

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
Pentecost 19, October 10, 2021
Proper 23

“Some Fundamental Respect Needed Now”

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90:12-17;
Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

I remember driving from Ridgecrest out through the desert to our church in Randsburg, just off Highway 395.

It was not an infrequent sight to see in the distance a group of buzzards circling over what I presumed to be their lunch. As I got closer, I could see them fighting over the scraps of Br'er Rabbit, or whatever was left of some unfortunate roadkill. These buzzards were a tenacious lot. It wouldn't be until the last moment when I was about to run over the lot of them, that they would hop away or take to the air.

From time immemorial, these scavengers have been a warning to desert travelers that this forbidding terrain could be deadly to the lost and unprepared. Fatal to those who scoff at the precautions of survival. Or just the plain stupid. Yeah, what you don't know can easily kill you out there. With temperatures of one-hundred-twelve and higher, one does not last long without water and shade. Besides the heat, hazards lurk under rocks. Unseen mine shafts await the unwary. That circling group of birds is your stark warning. You may end up dinner, with a few scraps left over for their breakfast in the morning.

Those circling birds are indeed a timely warning for the desert traveler. Every bit as sharp and urgent as Amos's prophecy to the nation Israel. And now, to the nation America.

The purpose for this is exactly the same as that warning from your mother about the hot stove or the rushing traffic on a busy street. It's the skull-and-cross-bones on that little green bottle in the back of the kitchen cabinet. Its purpose is that you might "live long and prosper." That you might not be removed from the gene pool at a tender young age. Or at any age.

For his nation, Amos's warning was so that its people might keep and enjoy the freedom won by God when they had crossed the Red Sea before Pharoah's horses and chariots. Exodus was Freedom. It would be hard to keep.

No nation can sustain itself for long when it is riddled by corruption and fraud. More on that later. Corruption has set in, so this is the lawsuit that God has brought against the nation of Israel. Court is called to order at the city gate, the seat of judgement. God is present to hear the case and pronounce judgement.

Here's the opening summons:

"Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire...Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground...

Now come the particulars of God's indictment against the House of Israel:

"They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth (read: "but we have Alternative Facts"). Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain ...you take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate."

Finally, the summation and judgement:

"Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of the people."

It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to a righteous remnant – that's the earnest and desired purpose. Blessedness and Righteousness will kiss each other in your dealings – that's the intent.

The purpose of it all is an amendment of one's ways. Repent, which simply means to turn around and head in a new direction – a saving direction, the direction of national solidarity and wholeness.

God doesn't want that we should feel sad or guilty; the purpose here is that we should thrive. It is that the nation should be a realm of justice and equity so that we dwell in peace with one another, and the sojourner who also lives in the land.

This is a warning about the path you are on which is leading to ruin and destruction.

Apart from God's corrective word, our hearts are idol factories. How quickly we lose the purpose of it all. The prophets, running all the way from Moses to Zechariah to Jesus and to Dr. Martin Luther King, are the corrective to our self-serving, destructive rationalizations.

Under the category of **self-serving revelations**: Jai came across televangelist Kenneth Copeland, who told his congregation that airline vaccine mandates were "the mark of the Beast," and another reason why they should buy him a private Jet.

No, pastor. God doesn't want you to have a jet and lots of bling. God wants you to be a decent human being and be faithful to the gospel you pledged allegiance to upon your ordination. God wants you to be an upright citizen in the land.

Perhaps a more contemporary warning and revelation has come from one of our conservative columnists, Robert Kagan – not an alarmist, but a deeply ethical foreign policy analyst who served in the U.S. State Department in the '80's.

He sounds a warning to us Americans that our democracy is on the brink. "The United States is heading into its greatest political and constitutional crisis since the Civil War, with a reasonable chance over the next three to four years of incidents of mass violence, a breakdown of federal authority, and the division of the country into warring red and blue enclaves"

The warning signs are obscured by the theatrics of Trump and his supporters, the January 6th insurrection, the pandemic, the economic malaise and flat-out "wishful thinking." But the evidence is right out in the open. In front of God and everyone.

Bogus charges of election fraud only serve to diminish our faith in constitutional order. Even in California, one of the leading candidates to replace Governor Gavin Newsom in our recent recall election began claiming that the election was rigged before a single vote was in.

Election laws are being perpetrated across over a dozen states that would limit the franchise, reinforce gerrymandered districts and permit legislatures in Red States to overturn the results of any election they don't like. No matter what a secretary of state has certified. "We just don't like your electors. Take ours!"

A local, John Eastman, a product of our very own Claremont McKenna College – that's right, our own home-grown, a Claremont educated seditionist – provided Trump with the road map necessary to overturn the 2020 election.¹

This is how it was to work. I know, it's "in the weeds." But this is how democracies die.

Trump gets enough states like Arizona and others to have their Republican legislators submit alternative slates of electors – alternative to those previously certified by their secretaries of state. All V.P. Pence needed to do was to void both slates of electors from those states, then declare that because there were not enough valid electors for either candidate, he would throw election into the House of Representatives. There the number of small, sparsely populated Red States would overwhelm the rest and then declare Trump re-elected. Warm up the Marine Corps Band for one more chorus of "Hail to the Chief."

More realistic and far more dangerous than the delusional fantasies of Mr. Pillow Guy! This week I came across the headline from *Salon*, the internet magazine: "Mike Lindell's new genius plan: Knock on your door and ask whether you're dead. The pillow maven's last-ditch effort centers around sending out canvassers to neighborhoods across the nation."²

Maybe on this Halloween such a canvasser might get a "yes" to that inquiry. Or in Chicago.

When fraud and lies and fantasy prevail, no nation can long endure. "Stop the Steal" and insurrection are dead ends for the promise of America.

Kagan, in preface to his essay quotes James Madison, author of much of our Constitution: "Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation."

Whether it be bribery, theft, cronyism, nepotism, or just plain idiocy...a nation governed on such a foundation cannot long endure. That was the judgment of the

¹ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/21066248-eastman-memo>.

² Zachary Petrizzo, "Mike Lindell's Genius Plan: Knock On Your Door and Ask Whether You're Dead," *Salon*, October 5, 2021.

prophets. That was the judgement of earliest Americans who founded the Iroquois Confederacy, and those who met at Independence Hall in 1776. That is the lesson of all nations down through history.

What can we then do? We are not helpless. We have a sacred right and responsibility. We have the moral obligation of agency as citizens in this republic. An obligation that goes far beyond simply voting every two or four years.

Become informed and involved. Yeah, newspapers are sometimes boring. Books are long and definitely more difficult than Facebook or Snapchat. If we want our children and grandchildren to have a chance at a decent life in a free society, it will take a bit of effort — actually, a lot of effort.

This is not the kind of heroics of storming the beaches of Normandy or conducting undercover operations behind enemy lines. Won't get you a Presidential Medal of Freedom or your name on that marble wall at the CIA headquarters. But it just might help us keep our democracy.

To raise these issues might be unpopular in some circles. But all it takes for tyranny to overtake us is for good men and women to say nothing, do nothing. Just keep quiet.

It maybe it is you who is appointed as the Paul Revere of this moment. You may be the one to trip the alarm. Wake us up to the fire on our doorstep. Or just urge your neighbor to vote.

Every day, in our morning news, faithful reporters and newscasters inform us of the rot in the Ship of State. The timbers are compromised. Wood borers have eaten through much of the structure. The sails mildew. The malnourished crew is exhausted. The ship is adrift. David Brooks, Robert Kagan, and others are sounding the alarm. Just as Amos did for his nation.

DO NOT DESPAIR. Warnings are given that we might right the ship before it's swamped. Before malefactors have scuttled it.

Warnings are given that all might enjoy "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Their aim is that we all might live in peace, each secure in their own home, under their own fig tree.

Choose the better way and prosper. To flourish is the will of God, in harmony with all others, and with all living things on this "earth, our island home."

"Seek good and not evil, that you may live..."

There are critical steps we can take now to preserve the inheritance of this land. Before it looks like Putin's Russia, Kim Jong-un's North Korea.

Push for the inclusion of all. America is ALL. Conservative and former Republican, David Brooks, a guiding light on the communal ethic necessary for our survival as a democracy, now urges not 3.5 trillion, but – GET THIS – 4 TRILLION in the Build Back Better legislation presently mired in congressional deadlock. This from our conservative friend! Why?

Like Amos and the 8th century Prophets, David Brooks knows that no country, no economy is sustainable if over half the people are left out. Left in hopeless destitution. And that's how they feel. Jesse Jackson is right in his summons, "Keep HOPE alive." They need hope to transform to reality.

We need a real champion, not a fraud who mainly cares only about himself and is too busy with mass rallies of adulation. That was Mussolini and Papa Doc in Haiti. That's the old "bread and circuses" ploy of dictators.

"Seek good and not evil, that you may live..." That's active citizenship.

Do your bit to help on election day. I never had so much satisfaction as when driving those without transportation to the polls. Join a service club. Subscribe to a local paper. Support a philanthropic organization. Maybe all you can do is send in a few dollars a month to a charity. Remember, it's not just you. The money of us all adds up. Support your local school board. Many board members and teachers are presently under vicious attack.

You have opportunities at your disposal Amos did not have. This is how we create the Beloved Community. These are the building blocks of the New Jerusalem, the New San Bernardino, the New Highland, the New Claremont, the New West Virginia.

Truth is the cornerstone. Love is the password. Open are the city's Gates of Justice. It is all meant to be glorious in the Lord's sight.

None of this work is glamorous. Face it, meetings can be flat-out boring. But this IS the work of DEMOCRACY. It's what you signed up for when you first put your hand over your heart in the third grade and learned the Pledge of Allegiance. It's what you signed up for when you were first allowed to hold your very own sparkler on a magical Fourth of July night. It's what you signed up for when you entered the voting booth that first time.

America, beware of that circling cloud of ravens in the distance. Take care. "Seek good and not evil, that you may live..." Amen.