

Insight, Courage and World Transformation

Text: Acts 26:1-9; John 12:42

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I have found in the season of Epiphany a theme that continues to circle around in my head and what I am going to say to you this morning, I've said before. I am going to reinforce that theme that in Epiphany we celebrate the fact that the Light has come. It's a wonderful season, the season of the Star, of brightness, of illumination. We celebrate the fact that God does not remain hidden, that God unveils God's self and we have the knowledge of God. The gift of God is that illumination of our minds and hearts so that we are not in darkness, but we live in light.

The thing that has continued to get at me is that the Church always celebrates these seasons of the year, we celebrate that the Light has come, but we fail to *act* in light of the Light. The Light is not an end in itself. The Light has come in order that people illumined, given insight, might become world changers, world transformers. The thrust this season and of this message is that insight must be wedded to courage in order that the world might be transformed.

It sounds like pulpit talk, grandiose, doesn't it? But, think about it for a moment. Is that not what the whole biblical story is about - God calling a people, Israel, in order to be light to the nations? Is not that what the Gospel is about - the light of Jesus Christ, the one who said, "I am the Light of the world," calling us to follow, to be light, to be salt to the world? Are we not called, we who follow in the way of Jesus and in the tradition of Israel, to bear witness to the kingdom of God and to be the concretization of that kingdom in the midst of history? We are called to be agents of change. We are called to be world transformers.

Krister Stendahl used a phrase that I love: "We are called to be the menders of Creation." Isn't that a nice phrase? To mend Creation. God is about the mending of Creation, and God's people are called to be the agents in that process of mending, the healing of Creation, specifically that society might be humanized, that there might be more justice in the world, that there might be more compassion in the world, that there might be more peace in the world. That's so basic, very simple, isn't it? Fundamental. The people of God, as we have understood ourselves, in the tradition of Israel and in the Christian tradition, are

a people who are called to live in the Light, to walk in the Light, to be children of Light in order that the world might become a better place. World transformation.

The Light hasn't come simply to give us information. The Light has come to give us insight in order that, with courage, we might engage in the changing of the world, the changing of society, the changing of human behavior, making the world a better place. The mending of Creation.

My theme is this: That *the insight must be wedded to courage* in order that the insight might be effective in the concrete world of which we are a part. And the greatest hindrance to the coming of the kingdom of God is a failure of nerve. It is *fear*.

I had noted that, last weekend at Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Dr. William Sloan Coffin would speak. Coffin has been an activist minister of the Gospel for many, many years. He has been about many causes of social justice and world peace, but yesterday's *Press* had a little clip from him in which, typically, he called the Church to live in love and to live lovingly, but then this caught my eye: He said, "The great enemy of love is fear, and fear is the destructive force and it is the block to transformative action," and he said, "I'm afraid of scared people."

The problem with the world is scared people. People who lack the courage to stand for the insight that God has given. I think that is clear from the scriptures and it is obvious in our own experience as a people in our own day.

Certainly it was clear in the biblical story, the story as Luke told Paul's story, and as John told Jesus' story. Luke, in the Book of Acts, in those last chapters tells about Paul's return, after all of his missionary activity and the founding of the churches, to Jerusalem with that offering, and when he goes there, a very significant moment in the 21st chapter, the 20th verse: James and the leaders of the Christian Jesus Movement, the Jesus Jewish Christian Movement encounter Paul and they welcome him, saying, "Paul, there are thousands of followers of the Way here. There is a big population in Jerusalem of Jewish people following the way of Jesus, but there are those among them who are saying that when you get out in the hinterlands, you play fast and loose with Moses. You don't observe Torah; you are not an observant Jew out there. And you encourage other Jews to be lax in their observance. And so, Paul, can you straighten that out?"

Paul says, "Certainly."

Then they say, "Why don't you engage in the Rite of Purification? Go to the Temple, it's a seven-day process, say your prayers and shave your head and all that kind of thing."

Paul says, "I'll be glad to," because Paul never claimed to be anything else but an observant Jew. And so, he does that but, while he's in the Temple, there's this

group who is agitating. They stir up a mob and it doesn't take a mob long with a mob psychology to get rabid. They're ready to pounce on him, to tear him limb from limb. They want to kill him, and he's arrested by the Roman cohort there, and the arrest actually becomes a rescue. So, he's put in prison to guard his own life. But, before that, he speaks to the mob and he says, "Look, I am a faithful follower of the tradition. It is for the hope of Israel that I stand here."

Well, they boo him down eventually, and then he speaks to the Roman tribune and finds out he's a Roman citizen. Now he's in the Roman legal process; he gives his defense to the first Governor, Felix, and then Festus and then finally we hear him talking before the King, Agrippa, and it's the same in every case as he gives his defense.

As we read a moment ago, he says, "Look, King, I was a persecutor of the People of the Way. I was so diligent in my own Jewish faith that I imprisoned, I voted for the death of the followers of the Way, I persecuted these people. Certainly these accusations against me are false."

And then he tells the king about how, on his way to Damascus, the light shone upon him, and he tells his conversion story and how he who persecuted the followers of the Way became the proclaimer of Jesus, as indeed God's anointed one. And then this phrase, one of my text this morning: "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision."

That's the point, dear friends. Paul was bathed in light; Paul had to undergo a radical transformation in his thinking. Paul had to do a 180° turn. Paul was absolutely broken, only to rise up and to go another way. He could say at the end of his life, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision."

He had been warned not to go to Jerusalem but he had to go to Jerusalem. They said, "They will bind you there," and he said, "I will go to Jerusalem even if I be bound. I am ready to die for the name of Jesus Christ."

Paul wedded insight to courage, and he was not disobedient to that heavenly vision. I'm sure he died disappointed because he had hoped that from Jew and Gentile there would be created one new humanity. That's the phrase from his Letter to the Ephesians. He spoke about how that middle wall or partition was torn down and now there would be no barrier separating the human family. And you know his frustration. It comes out in his Letter to the Romans, when his own brothers and sisters in the faith did not see what he saw. He said, "I would myself be accursed if only they could see this."

I think Paul dreamed of a day, not when the Jew would cease to be a Jew, but when the Jew in his following of Torah would see in Jesus that full manifestation of God and the day when the Gentile would not become a Jew, but would be embraced by that same grace of God. Paul envisioned one new humanity, embraced by God's grace, dwelling in the light, and he could see that it was not

happening that way, and there was this terrible tension between his work out in the Gentile mission field and the Jesus Jewish contingent at home base in Jerusalem.

But, think of what might have happened if Paul's dream could have been realized, for what ensued because it was not realized was the dominant Jewish party persecuting the people of the Way until the people of the Way became the dominant Christian establishment with tragically 2000 years of anti-semitic persecution. Think of the horror that has been visited upon the human family because there was not at that point created one new humanity.

Paul was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Paul was ready to die for that truth in which he believed, but it didn't happen. There were not enough who would join him, not enough who caught the vision. And so, 2000 years later, does thinking have its implications? My goodness, people, out of that what happened 2000 years later, the horror of the Holocaust! I read just recently in the paper that the nation Germany is wrenched even now as they're trying to determine how to establish a Holocaust memorial in Germany. Ten million dollars, but how do you do it? How do you have a people live, constantly being reminded of that horror?

You see, *thinking* has ramifications all down the line. If only there had been more who would have heeded Paul and stood with him, not to put everybody in a blender and have a homogenized humanity, but to have Jew and Gentile in Christ linked arm in arm, according to God's intention, bringing light to all nations, the light that is in Jesus Christ.

There weren't enough that had nerve enough to stand. There weren't enough who wedded insight with courage in order to transform their world. Near the end of the first century, the Rabbinic Jewish party has gained the ascendancy. The Jewish followers of Jesus are on the defensive now. Now in this Johannine community, John sees in his congregation one and then another and another leave; they're going out all over the place. The ascendent Rabbinic party is now denying the possibility of someone being in the synagogue and saying that Jesus is the Messiah. Now, you're up against it.

"Do you believe Jesus is the Messiah?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, if you confess it, you're out of here."

Now you have to decide - will I openly confess it, or will I just be quiet and stay here, for after all, this is my spiritual home.

That's the situation in which John tells the story of Jesus, and you always see those two levels in John's Gospel. He's telling the story of what happened in

Jesus' day to address what's happening in his day, and so after giving the Book of Signs, the public ministry of Jesus comes to an end in the 12th chapter. The first half of the Gospel is over and it's as though the curtain drops, and John comes out in front of the curtain and speaks to the audience to say, "Now, let me explain this dilemma. You wonder - all of these things that Jesus did that I've just recorded and his own people have rejected him; they don't believe him. How can that be?"

Well, John, out in front of the curtain now, with the audience, says, "On the one hand, God's in that somehow." To explain how that can be, John goes to the prophet Isaiah, the 6th chapter, in which Isaiah records his vision of God and his call. The sixth chapter has a strange twist:

*He said, Go and tell this people:
You may listen and listen, but you will not understand.
You may look and look again, but you will never know.
This people's wits are dulled, their ears are deafened and their eyes
blinded, so that they cannot see with their eyes
nor listen with their ears
nor understand with their wits,
so that they may turn and be healed.*

Difficult words; how can we understand them? In any case, John is saying something similar. He is trying to say to the people this is not happening apart from God's overall operation in history. But then, lest it seem as though he is just saying, well, it's God fault, he goes on to the next paragraph to say, "But even many of the authorities believed but did not confess it for fear of the Pharisees, lest they be put out of the synagogue."

Now, in Jesus' day, nobody was going to be put out of the synagogue, but in John's day the issue was you confess Jesus as the Messiah, you'll be put out of the synagogue. And what John is saying to his community of people was you must make up your mind, you've got to decide, and it just may be down deep finally it will be an issue of whether or not you have the courage of your conviction. Because he says in Jesus' own day there were religious authorities that believed, but for fear of the Pharisees they didn't confess it because they valued human glory more than the glory of God. I would translate that a little differently in our day. They valued their comfort and their security and their job, their position in society more than the imperative to speak the truth according to their conscience. John says to his community, "Will you, too, leave, through a failure of nerve? You do believe it. Just like in Jesus' own day there were those who did believe it."

But the question is not what you believe in the depths of your heart. The question is the degree to which that which you believe in the depths of your heart will find expression in your life. It is the degree to which you will stand up and speak it, say it, take a stand, be counted. Because, you see, insight is given not as an end in

itself, to be contemplated in silence. Insight is given to be wedded with courage in order that the end of it might be world transformation. We are to be about the mending of Creation, the humanization of society, the changing of attitudes, the changing of behavior, the changing of social structures.

It is so difficult to do it in the political process. Come in this next hour and ask Sen. Stille how difficult it is in the political process. Politics is the art of compromise, but there has to be a place in society where the truth will not be compromised, and if it is not the Church, if it not the people of God, then where will the truth be spoken? If we believe it, we must have the courage to say it. If we believe it, we must have the courage to incarnate it. If we believe it, then we must be the living concretization of it.

The light has come. Thank God! So, what? So that we may become agents of transformation. So that we may act on our insight. So that we may follow our conviction. So that we may be true to our faith, the thing that we really believe.

The great block to human transformation is fear - fear of consequence, fear of cost, and it is costly. And the fear is not without justification. Finally each of us in our own life and we as a people together, have moment by moment to make those decisions. Because 2000 years ago there were those who knew it, but for fear refused to confess it, a Holocaust happens and the world is still wrenched. We have knowledge about the genders and the essential equality of the genders, and yet there continues to be a battering away at the equality of women. We live in a society where the armed forces at a school like Citadel, where there is still that damnable resistance to what we really *know* is true and right. We live in a society that will continue to experience gay-bashing and persecution, when we *know* and we have information and we have an experience such that we know that there is no shred of basis in reality for that kind of bigotry and prejudicial attitude. The tragedy is that, while it is very difficult to speak the truth in the political arena where one needs to be elected, in the Church there is a refusal to speak it, even an undergirding of the bigotry and the prejudice that has ruled far too long.

My epiphany plea with you is that we will, before the face of God, think hard, think seriously, think responsibly, reflect, contemplate, discuss, dialogue, struggle and wrestle with humility and openness, but then have the courage to be all of that that would reflect what we really believe and end the conspiracy of silence and the compromise with all of that negativity that continues to lace the human family with tragedy.

Dear friends, the Light has come. Be children of Light and let your light so shine that all people may glorify the Eternal God Who calls us to be the menders of Creation.