

World Convulsion and the Exciting Vision of Faith

Independence Day Weekend

Text: Psalm 33: 10-11; Revelation 15:3

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

July 5, 1981

Transcription of the spoken sermon

I have not lived on Lake Michigan long enough to grow accustomed to sunsets - and I hope I never do. No matter how urgent the task at hand, Nancy and I stop and watch the setting of the sun every evening that we are home. It is a very special time - a time to savor the beauty and wonder of the created order; a time to stand in awe of the beauty of our Father's world. But in the year we have been there, I have learned that there are evenings when one can predict a beautiful sunset - when the day has been clear and there is no sign of a cloud in the western sky and the sun sinks toward the horizon with all of its golden radiance streaming forth without a filtering cloud. Such a sight is beautiful - the end of a perfect day.

However, there is another kind of evening completely unpredictable as it moves toward the moment of sunset. Perhaps a storm has just passed through or a front is gathering in the West. Huge cloud formations in constantly changing configurations play across the sky with the sun breaking through a crevice here, gilding a foreboding looking cloud there. The interplay of sun and clouds is dramatic, fascinating. Sometimes in those few moments as the sun slips silently into the sea, a cloud covers it all and there is no sunset to be seen. But at other times the clouds break, and across the water pours a path of melted gold and all the lowering clouds are touched by the varying hues such that no artist could do them justice. That is a sunset!

This is a parable of world history and, in microcosm, a parable of our personal lives, as well. My theme on this Independence Day weekend is that the Eternal God, the Sovereign of the Nations, works His purposes out in the midst of world convulsion, and His movement in History can be detected by the eye of faith. If we live by the vision of faith we can see the effecting of God's purposes in world convulsion.

The dictionary defines the word "convulsion" as, "the action of wrenching or condition of being wrenched... violent social, political or physical disturbance...to shake violently, to agitate or disturb," and convulsion is a fit word to describe our

world. It is a world in ferment -so much more than 205 years ago when those shots were fired that were heard 'round the world. As a matter of fact, those shots were not heard 'round the world. Much rather, what was happening was a rebellion in a British colony, the implication of which could hardly be foreseen at that time. The world went on its plodding way then, but at that time one could hardly speak of world convulsion. What happened then has had far reaching consequences. We have had now 205 years of national existence - an experiment in freedom - a nation shaped and formed deliberately to create the greatest possible freedom for its people.

That freedom has brought unprecedented blessing and prosperity and we cannot treasure it too highly nor guard it too carefully. That freedom is a precious gift which is constantly in peril from within and from without. After 205 years we who enjoy it are still a small minority of people, for the vast multitude of humankind live under totalitarian regimes, live regimented lives, live in grinding poverty, despair and hopelessness.

What is the proper celebration of our national independence? Where have we come in these two centuries? Where do we stand today and what ought to be the posture of the Church over against our world in ferment? Are we threatened by world convulsion? Should we use our mighty power in the world to repress the cry for human freedom or ought we to be working to break the stalemate of terror that characterizes our world today?

God works His purposes out in history. He, the Sovereign of History, effects His purposes in the midst of world convulsion and world convulsion is pregnant with new possibilities for the realization of God's intention that all people and nations should live a fully human existence in peace and well-being.

It is not always a simple matter to detect the invisible hand of God in the midst of the uproar and dust of history's unrest, but biblical faith has always been characterized by a confidence that God makes the wrath of men to praise him and that out of the chaos created by the pride of nations and the lust for power and glory, God affects His purposes of love. And so, this morning, on this Independence Day weekend, I want us to think about world convulsion as the opportunity for the working out of the Divine Purpose and understand that world convulsion in terms of the exciting perspective of our faith in the God of History. The commitment that was made and the risk that was involved two hundred years ago, which has proved to be so meaningful in the lives of us all, that commitment which has issued in this great nation with our experience of liberty and freedom, a nation deliberately designed to enhance human freedom – that commitment must be made again. And it needs to be made again not only for ourselves, but for all peoples. For it seems to me appropriate on this, our Independence Day weekend, *that we make another declaration and a new declaration, this time not a declaration of independence, but of interdependence with all the people of the earth.* For if there were no higher motivation driving us

on than self-interest, then we could say, in all honesty, in the self-interest of this nation and its people it is incumbent upon us to recognize that in this world which has grown so small - grapefruit size - it is impossible for us to pursue narrow, nationalistic purposes. Rather, we must become citizens of the world and embrace within our purview all people and nations. And to the extent that we are true to our own principles and honest with our own past, we must lend our power and our resources to every movement of human freedom, being sensitive to every cry for human liberation and the deliverance from bondage, wherever we find it. If we would be true to our past, we must be as committed to the freedom and liberty of all peoples as we have been to our own.

I do not have a program, a one, two, three-step approach that you can go out of here with. Rather it is my intention to seek to raise your consciousness of the issue that is before us - the necessity of our nation to be committed to the freedom and the liberty of nations all over. Because, you see, we have moved to the other side of the issue. We are now in the position of the crown of England 200 years ago. We now are in the preeminent position. It is now in our self-interest, if we are shortsighted, to maintain the status quo. We live in a world that is teetering on the brink of disaster with a balance of terror between the East and the West. We live in a world that is on the threshold of blowing itself up and destroying itself, and we are the persons of power. We are the persons of resource. We now pull the strings. We, now, have the ability to impact the world, either for peace or for destruction, and if we hear the word of God, then we will not be fearful of world convulsion, but we will see it as the opportunity to nudge and move the world toward a more humane society worldwide.

The shot that was heard 'round the world 200 years ago wasn't really heard around the world. This was a backwoods part of the world - who ever heard of America, and who knew what was here and what possibilities there might be? I am sure that Europe looked down its nose at this backwoods operation. The American Revolution was really just a pimple on the surface at the time - who would know what would issue from those apparently parochial events? But such is not the case today because events of far less significance impact us. Through the instant news coverage of the mass media incidents half a world away send their reverberating shocks around the globe. We are bound together in a bundle of life today like never before, and it is high time that we in the United States of America and in the Christian Church in America recognize our worldwide responsibility and recognize that it is not enough to pursue our own national interests and our national purposes. Even intelligent self-interest demands that we take the world into our view.

The American Revolution eventuated in this great nation, and we can say that the commitment to liberty and freedom at that time has been vindicated. The experiment of that time and these past two centuries has not been an accident of history, for our founding fathers recognized that liberty and human dignity must be grounded in the Eternal God and our founding documents witness to that fact.

But if we would be true to that heritage, then we must recognize that that which we will for ourselves we must will for all peoples. And it is incumbent upon us to recognize our world responsibility, and to declare our interdependence.

That isn't popular. As a matter of fact, it goes against the grain. It is much easier to exploit the fears of people and it is much easier to beat the drums and whip up a nationalistic feeling and a fervent patriotism. Throughout the history of mankind there have been those who have set up straw men and scapegoats and we see it happening on our evening news in Iran today where the Islamic revolutionary fires need to be fed constantly by hatred of America, justified or unjustified. History has always been filled with demagogues who would manipulate people for their own purpose and we see a narrow nationalism espoused by the very vocal religious Right in our day. But it is up to you and to me who are Christians as well as Americans to recognize that history is His Story, and that He embraces all people and has good will and purposes of love for all of humankind. Therefore, it is not enough for us to make a kneejerk, nationalistic and patriotic reaction to events in the world, but rather to take a step back and recognize our responsibility to be the instruments of God for the furthering of peace and the enhancement of the human condition everywhere, on both sides of the curtain, in the East and the West, in the North and the South, in the First World and the Second World, the Third and the Fourth, in developed nations and in developing nations - to recognize in our small world, that has shrunk to such miniscule size, that whatever happens anywhere in this world will impact our life and our existence as well.

Whenever one gets into this area, one is in the area not of black and white, but of many shades of gray. The international situation is so highly complex that there is really only one thing we know for sure, and that is that those who have easy, simple solutions do not understand. Beware of the simplistic solution to problems whose complexity we can hardly probe.

However, we cannot be silent until we have all the facts in. And so, in the midst of our struggle to determine the posture of America in this world of ours, in the 20th century, we recognize the inadequacy of our understanding and the complexity of the problem. Yet, act we must.

For example, let us take the instance of El Salvador, which I have mentioned before here. How ought we to react as a nation? Bishop Romero was murdered there a little over a year ago. He was the Archbishop of San Salvador and in his high, ecclesiastical office he had identified with the situation of the poor. In identifying with the case of the poor, there are those who would write him off by simply saying he fomented the unrest among the peasants. Well, I imagine that he did that. As a Christian who knows that God will not have people live in grinding poverty and futility, standing with the poor in a country that has been characterized by repression and oppression, what is a Christian leader to do? He wrote to President Carter back in 1980 and in that letter he said,

It disturbs me deeply that the U.S. government is leaning toward an arms race in sending military equipment and advisors to "train three Salvadorian battalions in logistics, communications, and intelligence." In the event that this news is accurate, your government, instead of favoring greater peace and justice in El Salvador, will undoubtedly aggravate the repression and injustice against the organized people who have been struggling because of their fundamental respect for human rights.

(...from an address by Prof. Jose Jorge Siman, Former President, Commission of Justice and Peace of the Archdiocese, Catholic Church of El Salvador, given from the pulpit of Riverside Church, New York City, on Peace Sabbath, April 26, 1981.)

Nonetheless, our government did not heed the Archbishop. We did send aid and military advisors. And this present administration has done the same. Choosing El Salvador in their early days in office as the point at which they would draw the line, they blew it all out of proportion, and then tried to dampen it down again. Obviously, that little nation was to be a testing ground - those poor people, those suffering peasants, the playground of the major ideologies of the day.

In April, on Peace Sabbath, Bill Coffin had in his Riverside pulpit a professor from El Salvador who spoke about the situation and pleaded with American Christians to send human aid, not weapons. And following his comments, Coffin said,

... If it is true that Communism has never come to a nation that took care of its poor, its aged, its youth, its sick, and its handicapped, then why can't we say to the Junta in San Salvador, "We'll help you take care of your poor, your aged, your youth, your sick, and your handicapped, but we will not help you find a military solution to what is not a military problem?"

In Nicaragua, where Catholic priests are in the ruling cabinet, where Jesuits manage the nationwide literacy campaign and are nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by more than one hundred members of the British Parliament, why shouldn't we help the Sandinistas in the same way we helped Somoza for forty years without blinking an eyelash?...

In Cuba, why shouldn't we lift the blockade of twenty years, and instead of sending Marines to Guantanamo Bay, let businessmen wade ashore in Havana? That's what Castro wants, that's the way to counteract Soviet influence, and that's the way to practice peace. The cure is caring, not killing; serving people, not power. Caring for others is the practice of peace.... Peace does not come through strength; strength comes through peace.

The Psalmist in the lesson we read this morning said the Lord brings the plans of nations to nothing. He frustrates the counsels of the peoples. But the Lord's own

plans stand forever. And then the Psalmist went on to say what this world has never learned - and our nation does not understand, as well.

A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Psalm 33: 16, 17 (RSV)

The world teeters on the brink of disaster, and what have we to say? I don't like radicals. I get sick and tired of radicals. I wish they would go away. I get tired of the media putting them before us all the time. One such radical is Daniel Berrigan, the Catholic priest who has been in and out of jail the last decade and a half. Most recently he and a few others went into the G.E. plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, which produces equipment for nuclear missiles. They destroyed what they could before they were arrested. They were just tried and convicted. In an interview, Daniel Berrigan had some things to say which, in spite of the fact that I don't like radicals, spoke to me. He said...

The Jesuit order accepted me as a member. The Catholic Church ordained me as a priest. I took all that with great seriousness. I still do, with all my heart. And then Vietnam came along, and then the nukes came along. And I had to continue to ask myself at prayer, with my friends, with my family, with all kinds of people, with my own soul, "Do you have anything to say today?" I mean, beyond a lot of prattling religious talk.

Do you have anything to say about life today, about the lives of people today? Do you have a word, a word of hope to offer, a Christian word? That's a very important question for anyone who takes being a priest, being a Christian, being a human being seriously, "Do you have anything to offer human life today?" *Sojourners*, June 1981, p. 23.

Well, do you have anything to say today? Do I have anything to say today? The last issue of *TIME* magazine has a two-page essay on "The Bomb." It says, in effect, since Hiroshima in 1945 the world has refused to look at the bomb. We have refused to look at the seriousness of the bomb. And we continue with nuclear proliferation and arming ourselves to the teeth with more warheads than would be necessary to blow up the entire globe, and still the song goes on. Israel makes a preemptive strike on the reactor in Iraq and justifies its action as necessary for its own safety and the safety of the world. In the wake of that, an Arab spokesman said, "We need the bomb!" In a world where six countries have the bomb, probably two more, and by the end of the 80's the possibility of 40 nations having the bomb, what has the Church to say? *TIME* magazine deals with it; I suppose we ought to, too.

The war horse is a vain hope for victory...

If the Psalmist were writing today he might say an antiballistic missile, or a nuclear submarine is a vain hope.

A king is not saved by his great army. ... The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to naught; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations. Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!

What do we do? Well, we don't make knee jerk reactions to every announcement from the White House or the State Department that would rile up our patriotic blood and make us feel like good guys over against the bad guys. We realize that we are in this bundle of life, bound up with all nations and people, and it is not a case of black and white or good and evil, of one side or the other. It is high time that we are true to the principles on which we were founded and that we seek to aid and abet every movement for human freedom and liberation anywhere in the world; that we pray for peace and begin to take steps and action, concrete action, that will further peace; that we come face to face with the horrible reality, the insanity of a world that lives under the shadow of nuclear armaments and that we recognize that our welfare rests with the welfare of the whole human family.

A Declaration of Independence 200 years ago – in the providence of God, a magnificent move toward the enhancement of the human condition.

1981, high time for a Declaration of Interdependence for a world that would be made safe for children and for the generations yet unborn.

Trust in arms? *"The war horse is a vain hope for victory."* When will we learn it?

As I was thinking about all these things this morning, I did what I always do on Sunday mornings, in the stillness, when the family is trying to sleep. I put on Bach's *Mass in B Minor* - a powerful piece. It begins with the Kyrie, "Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us." And then it moves into that great, strong, "Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace among men," then it moves on through the affirmation of faith, the Nicene Creed, and eventuates in the great chorus of Alleluia and praise with the closing cry, "Grant us Thy peace." And as I heard that stirring music, the music itself communicating as much as the words, and I thought about the world in convulsion, I thought to myself - the world in convulsion seems to be so real, so close, so tangible, and the Glory to God in the Highest and Peace on Earth among men of good will seems to be so remote, and yet the music, the music convinced me that that is the Ultimate Truth, and in a world in convulsion we will not despair or give up in hopelessness, paralyzed by fear because we believe that, in the midst of world convulsion, God is working His purposes out. The exciting vision of faith keeps us going and we know that history is not an accident going to happen, but rather throughout all of its chaos is woven that meaningful thread of the purposes of God that will culminate with that great cry, "The Lord God Omnipotent reigns!" But He does not work in a vacuum, rather through His people who, like those 200 years ago, are willing to die for a heavenly cause and sacrifice life itself if need be that there might be peace on earth. Amen.

