

Sermon
First Sunday after the Epiphany
Saint Andrew's, Methuen
January 10, 2021
William Bradbury

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

So much for 2021 being a better NEW year!

In addition to the ongoing health crisis, we are now in the throes of a political crisis. We've seen things these past few days that none of us have ever seen before: a mob, whipped into fury by the leader of our nation, marches down the street and storms the Capitol, in which congress is certifying the results of a free and fair election that had been certified by every state—red and blue—and tested in over 60 court challenges around the country.

Members of congress and their staff have to run from their work and hide out in locked rooms. Property is destroyed, people injured, and 5 die as a result of this attack. This was not a symbolic act of peace, but a violent act of intimidation and insurrection.

Bishop Gates wrote this yesterday: "Among the numerous evils thrown into high relief by the attack on our Capitol building, we cannot avoid calling out its manifestation of racism and white supremacy. From the Confederate flag carried boldly through the Capitol, to the scaffolding and noose constructed on the plaza outside, to the indisputable contrast between the way invading rioters were treated Wednesday and the way non-seditious protesters have been treated at other points throughout the year past—there is simply no denying the ugliness of racism before us."

As I watch this unfold on live TV, I'm not surprised to see a prominent banner that says: "Jesus 2020". On Wednesday some Christians believe they have a religious sanction for their actions: Jesus is with them in overthrowing this election—certainly Jesus doesn't want a diverse, inclusive America that guarantees liberty and justice FOR ALL.

So, let's look at what our gospel today teaches us about this moment we're in. **Especially look at what it teaches us about power:**

John the Baptizer says “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”

Surely John is describing a leader who will be physically stronger than Samson, morally stronger than Isaiah, and politically stronger than King David.

A leader with the power to defeat their enemies, foreign and domestic, and establish God’s Realm that supports their view of the world. Apostles James and John beg Jesus to let them sit on his right and left **when he comes into his power.**

Peter expects Jesus will have the power to throw out the Roman Empire. After all, didn’t Jesus tell them that at his baptism he saw heaven open up, and the Spirit of God enter his life? And didn’t he hear God say: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”?

Surely Jesus has the power of God!

As Holy Week unfolds, however, Peter loses faith in Jesus because he can’t even save himself. As Peter waits in the courtyard outside the trial, he is so afraid of a young servant girl that he denies even knowing Jesus! When Jesus is finally hung on the cross, Peter is long gone.

Jesus can’t be the savior, because saviors always win—and never, ever, lose.

 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, the founder of modern existentialism, famously said, **“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”**

Peter won’t know how to understand Jesus’s story, until after the event of Cross and Resurrection. Only then will Peter understand his own life, as a child of God living inside the Jesus Story. Only then will he be able to find forgiveness for his lack of faith and the courage to stand with Jesus, no matter who is accusing him.

Remember the two on the road to Emmaus? Three days after the crucifixion they are heading away from Jerusalem, sad and hopeless, because of Jesus’ failure to restore the kingdom to Israel.

But then a stranger--the Risen Jesus—joins them on the way and opens the scriptures to them, that is, he interprets the Bible, our Old

Testament, through the lens of his death and resurrection, and their hearts begin to burn with understanding and joy. Then as they share a meal and Jesus breaks the bread, their eyes and hearts are finally open to who he is—and he disappears.

Why does he disappear? Patristics scholar and Orthodox priest John Behr says it is because Jesus has moved from outside their lives to inside, so that the two forlorn disciples are now part of the Body of Christ!

Life makes much more sense when we look at it through the Cross instead of through political and cultural notions of power. That's why the Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians, **"I decided to know nothing among you, except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."** 1 Corinthians 2:2

And in Romans 6 he writes: **"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"** ... so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

Who we walk with in this life matters!

Authoritarians and demagogues have followers who accept their lies and violence in order to get rid of those who they think are standing in the way of their prosperity. In Nazi Germany it was the Jews. In the recent years we've heard calls to get rid of Muslims, Immigrants, and Black Lives Matter.

On Wednesday as they entered the capitol some were shouting: "Hang Mike Pence."

"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."

We best live our lives forward when our lives find meaning and purpose in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Word made flesh. If we were in our church building today, we would be having a baptism and renewing our own baptismal covenant. (I should have included that in the liturgy—but I forgot!)

So let us remember now that we who have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection are called to:

- +walk in Jesus's Way of non-violence and peace;
- +follow Jesus's Truth of universal acceptance and compassion;
- +let his divine Life—the Holy Spirit—flow through us and transform our broken humanity, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Therefore, in our baptism we are called to be ambassadors of Christ, who is the Realm of God in person, and who reveals the power of God's love in the powerlessness of the Cross.