

THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

ISAIAH 65:17-25; MALACHI 4:1-2A

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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NOVEMBER 13, 2016/26TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

This is one of those Sundays where preachers can probably count on many people coming to church with the same thing in mind.

I'm speaking, of course, about the Calgary Flames losing their fourth game in a row last night. ☺

It's been quite a week in the news. For most of this week, conversation has been dominated by the US presidential election and its outcome.

(If you have not been paying attention to the news this week or avoided the endless online chatter I envy you and commend you for your good judgment.)

But for the rest of us, this has been a week dominated by discussion about something few thought possible a year or so ago: President Donald Trump.

The fact that a man who campaigned on stoking the flames of division, who regularly scapegoated minorities for the problems facing America, who used threats and intimidation against those who disagreed with, whose speech was vulgar, ignorant, and deceitful, who bragged about how being famous allowed him to sexually assault women... the fact that *this* man was elected president of the USA is, for many, nothing short of incredible.

The fact that the votes of white Christians played a large role in securing him the office is even more scandalous.

So, many people are struggling this week. Struggling to understand how this could happen, to understand what it says about our culture that it *could* happen, struggling to figure out how people could be so radically divided. And, of course, worried about the vulnerable populations that Mr. Trump so regularly disparaged throughout his campaign.

I do think the election results are a *lot* more complicated than “half the population is ignorant hateful bigots and half the population is enlightened tolerant citizens.” This is a narrative that gets considerable traction in the media, but I don’t think it does justice to the reality on the ground. Many people voted for the Republican party *despite* not *because of* Trump, and for a whole host of reasons that have nothing to do with his personal character.

But here we are. We are looking out at the cultural and political landscape and scratching our heads. We’re worried, perhaps, for the future.

Many wonder what effect a US president who campaigned on walls and beating up enemies will have on the global stage. Or how the already pronounced racial tensions in America will be affected by this. Or about how it will affect Canada’s economic relationship with our largest trading partner.

There’s lots of anxiety and not much hope. At least in some quarters.

Speaking of hope...

This is a word that shows up with predictable regularity every time there is an election of any sort, anywhere. It’s often found with its best friend, “change.” “Hope” and “change.”

Hope is thrown around endlessly in every political campaign. It was part of almost every conversation I had with people about the election.

Both Trump and Clinton were selling hope. We’re the ones who will deliver the future you’re looking for. We’re the ones who will fix the problems facing the country. We’re the ones who will defeat the bad people. We’re the ones who will make things better.

Hope and change are easy to sell.

And for good reason. I think we are hard-wired for both.

We are primed for hope, no matter how many times our expectations might have been frustrated in the past, no matter how many examples history might afford of politics degenerating into the same old, same old, no matter who is in power.

We are ready for change, no matter how unlikely change might be in reality. As human beings, we seem to be uniquely and consistently oriented toward some better future.

No matter what the past has been like, we are convinced that something better is around the corner. We can lose the weight, kick the habit, learn the skill, change the behaviour, achieve the goal, fulfill the dream...

Hope and change are always beckoning us onward, and we are always chasing eagerly after them.

As I reflect on hope/change language this morning, the irony is not lost on me that as a pastor, I, as a pastor and as a Christian, am heavily reliant on these two words.

I am, in a sense, marketing hope and change up here every single Sunday. Hopefully not as crassly and self-interestedly as many politicians, hopefully hope and change of a more ultimate and lasting kind.

We are looking for something better. All of us. All the time.

The prophet Isaiah spoke to people not so different from us. People looking for hope and change.

The context of our text this morning is the aftermath of the Babylonian exile, around six hundred years before Christ. Some of the exiles have been allowed to return and are now faced with the monumental task of rebuilding the nation left devastated by years of Babylonian rule.

There's a mood of deep pessimism in the air. The nation is characterized by injustice, wickedness, idolatry, syncretistic worship. Their leaders are blind and incapable of leading as they ought to.

They have suffered. And they will continue to suffer. The future looks bleak.

Into this context, we have this poetic passage that echoes all the way down to Revelation 21.

A new heaven and a new earth—this powerful and comprehensive vision of healing and hope on every level.

Personal sins, forgiven. Communal strife, no more.

All the bad things we have endured, all the sins we have committed—forgotten, remembered no more. “Holy amnesia,” as one commentator put it.

The people of God, no longer divided and fractious, but a delight.

No more weeping.

All around, there is life—long life, people enjoying the work of their hands, no more labouring in vain...

The promise that God will answer before his people even call out... our wills will be aligned with our Maker.

And then, this well-known metaphor of the wolf and the lamb feeding together. It is an image of peace and rest.

The passage ends with the promise that violence will be no more: They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD.

This is our hope. This is what God has promised to his people. Everything that happens in our world, everything that happens in your life and my life, takes place under the overarching canopy of this new creation that Isaiah speaks of here. This is the purpose and the goal of human life—to live at peace and in harmony with God, with one another, with creation.

But it seems so remote, doesn't it? As we said together in our call to worship, “Why does it have to be so difficult? Why does it take so long? We're tired of waiting...”

Some might have even be thinking, “All that new heaven and new earth” language is just a bunch of pie in the sky... Sure, it sounds good to say, don’t worry, one day God is going to make everything better. Sounds lovely. But what good does that do us now?”

I want to offer three concluding thoughts/applications based on this passage in light of our present realities and the difficulties for hope that it represents

First, We’re not the first people to face anxious political times and a potentially dangerous king.

It’s worth remembering that Christians have historically survived far worse kings and tyrants than Donald Trump. Indeed, the church has not only survived terrible and oppressive political leadership, it has thrived and grown (spiritually and numerically).

Whenever we’re tempted to despair due to the specter of a Trump presidency, we ought to mentally rehearse some of the brutally violent and shockingly immoral political leaders that the church has endured around the world over its two thousand years or so. We’ve seen quite a bit worse than this, if perhaps not in such lurid detail.

Politics does not equal theology. It is troubling to see how much of our hopes we Christians have invested in American politics

It is difficult to imagine the early Christians getting overly excited about which Roman Emperor was in power. It is difficult to imagine the early Mennonites getting overly excited about which prince or king was in power... they wouldn’t have looked to these domains as arenas in which their convictions would find expression.

At times, the behaviour of Christians gives the impression that it is not Christ or his church that is the hope of the world but Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump or Justin Trudeau or _____

We perhaps need to be reminded to take a longer view

Second, Christian discipleship does not equal disinterested quietism.

We do not just passively sit by and wait for God to usher in the new heaven and new earth but we participate in its coming and provide a foretaste in the present.

Do you hope for a future of peace? Enact it now. Be people of peace, in your relationships, families, and communities.

Do you hope for a future of plenty for all? Enact it now. Live generously with your neighbours.

Do you hope for forgiveness? Enact it now. Forgive freely. Say sorry when you make mistake, when you hurt people. Be people of grace and mercy.

Do you hope for a future of joy? Enact it now.

Do you fear for vulnerable minorities in a world with people like Donald Trump calling the shots? Welcome the stranger; speak up for the weak, care for those cast to the side

Do you cringe at the sexist comments and behaviour that Trump legitimates? Make sure that your language and behaviour never objectifies other human beings made in the image of God.

Do you fear a world with walls? Make sure that we, as the church of Jesus Christ, are consistently reaching across them.

It's not up to politicians to usher in the new heaven and new earth. This is God's job. And it is our job to provide a foretaste of what it will look like here and now.

Third, we need to take seriously the reality/necessity of divine judgment.

I occasionally hear from people that I need to preach against sin and about judgment more. I'm often hesitant to do so because I know how easily it is for "God's judgment" can look and sound like "our judgment." We very rarely call for more preaching against sins that we are committed to and invested in—it's usually for "those people" out there that we think could use a bit of condemnation.

But we cannot escape a God who judges, as our second passage from Malachi made obvious this morning. Perhaps you cringed a little as it was read. We like that part about the "sun of righteousness rising with healing in its wings" (and we sing about it each year at Christmas time, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"), but all that stuff about the arrogant evildoers being burned up, well, we could do with out that.

We like the idea of a non-judgmental God—a God who offers us the promise of a new heaven and a new earth with lions lying down with wolves, and lions eating straw with the ox. It all sounds so warm and pastoral and non-judgy.

But the prophets will not give us such a cheap and inadequate hope. The prophets offer us some of the most soaring and beautiful language in all of Scripture about the future that God promises his people, but never before insisting that we hold up a mirror to ourselves and never without the reminder that the God of the new heaven and the new earth is also the God of the refiners fire, the who judges and purifies.

We *need* a God who judges, even if we don't realize it, even if we don't think we want it. In his new book, *The Day the Revolution Began*, N.T. Wright is critical of our present-day reluctance to admit this:

[T]he lazy idea that God, if such a being exists at all, is like an indulgent elderly relative who doesn't want to spoil people's fun and so never gets angry about anything. As has often been pointed out, this is mere sentimentalism. If there is a God, and if he does not hate injustice, child prostitution, genocide, and a lot of other things as well, then he is not a good God.¹

Miroslav Volf makes the point even more graphically in his magnificent book, *Exclusion and Embrace*. He is a pacifist and is talking about how the practice of nonviolence, and arguing that it's possible for human beings not because God is really nice and we need to be nice like God, but because God has promised divine vengeance:

My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone... Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit...

Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of a thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a

¹ N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (London: SPCK, 2016), 43.

scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.²

If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence—that God would not be worthy of worship....

God will judge, not because God gives people what they deserve, but because some people refuse to receive what no one deserves; if evildoers experience God's terror, it will not be because they have done evil, but because they have resisted to the end the powerful lure of the open arms of the crucified Messiah.³

Volf knows of what he speaks. He is Croatian, and lost family and friends to the violence of the Balkan wars in the 90's.

We look around at our world and we see a great deal of arrogance, just like Malachi saw in his day. We see great evil being visited upon vulnerable people around the world by people determined to greedily abuse their power, to assume for themselves the power that belongs only to God. We might think of the reality our Syrian friends have left behind in coming to Canada.

All of it is based on this original sin—the sin that goes all the way back to Genesis 3, when the first human beings sought to be “like God,” presuming to attain the knowledge of good and evil rather than being content with their role as stewards and image bearers.

Arrogance is the sin at the root of so much violence and destruction and idolatry and injustice today and throughout history.

And we look forward not only to a future hope where it is burned up, where all that was false and destructive, all that stole life, all that was idolatrous and deceitful, is reduced to stubble.

Or, as Isaiah says, it is “remembered no more.”

² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 304.

³ *Ibid*, 298.

This, too, is part of the Christian hope. Thank God.

We need this. Our world needs it. Those who have been on the wrong end of the score need it. Those whose innocent blood has stained the earth need it.

And we need God to do it, because we do a terrible and inconsistent job of judging on our own.

And, of course, the sun of righteousness that rises with healing in its wing is none other than the crucified Messiah. The one who will judge and refine and purify us is none other than the very one who laid down his life for us, who bore the weight of all our arrogance and evil, whose arms remain wide open to welcome us in, to forgive us, to heal us, and to send us forth to be emissaries of this hopeful future he has promised.

There can be no greater comfort, no greater hope, and no greater challenge than this.

Amen.

