

“A Time to Testify”

A sermon given by

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to the congregation at

Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church of Denver

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Scripture: Luke 21: 5-19

CRB: You might be wondering why we are both up here this morning.

Ian and I believe this is a Kairos moment. Unlike *chronos* which means time in a chronological sense, Kairos is the Greek word and concept for a pregnant time, a moment in time *infused with opportunity for reflection and actions*. This we believe is a Kairos moment in our nation’s history. Because of the highly emotional state of Americans before and since the election, we want to respond pastorally, together, to offer some of our own thoughts and feelings.

Regardless of one’s political persuasion, we would say all Americans are in some form of their own disorientation. What we mean by disorientation is the feeling of being dis-located from your understanding of what is familiar, predictable, safe and secure. Disorientation as losing a sense of direction, bewildered, baffled, uncertain and most often fearful about the future.

A colleague of ours who pastors a more *conservative*, rural congregation said that amidst so much cultural change, his parishioners say they long for their former way of life—one they used to know and understand. There’s nostalgia about the past. They sincerely feel disoriented, in exile. They long for security.

Other Americans feel disoriented because *what they trusted about our American democracy—the values of civility, decency and care for those who are most vulnerable-- have been forsaken*. They trusted we were on a trajectory toward greater inclusion of a diverse world. We’ve had an African American president for eight years, therefore it seemed

possible to have our first female president. For many, the election process feels like it put the country dangerously backward. They too feel exiled.

Ian, where has all this left you?

IGC: I would agree with all of that. And I'm finding it really hard, *as a pastor*, to figure out how to talk about all of this. When our country experiences something like what happened in Orlando, for example, we can assume people are grieving (and then we know what to do). But this is different. Many of us here today *are* grieving...and scared...and anxious about the future - but certainly not all of us. And as a nation, about half the country is grateful for the election results, while the other half is in deep shock. I don't know if we've ever been so deeply embedded in different realities as we are today. And so how do I - how do we - as pastors - respond to the feelings of the community when, as a community, we're in such different places?

All of this is also complicated by a deep mistrust between Democrats and Republicans. We've all been watching way too much CNN and FOX News (actually I should say CNN *or* FOX news) and it's left us so suspicious of other perspectives.

So it's difficult as a pastor to say anything about Mr. Trump without it sounding like an attack on Republicans. Or about Mrs. Clinton without the same response from Democrats. But I want to say, I have great respect for the Republican Party and I want a strong Republican party. I just believe our next president is really something else entirely. Love him or hate him, Donald Trump is like no other candidate we've ever seen. And I think we're all trying to figure out what new world he will lead us into.

Which is why I like that word 'disorientation' that you've used. We're all asking - Republicans, Democrats and everyone else - what this means.

CRB: As people of faith, we turn to SCRIPTURE to ground us. Today's lectionary passage from Luke gives us some language to help us process our thoughts and feelings.

Luke's gospel was written during a time of persecution of the early Christian community. In this story, Jesus is in the temple teaching. The Jerusalem temple was the locus of all that was reliable, stable and orienting for Jews. The Temple was where the people were *reminded of their identity as Jews*. The beauty of the edifice or the structure distracted the disciples from listening.

Jesus said to them, "*Not one stone will be left upon the other.*" In other words, there will be a time when what you believed was stable and unshakable will come crashing down. This demolition of our deeply held beliefs causes disorientation and grief. This is one of those times. People are incredibly anxious about the future.

IGC: When Jesus tells them the temple will fall, the first thing they ask is “when will this be and what will be the signs?”. It raises the question for our own situation – how should we be reading the signs in our day? Are things in our country still basically okay? Was this, in the end, just another election, another swing in the ebb and flow of our country’s political life? Or is it the beginning of an ugly season in our county and maybe for the world?

What are we to make of the response of leaders around the world who embrace hardline nationalist agendas: Vladimir Putin being one of the first to congratulate Trump and calling for a new era of “fully fledged relations”. France’s far right Marine Le Pen welcoming the results and claiming they herald a new world. Viktor Orbán, the hardline nationalist leader of Hungary, saying Trump’s victory is great news. And in Greece, the frightening neo-nazi political party, Golden Dawn, declaring, “A great global change is starting.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/far-right-first-to-congratulate-donald-trump-on-historic-upset>

CRB: On Friday, Tim and I saw a Black Lives Matter banner on the side of First UU church in Denver defaced with red paint dripping down the side of the beautiful stone wall.

IGC: How should we read these signs? How worried should we be? What line would need to be crossed before we spoke out? Most of us probably know the frog in water analogy – that you put a frog in boiling water, it jumps right out. But if you put it in cool water and slowly turn up the heat, it will just sit there, slowly getting used to the warmer and warmer water...until it dies.

Now I hope that doesn’t describe what’s happening now. And even if Mr. Trump won the election by appealing to our lesser angels, I hope that once he steps into the office and feels the weight of that mantle, his more extreme positions will soften. But I think this is a nervous time. Especially if you’re a person of color, or undocumented, a woman, gay or lesbian, Muslim...This is a time when we should all be ‘watching the signs’ carefully and not become complacent.

CRB: I found it unnerving that November 9 was the Anniversary of Kristallnacht. Kristallnacht (the night of the shattered glass) was the pogrom against Jews throughout Nazi Germany in 1938. Jewish shops and synagogues were destroyed; many were murdered by civilians and police. Historians view Kristallnacht as the beginning of the Holocaust.

And *no one did anything to stop* the violence. Humans--each of us-- have the capacity for this kind of evil. We cannot be in denial about that.

Good people stood by as the pogrom occurred. They had been experiencing the progression of hatred around them; by then, they were too frightened to take a stand against it.

What were the signs of that kind of the growing hatred toward the Other (the Jews) that resulted in Kristallnacht and the Holocaust?

IGC: That's right. You know, one of the positive things about times of conflict and challenge is that we are forced to clarify what we believe and what we stand for. We may well be entering a time when it is harder to stay on the sidelines. Both as individuals and as a faith community.

It's interesting that Jesus says in this passage that when difficult and disorienting times come, when the temple walls come falling down, it "will give you an opportunity to testify". Testify means to bear witness. But bear witness to what? Our own personal opinions and political agenda? Or something else?

It's so important at a time like this that we draw from the deepest goodness in ourselves possible. And if we stay at the level of our *political* identity – as republicans and democrats, debating policy and strategy – I don't think we'll find the clarity we need in these confusing times. This is a time to draw from our *baptismal* identity and our *faith* values.

What do we know as Christians? What do we believe were the values from which Jesus lived and taught?

We each have to answer that for ourselves. But as Clover and I reflected on this question, two core values from our faith came to mind from which to ground ourselves in the days ahead: compassion and courage.

Passion means to 'suffer' as in the 'Passion of Christ' that describes Jesus' last days and crucifixion. *Com*-passion, means to suffer *with*. And this may be the place to ground all our faith values – with the one who gave his life, who suffered with us. And who called us to lives of suffering with others. Lives of compassion.

So if our world, indeed, is about to become less welcoming and respectful toward immigrants, Hispanics, African Americans, Muslims, women and the LGBTQ community, then we are called to *testify* that this is not God's way.

CRB: Which leads to the other core value we will need more of in the coming days – courage. We can't be the silent frog in the water. We will have to testify.

And from our Christian values, not our political ones – we'd have to say that things just got a little hotter.

Those who profess to follow Jesus, must ground our testimony in our best understanding of who Jesus is and what is God's call for us. We must have the courage to testify to our convictions, willing to accept the consequences of that, just as Jesus did.

WHAT we will do in the days ahead are the same things we've been doing. Our call THIS week is no different than last week's:

we open our doors to the stranger; we defend the outcast; we feed the poor; we house the homeless; and, we bind the wounds of the sick and brokenhearted.

God just may be calling us to do more of it and with greater urgency.

Gratefully, we are not called to give witness, to testify, alone. We are in this together—as the living body of Christ, our unity is in our baptism and at this Table. We together are mandated to testify to a different vision of reality. God's vision of shalom, wholeness, peace that goes beyond us. A vision our brothers and sisters in other faith traditions hold up as well.

We found it astounding and emboldening that the Anniversary of Kristallnacht is ALSO the anniversary of the tearing down of the Berlin wall-- November 9, 1989.

Kristallnacht and the tearing down of the Wall show us that humans have both an enormous capacity for EVIL And an enormous capacity for good.

We are NOT to build walls but tear them down through compassion and courage. We can set each other free-- to live out God's reign of peace, justice and love.

This kairos time challenges us –as individuals and a church—whether we are Republicans, Democrats or Independents--to reach deep into our best selves to access the WELL of HOLY GRACE and goodness.

That's our hope and the prophetic challenge to which we are called...today and in the days ahead. May God give us strength and grace to do so.