

“Unarmed Truth”
January 10, 2021

Isaiah 59:9-15a
John 1:19-34

It has been a difficult week.

Too many times as your pastor I have begun sermons with those words.

Too many times as your pastor I have stepped into this pulpit with awful news still fresh in all our minds and hearts: mass shootings, mistreatment of refugees, attacks on Muslims, Sikhs, and Jews, police shootings of unarmed Black men and women.

Words fail any who seek to speak when the wounds, the sorrow, the anger, the fear are so fresh.

But you have called me to speak from this place and in such times.

We watched this week as the warning of the prophet Hosea was lived out in our nation’s capital: “Those who sow the wind will reap the whirlwind.”

What began with lies has ended with lies and violence and death.

Last Wednesday, a mob of domestic terrorists stormed the Capitol while both houses of Congress were involved in a simple yet one of the most solemn activities of our democracy—receiving the electoral ballots for the President and Vice-President of the United States. They attacked not only Congress and the Capitol but also the principle of the peaceful transition of power. They were incited by the President of the United States who cannot accept that he lost the election to Joe Biden and who has been lying about the election since November.

The damage the mob did to the building was significant. Men and women were seriously injured and some died.

The damage they sought to do to our democracy was even greater: bringing a halt to the will of the People expressed in our ballots from the November election. That some arrived with zip ties and weapons has led authorities to investigate whether there was intent to harm those in Congress or take them hostage.

This mob was a diverse gathering of anger and hatred—the result of four years of lies. And as people of faith—as members of the *United Church of Christ*—we need to recognize that those who call themselves “evangelical Christians” were a major part of this mob and its actions. They carried signs and flags announcing: “Jesus Saves.” They raised a large cross outside the Capitol.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.”¹ In the past four years they have ignored that calling and have twisted their faith into the support of corrupt power in the hope of restoring their fading influence.

Along with so many others, they have taken a steady and constant stream of lies and embraced them as truth—from the Birtherism that the President used as his entrée into politics to his steady insistence that the election was “stolen.”

And, of course the lies have not been restricted to politics. We are in the midst of an ongoing, deadly pandemic in which so many leaders have been reluctant to speak the simple truth that Covid-19 is a deadly disease and that it is important to wear masks until vaccines start to work throughout the population. Those are not hard words, but how many had died before we heard anything like this from our senators, our governor? We know that the President’s talk about the pandemic has been filled with untruths.

The ancient prophet, Isaiah, speaks to our fear: “Truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking.”

Michael Gerson, himself an evangelical journalist wrote that: “The collapse of one disastrous form of Christian social engagement should be an opportunity for the emergence of a more faithful one. And,” he says, “there are plenty of potent, hopeful Christian principles lying around unused by most evangelicals: A consistent and comprehensive concern for the weak and vulnerable in our society, including the poor, immigrants and refugees. A passion for racial reconciliation and criminal justice reform, rooted in the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity. A deep commitment to public and global health, reflecting the priorities of Christ’s healing ministry. An embrace of political civility as a civilizing norm. A commitment to the liberty of other people’s religions, not just our own. An insistence on public honesty and a belief in the transforming power of unarmed truth.”

What would America be like if these had been the priorities of evangelical Christians over the past four years — or over the past four decades?

To me, those sound like the principles we try to live by as liberal Christians.

Each of them and all of them are important as we move forward. But I want to say a little more about the “insistence on public honesty and a belief in the transforming power of unarmed truth.”

Lies have consequences.

The consequences are personal: one study showed that our brains become more desensitized with each successive falsehood. The more we lie, the less the brain responds. Our own small acts of dishonesty have a cumulative effect upon us.

And the consequences are social and political: Honesty and the trust that honesty engenders are essential for a liberal democracy. We have been given a vivid warning that a nation so steeped in the absence of truth cannot long endure.

This first Sunday after Epiphany is the day on which we remember Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan.

In the early chapters of the Gospel of John, Jesus and John the Baptist are presented as two leaders, each with a deep concern for the truth wherever it would take them.

When religious leaders come to John, he confesses, and does not deny, that he is not the Messiah. He awaits and looks toward the One who is greater than he. John baptizes and he also speaks the truth so that it might be heard by all.

Along with other people of faith, we must continue to insist on honesty on the part of those who seek to serve the public good by leading in government. Each one of us individually and all of us together are crucial to this effort.

This is both good news and a demanding charge: We are called to honesty in our speech because we are the ones who can bring about the political honesty that is needed for a liberal democracy to flourish.

Our continued expectation of honesty in the public square will set the limits for those who exercise the authority they receive from the people.

In the United States we still need to speak truth not only to those in elected office but also to those of us who put them there—to recover a common, shared reality devoid of conspiracy theories and a nihilistic disregard of truth.

We in the liberal church are called to important work. While we used to be able to assume that many outside the church held our values and expectations, we are now called to define and clarify what those values are and learn to speak about them in ways that can persuade others. This is not about moral superiority. It is about creating a society that honors each of its members, a society that speaks the truth, a society that seeks the peace that grows from justice.

The good news of this past week—if there is any—is that for the present time, the mob did not prevail. Our nation did not fall to their assault. The Senate and the House of Representatives returned to their work, the legitimate votes of the Electoral College were received, and Joe Biden is officially our President-elect.

And finally—finally!—there is a growing bipartisan sense that the President should be held accountable for his lies and for the damage they cause.

Of course, as of Sunday, there are still ten days until the inauguration and the President has proved to be a dangerous, unscrupulous man who will always seek his own good and only his own good. How this will finally play out, we don't know—or at least we don't as this worship service is being recorded on Saturday morning. Resignation, invoking the 25th Amendment, and impeachment are all offered as very real possibilities.

In the days and years ahead, let us seek the truth and speak the truth.

ⁱ MLK, “A Knock at Midnight,” in *A Knock at Midnight*, pg. 72