

The Rev. Jake Miles Joseph
Plymouth Congregational UCC of Fort Collins, Colorado on February 5, 2017
A Progressive Great Awakening: New Lights
Matthew 5: 13- 20

* I love teaching the new members' classes with Hal and Jane Anne because they always help remind me what this work is all about and how special our approach to ministry is at Plymouth. I was reminded this week about what covenant and church means here in the UCC. In the UCC, we covenant to journey together, but do not promise to always agree. Today, I am preaching a sermon that came to me from my discernment with the Holy Spirit. You do not have to agree with me, but I pray that you will listen and find what rings true for your heart.

Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the prophecies, visions, awakening of our hearts be good, complete, and new in your sight, O God, our rock and our alarm clock. Amen.

The time for complacency is past. The days of blissful ignorance are long gone. The Church's long and comfortable slumber in the satin sheets and down, feather-filled bedspreads are coming to the dawn of a new day. The comfort found with the mattresses of padded endowments, pillows of unquestioned cultural dominance, and blind sleepwalking through superficial, easy acts of charity are finished. The harsh sound of the alarm clock of God's call for ethical speech, awakening to a need for virtuous leadership, and prophecy has now rung for the Church.

Can you hear it? God's alarm clock rings loud clear in all of our hearts this morning. Don't you hear God's call for action sounding in your soul?

It is morning in the church and midnight in America. Today is the first day of the Progressive Great Awakening.

We might well believe this is the first time God has sounded this great awakening alarm. As Congregationalists, however, this is our legacy and our heritage. Awakenings are our business in the UCC. While we no longer espouse the retrograde theology of the time, we in the United Church of Christ are the direct inheritors of the First Great Awakening that began in Northampton, Massachusetts in the church led by Jonathan Edwards. He was the author of the famous, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." How many of you remember reading this gem in school? The UCC has come a long way since that sermon title, hasn't it? While today the words of Jonathan Edwards strike us as conservative and awkward, we must recognize that it was revolutionary and even progressive in 1741 when it was written!

Edwards was the leader of the Congregationalist "New Lights" or reformers who sought to revive a faith in God's grace and in active belief. The "Old Lights," on the other hand, were the Congregationalists who had become more of a complacent political institution running the affairs of small towns in New England than a church of faith and action. They wanted nothing to do with passionate belief. The Old Lights despised Edwards and his First Great Awakening followers' passion, penchant for grace, outspoken nature, **and they preferred that the church go back to sleep as a pacified and placated institution of polished pews and polite picnics.**

Now, Edwards was very concerned with what he called the "wrath" of God. There is an ugly English word: **Wrath**. It isn't even fun to say. **This makes me wonder, as progressive Christians today, being woken from our sleep, can we handle our claim on the wrath of God?** There is no doubt that God's anger is Biblical. Even Jesus demonstrates wrath in the temple at those abusing the system by turning over tables in a rage. This is a word that, for many of us including me, brings up what I call Evangelical Church-PTSD from our youths in more conservative and less loving places than Plymouth. The wrath of God is tough to embrace. So how can we re-appropriate and reclaim God's anger as a righteous and holy wrath? Can we reclaim the legacy of our direct ancestors Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening for a new time and a new need? **Why is God waking us up now and calling us all back to the real work of the church?**

Today, as progressive Christians, we associate the word "wrath" as meaning a hateful or a conservative God, right? The word wrath actually just means "extreme anger" or "vexation." We must, sisters and brothers, believe that God is capable of extreme anger if we also believe that God is a God of social justice and radical transformation.

In the words of our ancestor of Congregationalist faith, Jonathan Edwards, "You had need to consider yourselves, **and wake thoroughly out of Sleep**; you cannot bear the Fierceness and Wrath of the infinite God...Therefore let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the Wrath to come...Let everyone fly out..."^[i]

Regardless of party affiliation, if we believe that lying and making up fake facts makes God angry, then we must know of God's wrath. We must reclaim virtue and ethics. If nobody else is going to claim that lying is wrong, then it has to be us. Lying is just as wrong for progressive Christians as anyone. Deceit is no virtue, Amen?

If we believe that neglecting the poor of the earth, marginalization the other, and making the poor and hopeless poorer and more hopeless for our own enrichment, wealth, power, and money makes God angry, then we know of God's wrath. If America First means that everyone else goes last, then God has wrath in store for us.

If we believe that belittling others, mocking the weak, discrediting the educated, insulting the hopeless, undermining world peace, or promoting or protecting hatred is a **sin** (falling short of what God hopes for us), then we must know of God's wrath. **Yes, I said sin.**

If we believe that discriminating against the LGBTQ community is wrong and enabling the hateful and violent, then we know of God's wrath.

If we believe from the depths of our hearts, our faith, and our theology (belief in the nature and fact of God's very existence) that fundamentally... sexism, the objectification, abuse, unequal pay, and double standards for women is fundamentally a cultural sin, then you know in your heart what wrath means. The Wrath of God is the feeling you get when your spouse, sister, or mother is passed over for a promotion.

If we believe that abusive reverse mortgages, predatory scams and financial schemes, rampant elder abuse, underfunded and understaffed nursing homes for those who cannot afford private pay, and disrespect for our elders and elderly is a cultural sin, then you know the wrath of God. The Wrath of God is the feeling you get when you cannot get proper care for your parent or sibling.

If we believe that having ethics matters and that creating alternative ethics that makes everything okay is wrong, then you feel the core of the wrath of God.

If we believe that outlawing immigrants, dehumanizing other religions, rejecting the refugee, and building walls between God's children based on race and language is a sin, then we know the wrath of God.

Maybe we are all sinners in the hands of an angry God anyway for our slumber and complacency.

This is not however a time to blame, but it is a time to waken the sleeping Church. That choked up feeling, fear, anger we feel in our guts as all that is good and right and Scared in the world is put at risk is God's alarm clock inside of us. **We feel God's wrath and it is Holy.**

As your minister for pastoral care and outreach and mission, these two job responsibilities often merge as these cultural sins cause our own members' pain. As inadequate healthcare, mental health support, elder abuse, and immigration worries bring us and you to tears, my call here to care for your outreach work and your spiritual care merge.

Usually I preach pastoral sermons about the love of God, the peace of God, the acceptance of God through Jesus Christ, but today (While all of that remains true... truer than ever...and my next sermon will probably be again about loving our enemies and I might could even sing again in my next sermon...), I am called by my ordination vow to help us reclaim and awaken to the wrath we know in our hearts comes from God. Wrath is, after all, extreme and Holy, DIVINE vexation, frustration, and anger. **If I don't preach this today, then I am not worthy of the title of The Reverend Jake Joseph.** If I don't speak the truth, take away this title.

New Lights, Christians, Church, Friends, Leaders of the Great Awakening... of 2017, today we start here in Fort Collins, Colorado... like what was started in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1730, but this will be the First Progressive Great Awakening.

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to the father."

Salty Christians, what does that mean? Historically, in the text, it means those with a unique flavor who are effective at their mission of preserving and transforming. I especially love this passage because of what else salty means as an adjective in modern English parlance. To be salty means to be irritated and irked... vexed!

This is what our scripture is calling from us today! We must harness the wrath of God for the good of the word in order to lead. Other branches of Christianity have given-up their saltiness or capitulated to power, and have therefore given-up their claim on Christ's message and hidden their flame. Others have decided that Christianity is simply a vehicle for political oppression of the weak and powerless. **We are called to be salty, flaming Christians! We must again be new lights in a world of darkness, newly awakened as others are now going or being put to sleep.**

Now, since we are already talking about progressive Christian wrath and cultural sin, why don't I also say a word about what Progressive Christian temptation looks like? I mean, might as well go all in! This very likely is a once in a career type sermon.

The first temptation I call, "The Snooze button."

I mean, who doesn't like to go back to sleep? When confronted with a Great Awakening of God, who wouldn't instinctively hit the snooze button!? I confess that I LOVE the snooze button on my phone alarm. We see this in effect in the Bible with Jonah and his reluctance as a prophet, Paul before his conversation when he was Saul, and even with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (take this cup). SNOOZE! God, can't we just hit Snooze for another decade or millennia? Can't we just hit the snooze for the next four years? The first instinct is to ignore the fierce urgency of now, as Martin Luther King, Jr. and LBJ called it. That is a grave temptation.

The second temptation I call, "The roll over and pass the buck."

The other temptation, and I can attest to this and am also guilty of it, is when the alarm goes off, you roll over in bed and tell your spouse or partner, "hey honey [yawn] go let the dog out." Then you pass back out. "Hey honey, go get the kids ready for school." "Hey honey, go attend to the issue I don't want to deal with right now," and I am going to hit the snooze button for a while. Amen? Does this sound familiar to anyone? Does this sound like anyone's spouse or loved one?

This is the temptation, when you see an announcement about a march for social justice or have an idea for action that must be taken (when God sends you an alarm), you email Betsy or me from the Outreach and Mission Board and write with lots of exclamation marks, "Somebody should be doing something about this!!!! The church should organize this march!!! I am indignant that you are not leading this charge!" **I have been getting around five ten of these emails a day from you and they all center on the phrase, "someone else should, but I am too busy to take any leadership right now."** You should be doing something about this. If I turned all of my attention to organizing all of the marches for you, you would have no pastoral care or communications or sermons from me. So when the alarm goes off, don't pass the responsibility, but take action and provide leadership. An email to the board or me is a good start, and please keep emailing us, but it is sort of the "roll over and pass the buck" and go back to sleep response to God's wake-up call.

Plymouth, we are called to be new lights once again. The alarm of grace and action that stirred so many years ago is sounding again. We are called to this time for waking-up. We are called to this time of being salty, whole and H.O.L.Y. irritated Christians for God.

It is time for the to waken from our sleep, risk losing our endowment mattresses and our pillows of peace, and our blankets of blandness. The buck stops here. We cannot roll over and say that this morning task is someone else's responsibility. We cannot hit the snooze button. We are the leaders we have been waiting for and that God, Jesus Christ, the universe has been looking for. **It is morning in the church and midnight in America. Today is the first day of the Progressive Great Awakening. We are the New Lights for a new time. Shine on.**

Amen.

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[i] Jonathan Edwards. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=etas>