

Adamant Hearts  
Zechariah 7:8-14  
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Second Sunday in Lent  
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How long will this go on? Of course, I am referring to senseless killing – especially senseless killing of people in the name of white supremacy and white nationalism. God, have mercy on us. Please, put an end to this.

I hadn't slept well last Thursday night, due to a being in a minor car accident earlier that evening. Thankfully, no one was injured – but I was shaken up and had a hard time settling down to rest. When I did finally sleep, I had strange dreams that caused me to feel unsettled and tired when waking up the next morning. So, on Friday I began my day as I almost always do, by checking the *Washington Post* on my phone. When I first saw the headline, I hoped that I was misreading the words, or maybe I was still caught in some kind of hyper realistic dream, made even wonkier by my agitation from the night before. Alas, the news was all too real - as it has been so many times before. Forty-nine people, at prayer, killed in mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Killed by a white man who had released a 74-page manifesto on social media railing against Muslims and immigrants. It's unnecessary tragedies *exactly like this one* that have put it on my heart to think seriously about our attitudes towards the “stranger” during this Lent season.

Most of us do not go and get guns and walk into houses of worship and take dozens of lives – that is an extreme response to our prejudices and biases. It is, however, way too common (and seems to be becoming more so every day). But still...most of us are not going to do such a thing. Even so, people of faith, especially those of us who are trying to follow the teachings of Jesus, have to look hard at the pervasive fear that has become so much a part of our culture and do our best to discern where and how we are participating in that. Here are some words from the *Washington Post* that describe the motivations of the gunman in New Zealand: “the manifesto left behind after the attack was littered with conspiracy theories about white birthrates and ‘white genocide’ is the latest sign that a lethal vision of white nationalism has spread internationally. Its title, ‘The Great Replacement,’ echoes the rallying cry of, among others, the torch bearing protestor who marched in Charlottesville in 2017.”

We aren't pulling the triggers ourselves, but we all share a responsibility to look at ourselves and raise questions about the narrative that is we are living in and whether or not we have had some part in creating it. It is imperative that we ask ourselves: are we feeding the hatred in some way with the assumptions we make about other people? Do those of us who have lived in the ranks of privilege harbor indignation at the very suggestion that someone we (perhaps even unconsciously) see as undeserving could ascend onto an equal plane with us? Or what about the idea that we could actually LOSE our positions? Does that idea unsettle us so much that we need

to think of stories to tell ourselves that justify treating certain groups of people as “less American” or even “less human” than we are? Let me

be clear that I’m not saying any of us are evil or malicious people. That’s part of what makes conversations like this so hard. The white people here at St. Matthew and in my neighborhood and my professional circles are not doing and saying things that blatantly cross over the line into racism and white supremacy. Certainly at times we are guilty of being clueless or thoughtless, and I apologize for any time that I have unintentionally hurt any of you or any other person in society who has to contend with being treated as “less than.” The people among us of color have to deal with a whole host of degradations and indignities that I’ve not faced as a white person. I would not presume to interpret your experiences. But at least here, in this community, I hope we can start from a place of giving each other the benefit of the doubt. When we have to look at painful things like this, let’s assume that we are each starting from a place of good will and a genuine desire to understand each other and make things better. Whatever the color of

our skin or country of origin, whatever our personal wounds and private pain, however, I think we can all agree that we need to change the conversation if we want different results. I believe that the fear white people have about losing our privileged place in society has a lot to do with the way we think and talk about immigration – especially immigrants of color. It gets couched in language about jobs and resources and education and health care and how we as a nation will provide that for everyone. Those are important, complicated questions and I do not claim to have the answers to them. But I wonder...what might happen if we

were to stop thinking in terms of limitations and how there is only so much to go around and no matter what I have to protect myself and the half dozen people who are most important to me and no one else is my concern. What if we were to approach the complex issues related to immigration with a sense that we are all in this messy business of life *together*, that we are connected in such mysterious and beautiful ways that we thrive or fail as one. If we could come to understand that it’s not a zero sum game – when our neighbor flourishes, it’s good for us, and vice versa – maybe we can come up with creative ways to be together as children of God.

Thursday night, when I was lying  
awake, reliving my car wreck over and over in my mind, trying to quiet my breathing and slow down my heart rate, I found myself thinking about the phrase that Zechariah used to describe the Israelites – he said they “made their hearts adamant” when former prophets had tried to warn them of the error of their ways. Let’s back up for a second...this speech of Zechariah’s comes in response to a query about fasting. This is one of several times when the Israelites approach the prophet (and later it happens with Jesus) in a legalistic way. They see their fasting as a transaction...if I do *x* (fasting), then *y* (God’s favor) must follow, right? There’s not necessarily anything wrong with fasting, but Zechariah points out (as other prophets before him have done), that if not undertaken with the right spirit, fasting is beside the point. Relationship with God is more than a list of boxes to be checked, and completing our self-imposed checklists doesn’t catapult us to the pinnacle of God’s favor. This relationship is ongoing – we are never *finished*

becoming the people God created us to be. And here are the things that God through Zechariah says are more important than fasting. “Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.” Dang. It really would be easier just to fast for a day or so now and then, wouldn’t it? No wonder, throughout the generations, the Israelites had tried to close their ears to these instructions. Living the way God calls us to is hard, and it’s even harder to do it consistently, day after day after day.

So God’s children tried not to hear what God told them. “They refused to listen,” says Zechariah, “and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear. They *made their hearts adamant* in order not to hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets.” I’m reminded of little kids when they stick their fingers in their ears and chant to keep from hearing something they find disagreeable.

So, I keep coming around to this idea of adamant hearts. In the scenario Zechariah describes, the adamant heart was not a good thing. The Israelites had hardened their hearts to the sufferings of their neighbors and stubbornly clung to the ways that they wanted to do things. They dug into the lives they were living and didn’t want to consider any other way of being. It’s similar to when Jesus called the Pharisees a “stiff-necked people” – there’s an inflexibility there that is not leading anywhere good.

Look, being adamant is not always a bad thing – it depends on what we choose to be adamant about. “Adamant” is defined as “refusing to be persuaded or to change one’s mind.” Some of the synonyms for the word are not ones I would want associated with the life of faith – “inflexible,” “uncompromising,” “rigid.” I don’t think those are going to get us where we want to go. But some other synonyms for “adamant” are “determined,” “resolved,” and “resolute.” The Israelites dug in on the things that could not bring them closer to God, but what if we, today, were to be equally committed to discerning God’s in the midst of the disinformation and fear that surrounds us?

Let’s make our hearts adamant FOR loving our neighbors. Let’s make our hearts adamant IN FAVOR OF welcome over walls and love over fear. Let’s *adamantly refuse* to let God’s people be divided, and let’s *adamantly move toward* widening the circle of who God loves. The Israelites made their own hearts adamant when it came to denying what God was God was saying to them through the prophets. I think, though, that we are going to need God’s help to remain resolute in this quest. Help us, God, give us adamant hearts, and make us determined to move in the direction you call us. Move us from the familiar practices of oppression and denigration of people we do not fully understand. Show us the good things we can devise for each other, leading to richer, fuller, and more abundant life for all of us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.