

New Secrets, Waiting to Be Found
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Circle of Mercy Congregation
Principal text: Isaiah 65:17-25
Other lections: Psalm 118; Luke 21:5-19

“The parents have eaten sour grapes,” writes the Prophet Ezekiel (18:2), “and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” There are a lot of teeth on edge these days: a lot of bared teeth, grinding teeth, teeth with fangs. Last Tuesday night, as the electoral results began to shock the nation, commentator Van Jones spoke very emotionally: “You have people putting children to bed tonight and they are afraid of breakfast. They’re afraid of ‘How do I explain this to my children?’”

I went to bed Tuesday night long before the final results but after the news anchors’ faces began to blanch as the number began piling up, telling a different story from their teleprompters’ received wisdom. The next morning I wasn’t surprised at the outcome, but it did feel like a punch in the gut.

As I sipped coffee, my mind was racing, almost in a panic. I began a mental check list of all the potential ramifications of a Trump administration: healthcare; the nuclear deal with Iran; massive tax cuts for the wealthy; white backlash of all kinds against people of color, of Muslims, of the queer community; the status of immigrants; the gutting of environmental regulations; privatization of Medicare and Social Security; Supreme Court nominees; the undoing of modest banking reform regulations On and on until I felt a bit dizzy.

Then Nancy came into the kitchen where I was sipping coffee. “I’m SSOOOO glad I don’t have to preach this Sunday,” a little too gleefully.

“There is that comfort,” I said sarcastically. Months ago, when I said yes to this assignment, none of us knew what an uphill climb it would be to speak to this week’s news.

I believe—and this is certainly not an infallible judgment—I believe that as a nation we are in trouble, maybe catastrophic trouble, and we need to figure out what to do.

There is plenty of trouble in this week’s lectionary readings. We read my take on Psalm 118 as the call to worship. Though my rendition did not stick to wording of that Psalm, it did stay with the text’s whiplash. Did you notice how it moved from agony to ecstasy and then back again? Like a rollercoaster, at breakneck speed, from heights to depths so fast that the blood drains from your head, and then from your feet. Back and forth between trust and tremor, hope and horror, confidence and cataclysm, assurance and anxiety.

Trouble. Trouble for sure.

Then if you turn to today’s Gospel lesson in Luke, you’ll read some of Jesus’ unsettling warnings about the coming troubles, of wars and insurrections, earthquakes and famines, arrests and persecutions and betrayals. Trouble, nothing but trouble.

But then he closes with 8 simple words: “By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

So we have this warning: Trouble—no getting around it. And we have this counsel: Endurance. What will that look like?

This election is among the most bizarre and vitriolic campaign ever. For the first time in history a woman was the nominee of a major party, and yet her opponent garnered 10 points more of women’s votes. 81% of the personal-morality-boosting

evangelical Christian population aligned themselves with an admitted serial divorcee and adulterer, a man facing multiple counts of sexual assault and financial fraud, a man who famously said he could shoot somebody in broad daylight on a busy street and still get elected. According to exit polls, fully a quarter of his supporters admit he is neither qualified nor has the temperament for someone with access to nuclear launch codes, who's bragged about wanting to "bomb the you-know-what" out of our enemies.

Having said all these things—and it's not because I am a big fan of Hillary Clinton—having said all this I hasten to add that Trump did not do this to us. Trump did not generate the sometimes vile hatred. He focused it. He voiced it. He gave it shape. But the anger was already there, and we are responsible for addressing it with something more than shouting and threats.

Forget about moving to Canada. (You probably heard the Canadian immigration website crashed late last Tuesday night.) We may not like our nation right now, but we must—urgently—love our country.

Only half the eligible voters in this country voted. And half of those just gave a middle-finger salute to the nation. We need to figure out why and do something about it.

Trouble ahead, for sure. There are many ways to diagnose the resentment Trump's campaign has energized. Van Jones called it "whitelash," a white backlash. Whatever conclusion you reach, clearly a great many people in this country are living with a deeply-felt loss of status. Whether you do analysis based on race or class or gender or rural/urban divide, the end result is still an awful lot of very angry people, many among them who could care less about Donald Trump's actual policies.

So what have we learned, and what shall we do in the face of this trouble? I want to suggest four resolves needing special attention as we move forward.

1. In a Facebook post Wednesday morning Missy Harris put her finger on the first thing we must resolve: “The truth is that no matter what the outcome of what we have woken up to this morning, I will be okay. My family will be okay. But many will continue not being okay and will continue living in fear for their lives and their children's lives. We must never be okay with this.”

Most of us here will be OK, but our *OKness* must extend to those at risk.

On Wednesday alone the stories of ginned up bullying is frightening.

- **A cell phone video** at York County (Pennsylvania) School of Technology recorded some students walking the hall with a Trump campaign poster, chanting “white power.”¹

- Middle school students in a Detroit suburb chanted "build the wall" during lunchtime, leaving Latinx schoolmates in tears.²

- Someone at New York University (*my alma mater*) Tandon School of Engineering wrote "Trump" on the door of Muslim students' prayer room.³

This week a friend circulated a note with a quote from the early 20th century journalist and social critic H.J. Mencken, who wrote: “As democracy is perfected, the office of the President represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day, the plain folks of the land will reach their heart’s desire at last, and the White House will be occupied by a downright fool and a complete narcissistic moron.”

I immediately responded:

“I am a fan of Mencken’s wit but not his political judgment. It is the ‘plain folks’ of

the land that are, in fact, among the biggest losers in this election. That some find it rather easy to manipulate them, yes, that much is true. That they deserve it, no. It is we, the unplain, the cosmopolitans, who are complicit in this disaster. And we shall continue our complicity until we find the wherewithal to fashion movements sturdy enough to topple from their duplicitous thrones the gangster-bankster class, along with their illicit aspirants.”

I do think people like me, and many of you, have a greater responsibility for the mess we’re in than we know. Consciously or not, we have been infected with the Democratic Party elite’s conviction about “deplorable” human beings.

This week grassroots organizer George Lakey wrote very perceptively. “We can build the scale of our movements by frankly admitting that alienated white working-class people are right: Both major parties are together destroying the country on behalf of the 1%. It may be hard for college educated activists to admit that the working-class view is more accurate than the belief of graduates of political science courses. However, the sooner the humility arrives, the better.”⁴

And then there’s this insight from a photojournalist. “For better or for worse, we will only get through this if we begin to understand the emotions of those we disagree with in a way we haven’t figured out. Emotions are a bit like facts—once they exist, you’ve got to deal with them rather than wishing they’d just go away. The only true emotional solvent is empathy.” Dominick went on to describe a situation he faced at a Trump rally. He was working with another reporter, when a man in the audience came up and began screaming at them, calling them “media scum.” His colleague had the presence of mind to calmly ask the man his name. And that simple act defused the fury, and the accuser

then began to tell the story of how he felt dismissed by the political status quo.⁵

Parker Palmer said it better than anyone I know: "Beneath the shouting, there's suffering. Beneath the anger, fear. Beneath the threats, broken hearts. Start there and we might get somewhere."

A friend called last week to ask "What on earth are you going to say [about the election outcome]?" I responded, "Don't know yet—still sorting through my own emotional reactions . . . something between flamethrowing and fetal crouch."

Those are typically our immediate reactions to threat. Reactive, or deactive. Act out or opt out. Aggressive, or indecisive. Fight, or flight.

Our first resolve is to be vigilant, in every way we know how, in protecting the first strike targets of bullies of every sort. We must be prepared to disrupt what passes for "peace" in doing so.

2. The second, equally urgent resolve is to listen attentively, with empathy, to the anger of those who in fact have no stake in the gangster-bankster ruling class. They are being used as surely as others who have no place at the table.

These two resolves sometimes seem to be in opposition to each other. Prophetic work, pastoral work. Advocacy, and empathy. There're not. Of course they involved different tactics, and some people are more adapt at one or the other, but these two vocations must collaborate and inform each other if we are to fulfill our mission.

3. Then there's a third important resolve if we're to be about the work of peacemaking, rooted in justice and tempered by mercy. It's so obvious it took me three proofreads of this text to realize it was missing.

People of equal intelligence, compassion and commitment have been, and likely always will be, disagreeing about how to translate our dream for a beloved community into a unified strategy for how to get there. We need to be emotionally prepared to not only tolerate dissent within the ranks but to make it work for us.

4. Finally, and most importantly, there is a fourth resolve.

Several weeks ago Sydney wrote an amazingly empathetic, visionary poem. (And yes, I know I may be biased.) She talked about those “who walk with me to the world of peace.” And it ended with “I walk to a new world, finding all the new secrets, waiting to be found.”

And this brings us to today’s text from Isaiah and its treasure trove of secrets, waiting to be found. You already know some of them. You can see some of them have been wonderfully illustrated, hanging here on the wall.

“New heavens, new earth . . . delight in my people . . . no more weeping . . . God answers . . . wolf and lamb together!” The secret to our ability to persevere, despite the turmoil and trouble, is to stay connected to the vision of new heavens and new earth, to the Kingdom of God, to the Beloved Community, to the God Movement. This is the key unlocking everything else, which is why it is so important to return week after bruising, troubling week to communities of conviction like this one. Ironically, it is in the midst of trouble that our hearts are most prepared to receive what is surely Good News for a world mired in vengeance and retaliation. A Mexican proverb says it well. “They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we are seeds.”

A brief anecdote from the Jewish sage Martin Buber, and then I’m done.

“Once they told Rabbi Pinhas of the great misery among the needy. He listened,

sunk in grief. Then he raised his head. ‘Let us draw God into the world,’ he cried, ‘and all need will be quenched.’ God’s grace consists precisely in this,” that God wants divine attention to be won by humanity, so much so that God relinquishes divine prerogative to enter the troubled world of human enmity.

Let us draw God into the world, sisters and brothers. This vision only comes to those who risk, to those willing to suffer on behalf of these treasures waiting to be found, maybe—in extreme circumstances—even to die for the Promised Land. But remember: we are seeds whose burial has the power to regenerate the world.

May it be so, even now, even today.

¹ <http://kutv.com/news/nation-world/reports-of-racially-charged-incidents-at-york-vo-tech>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewbpQEGwxQY>

³ See Sean O’Kane’s “[Day 1 in Trump’s America](#)” for other examples of post-election hatemongering.

⁴ George Lakey, “Without empathy for Trump voters, movements can’t succeed,” Waging Nonviolence <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/43323/>

⁵ Dominick Reuter, “On the Election” <https://medium.com/@dominickreuter/on-the-election-5a946af1d090#.o69e0shp9>