

“We Should Have Seen All of This Coming”

Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr.
Senior Minister

January 10, 2021

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 10, 2021, The Baptism of the Lord, dedicated to US Capitol Officer Brian Sicknick who was murdered by the insurrectionist mob on Epiphany while defending the Capitol, to the four people who died while assaulting our US Capitol, to Rep. Andy Kim of New Jersey who cleaned up the Capitol on his hands and knees, and to Stacey Abrams who battled for electoral freedom and fairness in Georgia and always to the glory of God!

“We Should Have Seen All of This Coming”

Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

We should have seen this coming. There were signs all the way along that pointed to what happened. From his earliest years, this man was different. Just ask his family. But we never knew it would come down to this. We should have seen this coming - but we didn't - and neither did his cousin.

Cousin John is down in the Jordan River when Jesus shows up and gets in line for his baptism. Jesus wasn't famous. No one knew anything about him. He hadn't committed any miracles yet. He hadn't saved humanity yet. He simply stood in line waiting his turn – just like people today waiting for their COVID-19 vaccines and waited in lines to vote in 2020 - excited but a little bit nervous and frightened.

John recognizes him as he enters the water. To the rest of the newly redeemed and waiting unredeemed sinners by the river, it looks like the two of them are just talking. But attention is drawn to Jesus as he emerges from the waters and the heavens tear open and the Spirit descends on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven says: *“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

At this point, there is no doubt about it – Jesus is different. When everyone else is baptized, no clouds are tearing. No heavens ripping open. No divine voice booming. No Spirit – like a dove-descending. The language of slashing and slicing, shredding and clawing sounds more like the unleashing of a caged tiger than the baptisms of which I have been part.

Listen to Mark's words. His word for *'torn apart'* is *'schizo'*, and it means *“to cleave asunder, to rend.”* It's a strangely violent word to describe such a happy occasion. This is not peaceful and gentle. Heaven is **torn apart**. It's the same word Matthew, Mark and Luke all use to describe that moment on Good Friday when Jesus dies on the cross and the curtain of the temple is torn in two. It's a word that resonates in the prophecies of Isaiah - particularly when Isaiah says to God, *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”* (Isaiah 63:19).

Mark wants us all to know that Jesus is the one for whom God tears apart the heavens to come down. This is a radical act in Mark. God commits the act of breaking and entering the world to deliver Jesus to us - and we should have seen it coming (drawn from Maxwell Grant at the UCC in Greenwich, CT).

You see, God has the power, the willpower and the fierce determination of a tiger to tear open the heavens and deliver goodness, grace, justice, peace and love in this world. Although we don't associate this power and fierceness with baptism – we should. Through each of our baptisms, God is powerfully at work. At our baptisms or as parents when we speak for our children, we answer the clear and unequivocal question, “*do you renounce the power of evil and accept the freedom of new life in Christ?*” That is not a timid question. That is the most ancient question of Christian faith. It is a question which turns us around. We must renounce evil before we embrace freedom in Christ. We cannot be baptized without renouncing evil – and once we have renounced evil– there is no going back.

I have been thinking a lot about Heaven tearing open and renouncing evil this week. I have been thinking a lot about my baptismal vows. I have been thinking a lot about your baptismal vows – every single one of us who call ourselves Christian or a follower of Christ. (And I know that there are many of you who don't like calling yourself “Christian” because of what that word has come to mean in its abused form.)

I never speak lightly of Evil. I do not use the word unless I mean it - to do so is a dangerous thing. When I speak out against evil – I do so from the depths of my baptismal vows, my dedication

to Jesus Christ and my promises to you and all whom I love and serve. So please listen carefully.

On this day in which we renew our baptismal vows, I call you to remember that each one of us is “made” a Christian through our baptismal vows. We start the vows to become a Christian by renouncing the power of evil.

Make no mistake about it. Evil is powerful.

In his book, *The People of the Lie* (published in 1983), Christian and psychologist M. Scott Peck correctly describes evil as the creating of chaos. He says, *“Evil is the state of chaos created by people in this world. Ones who are evil and create and sustain an environment of chaos are good at it and determined to create it and determined to sustain it. They are good at planting seeds of doubt about those who are good and loving and grace-filled. They usually present themselves as good – sometimes better than others.... But, make no mistake about it, while they rationalize their actions, their intentions are to tear down and destroy anyone that they feel needs to be destroyed”*

The idea that human evil exists is difficult for many people to swallow. Most consider evil too archaic a concept to apply in our modern, scientific society. We want to reduce evil to a medical diagnosis, or some personality disorder, or something that can be managed with a pill. **But there’s no pill that can cure evil.**

Scott Peck describes evil people as being aware of their conscience, but actively choosing to ignore it - as opposed to a sociopathic person who appears to be devoid of conscience altogether. In other words, an evil person knows that they are doing evil, while a sociopath does not, even though their actions may be very similar.

Peck describes evil as “*militant ignorance.*” Evil people are obsessed with maintaining their self-image of perfection through self-deception. In addition, evil people will be very selective about who they inflict their evil upon, while going to great lengths to maintain an image of respectability and normality with everyone else. As a result, evil people are often well liked by the majority, and their victims come across as being overly sensitive, having a persecution complex, or even being crazy.

Peck says, “*Evil people, unable to face the painful reality of their character, will often place themselves in positions of power, or moral superiority. And they will use their position of power to destroy anyone who questions them in any way.*”

WOW! Are you getting this? DO you see how evil works?

Now can you see why I believe we were witnessing the unleashing of evil on Epiphany- Wednesday January 6th?

A busload of right-wing, paramilitary Proud Boys came to our Ohio statehouse grounds and attacked peaceful Black Lives Matter protestors. They beat them, they hit them, they kicked them. None of them were arrested and they got back on the bus when at the very same time our US Capital was being overrun and occupied, there was something evil and well-coordinated going on.

It wasn't just angry people who got out of hand.

It was “militant ignorance.”

Evil was unleashed on Epiphany.

As I look at the unleashing of evil on January 6th, Epiphany, and all the intense days that I could go any number of directions with

my reflections today. I could talk about the murder of Officer Brian Sicknick – a good man, an active Episcopalian, a rescuer of aging dachshunds – whose skull was crushed by a mob using a fire extinguisher to kill him. I could talk about Ashli Babbitt who was shot and killed as she was breaking into the House Chambers and is now being canonized as an evil saint by her brothers and sisters of hate on the front lines of white nationalism. I could talk about the desecration, the shooting and looting of the House and Senate chambers, the Rotunda and Statuary Hall and the Capitol offices of our elected leaders.

I could talk about the mob - which was almost completely white - being seemingly welcomed by Capitol police at times and certainly overwhelmed as they were completely unprepared for an all-out assault on the building and the people inside. Or I could talk about structural racism – in which 54 arrests occurred with over a thousand mobsters, meanwhile back in May 289 arrested at peaceful demonstrations following George Floyd’s murder in May. I could talk about the white mob who terrorized the entire elected leadership of the United States Government who were ALL in or around the Capitol with the exception of Donald Trump who sent the mob off and then safely returned to the White House to watch the mob he unleashed from his home TV.

Or perhaps I could talk about the fact that this was the first time ever that **AMERICANS** assaulted our citadel of Democracy – the only other attack coming in the history of our nation when the British burned down the Capitol in 1814 during the War of 1812. I could talk about how these same domestic terrorists walked out into the night by the hundreds – like nothing happened – with seemingly no consequences and minimal arrests and no

law enforcement confrontation. I could even talk about how the president, after instigating the entire attack on our Democracy, never called in the national guard, never claimed any responsibility and sort of mentioned to the rioters to leave – while calling them great patriots and telling them I love you. I could talk about all of these things – because outside of Officer Sicknick’s heroism and sacrifice – all of these things I mention speaks to the unleashing of evil.

But I want to talk about one thing. I want to lift-up (before I sit down) one thing that we all need to consider today as we as Christians engage our own life of faith. How baptized Christians were fully engaged in this insurrection and how we must choose to reject evil and face it down what they did and embrace the freedom of new life in Christ.

On Wednesday, white Christian nationalists led the riots and the insurrection. On Thursday, the Rev. Dr. Robert Jones wrote this power analysis:

“If there was one thing of value to come out of the shameful chaos of Wednesday’s attack on the U.S. Capitol, it’s that the horrific events made plain the powerful ideological and theological current of American politics that often stay just under the surface. The emblems carried by the rioters – particularly the comfortable juxtaposition of Christian and white supremacist symbols – bear witness to these forces.”

There were many crosses, “Jesus Saves” signs and “Jesus 2020” flags that mimicked the design of the Trump flags. Some of the participants, organized as part of a “Jericho March,” blew shofars - Jewish ritual horns - as they circled the Capitol, reenacting the siege of the city of Jericho by the Israelites described in the Book

of Joshua in the Hebrew Bible. And one video showed the Christian flag - white, with a blue canton containing a red cross - being paraded into an empty congressional chamber after the doors had been breached and members of Congress evacuated.

The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg wrote that *"the conflation of Trump and Jesus was a common theme at the rally"* among people he interviewed. *"It's all in the Bible. Everything is predicted. Donald Trump is in the Bible. Get yourself ready,"* one person told him. *"Give it up if you believe in Jesus!"* said another, then *"Give it up if you believe in Donald Trump!"* – which elicited loud cheers from rioters.

Comfortably intermingled with Christian rhetoric and these Christian icons were explicit symbols of white supremacy. Outside the Capitol, Trump supporters erected a large wooden gallows with a bright orange noose ominously dangling from the center to show all of us that they will lynch anybody who is against them. These Trump supporters managed to do something the Confederate army was never able to accomplish - fly the Confederate battle flag inside the United States Capitol. Shame on them.

At least one protester sported a "Camp Auschwitz" hoodie (on the back it read "Staff") as a reference to the concentration camp where over 1 million Jews were killed by the Nazis, as many others wore t-shirts with "6MWE" meaning "Six Million Wasn't Enough" while making outlandish comparisons between Christians as victims of American society and European Jews in the Third Reich.

We must take these symbols and this rhetoric seriously, not in isolation, but in combination and conversation with each other. This seditious mob was motivated not just by loyalty to Trump, but by an unholy amalgamation of white supremacy and Christianity that has

plagued our nation since its inception and is still with us today. There remains a disturbingly strong link between holding racist and anti-Semitic attitudes and identifying as a white Christian.

We should remember at this moment, the divisions of the last four years, are set against the upheaval of religious and demographic change. Since 2008, the country has moved from being a majority Christian nation to one that is no longer a majority Christian nation (from 54% white and Christian to 44% white and Christian). This change took place during the tenure of our first African American president. The dysfunction and violence we are seeing is in large part an attempt to preserve a vision of white Christian America that is passing away.

The willingness among those in the crowd on January 6 (Epiphany no less) who believe outlandish conspiracy theories and the unwillingness to accept the election results are born from the same source: a desperate desire by some white Christians to hang onto ownership of a diversifying country.

As many have rightly declared, the violent disregard for the rule of law witnessed that day is not the best of who we are. But if we're going to heal our nation, we need to confess that it remains, still today, a troubling part of America's political and religious heritage and landscape (most of this was drawn from, Robert Jones, Religious News Service, 1/7/21, Jones is CEO and founder of PRRI and author of *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* and *The End of White Christian America*).

We should have seen all of this coming – the heavens being torn apart – more like the unleashing of a caged tiger than a gentle dove descending – we should have seen the riots which scarred our nation

and Epiphany 2021. Perhaps our ancient ancestors in Christian faith knew more than we do when they called each new Christian to baptism and the first thing they called them to do was renounce the powers of evil and accept the freedom of new life in Christ. They knew what Jesus and John knew. They knew that Baptism and our journey into faith takes all of our resolve, all of our commitment to justice and peace, all our determination to embrace the truth of God's Gospel of Love. They knew that to be truly Christian will take every thing we have in us to walk in the light and love of Christ.

So put your hands in the water – one more time. Make the sign of the cross on your forehead three times and ask for God's extra help to face all the days ahead of us because we have seen it coming and we will need strength for every single step that we take into our future as God's holy ones, chosen and beloved, who have put on baptism this day in Christ.

Amen.