broadcast was abruptly cut off by the Nazis before Bonhoeffer could complete his speech.

Bonhoeffer was one of the first to recognize "Hitler's policies against the Jews as a problem for the church...and eminently a political one." A month after his radio address, Bonhoeffer published an essay titled, "The Church and the Jewish Question" where he claimed National Socialism was an illegitimate form of government that had to be opposed on Christian grounds. Bonhoeffer outlined three stages of opposition. First, the church was called to question state injustice. Secondly, it has an obligation to help all victims of state injustice, whether Christian or not. Finally, if the state's actions lead to a "lack of rights and disorder" the church is called to "jam a spoke in the wheel" and bring the machinery of injustice to a halt. It was one of the earliest and clearest repudiations of Hitler and the Nazis.



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A year later, in the summer of 1934, Bonhoeffer pressed his fellow pastors by proclaiming “We are immediately faced with the decision; are we National Socialist or are we Christian,”^v because, “Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, with its plea for the weak.”^{vi}

After being arrested and imprisoned, on April 9th, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was marched, naked, to the gallows at the Flössenburg Concentration Camp. He was 39 years old and the camp where he was killed was liberated by Allied forces only a few weeks later. From 1933 to the day he died, Bonhoeffer bravely and openly opposed Hitler and the Nazi regime. He once wrote, “As much as the Christian would like to remain distant from political struggle, the commandment to love urges us to stand up for our neighbors. Our faith must know when the dictates of the state may lead us against our conscience.”

Our good friend Dr. Bill Leonard, and many others, have described the crisis we face today as a “Bonhoeffer moment,” and I agree. But we should be precise about what we mean by this phrase? It means fascism has swept in with the wind and our nation has elected a man who openly describes himself as a “dictator.” But Bonhoeffer is more than a description. The question is not just, “Is this a Bonhoeffer moment?” but “How will we respond to it?” Will we be like Ambassador Dodd or Dietrich Bonhoeffer? Will we do the “delicate work of watching and carefully doing nothing?” Or will we stand up, speak the truth, witness against injustice, help all the victims, and jam a spoke in the machinery of empire?

We are not alone. Christians are not the only people wrestling with this question. Politicians, government workers, leaders in every area of society and industry are grappling with the way the winds blew this Tuesday, including journalists. On the morning after the election, Jesse Eisigner, a Senior Editor at ProPublica, delivered these remarks to his staff, “We face the biggest test of our professional lives. Now we get to see if we really meant it when we said we will hold power to account. Will we do so when our subjects have true power on their side and a willingness to use it? We may be harassed. We may be sued. We may be threatened with violence. We may be ignored. Are we just sunshine journalists or are we ready?”^{vii}

Journalists have a lot in common with Christians. We’re both called to be witnesses to the truth we see happening in the world, which often means speaking truth to power, even if there are consequences. But as followers of Jesus, we are not just called to witness what’s happening in the world, but to change the world by doing everything in our power to build a beloved community and bring the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Eisigner’s question could be posed to us: Are we sunshine Christians or are we ready? Are we sunshine Christians or are we cross and resurrection Christians?

When James Carville stupidly said Democrats needed to “stop coming across as the party of preachy women,”^{viii} all I could think about was Easter and how it started with women who courageously stuck around to witness the crucifixion, to see where Jesus’ body was laid. They were grieving, dejected, and felt like all hope seemed lost, and it was all over, yet they got up and went out on Sunday morning to go to the tomb.



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The person they'd put all their hopes and dreams in for all those years was executed right before their eyes. Yet they never gave up, they continued to remember him and honor him. They weren't afraid of Roman soldiers, or the empire, or the consequences. They simply got up and went to the tomb where they discovered it was not the end, but a strange new beginning that had never existed before in history. And they became the first preachers to witness this new reality and proclaim the good news of resurrection to the men who were still hiding inside. I don't care if it's a winning strategy for Democrats or not, because our faith was founded by "preachy women" and has always depended on the words of "preachy women" to inspire us with the good news of love and justice.

A lot of people are asking, "where do we go from here?" I think a midwife from Wisconsin said it best, "You are awakening to the same country you fell asleep to. The very same country. Pull yourself together. And, when you see me, do not ask me 'What do we do now? How do we get through the next four years?'" Some of my Ancestors dealt with 400 years of this under worse conditions. Continue to do the good work. Continue to build bridges. Continue to lead with compassion. Continue demanding liberation. Continue to dismantle broken systems. Continue to set the best example for the children. Continue to be a vessel of nourishing joy. Continue right where you are. Right where you live. Do so in the name of the Creator who expects nothing less from each of us. And if you are not "continuing" ALL of the above, in community, partnership, collaboration? What is it you have been doing? And what are you waiting for?"^{ix}

Tuesday's come and gone with the wind. But don't let it cause you to despair, let it mobilize you! If this really is a "Bonhoeffer moment," then we need more than a diagnosis, we need action. If it's a "Bonhoeffer moment," then we need a "Bonhoeffer movement," a community of people who know that every crucifixion needs a witness, people like the women on Easter, who go to the grave of the crucified looking for a resurrection, people like Bonhoeffer, who will stand up, speak out, and fight against fascism and injustice no matter the cost. We need people who will cling to each other, who are committed to vigilance, who will not be silent, who will not give up, who will never surrender, who love our neighbors, who refuse to believe this is the end. We need people who work for liberation, who dismantle broken systems, who pour ourselves out for others like vessels of joy, people who refuse to be sunshine Christians, but cross and resurrection Christians. We need people who know that to truly follow Jesus we have to hold on to our hope for dear life because while it may feel like Friday or Saturday right now, Sunday's coming! Where do we go from here? We get up and walk toward the tomb, because the fight's not over. It's only just begun.

ⁱ Rebecca Solnit, quoted on social media after the 2024 election.

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress Press, 1978.

ⁱⁱⁱ Erik Larson, *In the Garden of Beasts*, Crown, 2011.

^{iv} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Edition* 12:281, Fortress Press, 2009.

^v Ibid., 13.192, 2007.

^{vi} Ibid., 13.402, 2007.

^{vii} Stephen Engelberg, "What to Expect from ProPublica in a Second Trump Administration," *ProPublica*, Nov. 6, 2024.

^{viii} Maureen Dowd, "It's This Man's, Man's, Man's World," *The New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2024.

^{ix} Venice Williams, as posted on Facebook, November 6, 2024, at 6:18 pm.