

“A Word of Hope”
1 Corinthians 13
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Today I was going to start a sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer but given the events of this past week, I feel moved to speak to you about the terrible tragedy that befell our nation. Wednesday, January 6, was the day of Epiphany. In the Christian calendar, this is the day we celebrate the visit of the Magi, the wise men, to the child Jesus in Bethlehem.

On Wednesday, we had an epiphany of a different sort. We witnessed, with our own eyes, an assault on our democratic way of life when a crowd protesting the results of the November election turned violent, stormed the Capitol building, destroyed property, and threatened the lives of our Congressmen and women, and the police who protected them.

I have to tell you, I have not been this disturbed and disheartened since 9/11. On that day, I was in the Pentagon when the building was struck by a hijacked jetliner. I was fortunate in that I was far away from the point of impact. But 125 people died in that attack—many more died in New York and in a field in Pennsylvania. I can still remember...the terror of that moment when we realized the Pentagon had been hit...the quick, but orderly, exit we made from the Building...the sick feeling in my stomach when I turned to see smoke pouring out of my office building...knowing somewhere, in there, people were dead, the result of a foreign terrorist attack.

Sadness, anger, fear, concern for my family, and for my country—I felt all those emotions on 9/11. I felt them again this week. Chances are, many of you did too.

I want to speak with you this morning not so much about the specifics of what happened at the Capitol—you can get that from the news media—but of how we got to this point in our national life and what we, as followers of Jesus Christ, can and should do in response.

First off, we must condemn the violence.

We live in a nation of laws, laws that are meant to apply equally to all the people. We do not always live up to this ideal, but we strive to ensure the rights of all people to live peacefully with our neighbors, and to respect the property of others. Violence is not the way the United States has chosen to resolve our differences. Again, we have not been perfect in this, but we strive after it. Violence is not the way for followers of Christ. Jesus told us to love our enemies, not to hate them. His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount instruct us not to seek vengeance but rather to practice forgiveness. This week’s violence at the Capitol, or at any demonstration by any group for that matter, is inappropriate and unjustifiable. It must not happen again, and those responsible must be held accountable.

Second, we must not believe what happened this week was sanctioned by God.

There were plenty of disgraceful scenes when the Capitol was stormed this week but one that really sickened me as a pastor was seeing the big flags that said “Jesus” and “Jesus Saves” flying above the rioters.

- I am sure some of the rioters believed they were following God’s will when they broke through the barricades.
- I suspect some believed their actions were part of a divine plan.

These things are not so. Once again, God does not endorse the violent overthrow of duly constituted democratic governments.

And what else discourages me is that people outside the Christian faith will look at these scenes, see the pictures, and think: “If this is the way Christians behave, I wouldn’t want to be part of it.” This is not a new reaction. Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the Indian independence movement in the early 20th century, once said: “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” Our episcopal leader of the Baltimore Washington Conference, Bishop LaTrelle Easterling, said of these scenes: “This is not what Emmanuel came to earth to embody. This is a perversion of the Gospel. This should drive all of us to our knees.”

I want to turn now to how we got to this place.

I believe we arrived at this very divided point in our history because as a nation, and even as a people of God, we have failed to see each other as people who are made in the image of God. We are failing to see our common humanity. This did not happen overnight.

Over the course of several decades now, we have willingly engaged in language and dialogue that purposely demonizes and denigrates people with whom we disagree. Social media is often blamed for this, but social media is a tool.

- It can be used to connect people to one another, or to cut them down.
- It has been used as a megaphone to amplify our own opinions, and as a cudgel to batter, beat, and berate anyone who disagrees with us.

Sadly, this is just as true among Christians as it is with those who express no faith in God.

Here's the important thing: words matter. What we say to one another about one another makes a difference. You've heard the saying we teach our children: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me." This is a lie. Words matter...words can hurt people, deeply; words do hurt people deeply; so deeply, in fact, that verbal bullying has driven people to take their own lives.

I found this quote I really like about the power of words: "Words create worlds." For Christians, we believe words brought the universe into existence: "Then God said, 'Let there be light...'" That's beautiful! Words can create, but they can also destroy; they can build up or break down, it all depends in how we use them. The Apostle James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, warned us of the danger of our words:

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire...but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so (James 3:5-6, 8-10).

What brought us to this place are the worlds our words have created.

We have "made worlds" wherein we are right; where we listen only to those who agree with us; where we believe people who disagree with us aren't just wrong, they're downright evil; and, where the divide between us is a ditch of our own digging. In a lot of ways, the comic strip character Pogo was right: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." Let me repeat the words of James here one more time: "My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so."

This national moment of crisis is also a moment of spiritual crisis for our nation and for our faith. How shall we meet it? We are followers of the One who died a violent death for us so that we can have life. As followers of Jesus Christ:

We must not engage in talk that demeans, disparages, or vilifies others. To do so is to shred the image of God borne by every human being. To do so is sin of which we must repent.

At the same time, we must condemn the language and ideology of hatred in whatever forms it takes.

Whether it is the language and symbology of white supremacy—which was clearly on display at the Capitol last week—extreme self-centeredness, religious hatred, gender discrimination, social superiority, or exploitive power, all of it is sin and must be rejected.

We must be a people of love. This is who Jesus called us to be. Jesus said: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." To love in this time of tension is hard. It means, though, we should be kind to one another; to show compassion. Agree with others where you can. Politely agree to disagree where you cannot. And if all else fails, to walk away in peace.

Above all, we must remain hopeful. Despite what has transpired and no matter what may come in the days ahead, we can be a people of hope. We hope because hope is born of Jesus Christ, and we are born anew in Him. We hope because the One whose birth we just celebrated brings the light of God's love into this darkened world.

The Apostle John wrote of Jesus saying: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). May the God of all Grace be with us and sustain us, now and always. Amen.