

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, the last Sunday of Pentecost, Reign of Christ, November 24, 2013, dedicated to Jane & Ralston Werum, 2013 Lay Leadership Award Winners; to my beautiful daughter, Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens on her 18th birthday & always to the glory of God!

“God is Busy Restoring Us!”*

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

We call today, The Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday. In the Christian year, we count our years in three cycles – A, B, and C – A is Matthew’s Gospel; B is Mark; Luke is C. John’s Gospel is woven through the three year cycle.

Today, Pentecost ends, Luke’s cycle ends and Year C ends on the cross. Year B ended in the Last Judgment. And Year A will end in the argument Pilate has with Jesus, in which Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world (we will meet at the bottom of the cross next year as well). All three describe the Reign of Christ. Let us pray...

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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.

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The leaves have all fallen. The harvest is in. The days darken swiftly now. The first snow has blown across Ohio. Winter is upon us and for us, the cycle of Christian readings has gone round, Christ’s Reign is upon us as his dying time has come round again, too. His ending – Our ending - is the violent ending of the execution of our King.

In her poem, Thirst, Mary Oliver writes:

*That time
I thought I could not
go any closer to grief
without dying
I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God
had His hands in this,
as well as friends.
Still, I was bent
and my laughter,
as the poet said,
was nowhere to be found.*

*Then said my friend Daniel
(brave even among lions),
“It’s not the weight you carry
but how you carry it -
books, bricks, grief -
it’s all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it
when you cannot and would not,
put it down.”*

*– by Mary Oliver, in **Thirst***

This November has been a month for remembering many terrible deaths – as though any death is not terrible....

On All Saints Day, we opened with the memories of beloved ones who have gone before us to eternal life, followed by the veterans of all wars (many of whom came home to us from war in wooden boxes), then the tragic effect of Super Typhoon Haiyan in its devastating destruction in the Philippines, and in recent days we have been remembering the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy fifty years ago on Nov. 22. It has been a month of remembering death.

Nancy Rockwell, in her piece, "The Dying Time," has brought us some important reflections on this. Rockwell writes: "The too-brief candle of Kennedy's presidency, likened to Camelot for the youthful beauty of Jack and Jackie, and the dreams and visions they fed the nation, now constantly feed the resurrection of our interest in him.

A lone mad man did it, was the verdict on JFK's death, and because there were so many rumors of conspiracies, a Commission was set up to study all the evidence for a year, and it confirmed the lone mad man." But there has never been peace with that commissioned verdict.

Since then, the lone mad man has become our answer to every evil act. The assassinations of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bobby Kennedy, and an unrelenting succession of mass slayings on college campuses, in high schools, first grade classrooms, Ft. Hood, a movie theater in Colorado, in malls across America and the Boston marathon, have all been declared to have been done by lone mad men or by a lone pair of them.

"Perhaps this should not surprise us as Christians. We have been working on the madman theory about who killed Jesus for two thousand years. Our collective pointing finger swings around a bit, from the High Priest, to Herod, to the crowd at Pilate's porch, but more recently scholars have pointed out that Pilate was certainly a grisly character and had the authority to act alone." We know that he crucified thousands of Jews during his reign as Governor of Judea. So why should he be troubled by one more death? Through our search for the lone mad man, some have said we are all implicated, and too many have limited these implications to all Jews - who we all know have suffered horribly as a result of this unjust implication.

"And this is where I think Hannah Arendt has something important to say. Hannah Arendt, born in Germany, and a Jew, was highly educated. She moved to Paris, was sent to a concentration camp in France, survived, and with her husband, who was German and not a Jew, but a socialist so still in trouble, and came to America after World War II. Hannah Arendt taught in New York City at the

New School. When Adolf Eichmann, a leading Nazi figure and overseer of the death camps, was arrested and taken to Israel for trial in the early 1950s, Hannah Arendt was the reporter covering the trial for The New Yorker Magazine.”

“Adolph Eichmann was internationally regarded as an unfeeling monster man. Though he was no lone actor, Eichmann was seen as part of a circle of monsters that overran the world with evil. But Holocaust survivor, Hannah Arendt challenged this, claiming Eichmann, whom she had watched testify for weeks, was an ordinary man, with ordinary feelings, but incapable of thinking about the morality of his actions. Arendt made the point that evil is ordinary and banal, not extraordinary or radical. It is the ordinariness of evil, the way in which it crops up in unthinking decisions, that is the root we all need to be continually looking for, she wrote. Only good, she said, can be both ordinary and extraordinary.

Her opponents wanted to see WW2 as Great Evil overcome by Holy Good. And they wanted to judge Eichmann as the encapsulation of evil, such that the world, once rid of him, would be good again.” Arendt insisted that we must all be involved in discerning the ordinary actions of every day. In other words, evil is not encapsulated in one person, but emerges from the atmosphere created by the ordinary actions of many persons.

“Jackie Kennedy’s remodeling of the White House, which had been known as ‘the old pile’ in design circles, held the cameras, but so did the bus boycotts of the Civil Rights Era, and so did Jack Kennedy’s sending in the National Guard, offering African-Americans some protection from the flagrant abuses of their rights of access to publicly funded institutions like schools.”

These visions of a new America were at that time not of this world, and were met with joy but also with rage. For some that rage was fueled by their anger that a Roman Catholic was in the White House. It may be that President Kennedy, by enduring persecution for his faith, was able to empathize with black Americans. And it may also be that the rage, seething in the press and on the streets in the south – including Dallas on that fateful day in November -

created an atmosphere where a mad man felt permission and even encouragement to murder.

Our American assassins of four Presidents - Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, William McKinley and John Kennedy - and our mad American murderers up to this day may not be able to think about the morality of their actions, but they can feel the hate around them, for they are not encapsulated, they are part of the culture, the atmosphere we are making every day.

“Jesus pushes us to see that his unjust death is not a Spectacular Evil. It is ordinary and banal, and exists in an atmosphere of smoldering resentments and hair-trigger responses. The extraordinary good that comes from his death is because of how he carried it, embraced it, balanced it, would not put it down. So the question for us is not who should we blame for his wrongful death, but how can we help to carry and embrace and balance what is wrongful in this world, so that we can infuse good into our days.”

On our way to Advent, we need to stop at the foot of the cross and remember the ordinary and extraordinary nature of brilliant and beautiful Good embodied in our Savior.

As we pause and remember this day, let us use the words of Abraham Lincoln – yet another Good Man who laid down his life for his nation, the world, his friends. 150 years ago this week, he concluded his 140 word speech at the battlefield cemetery in Gettysburg with these words:

... It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

May it be said of you and me that we hold such resolve for our honored dead, all of them beginning with our savior Jesus Christ

who died on a cross between two criminals. May we practice our faith which such resolve that the world will know that his death was not in vain. Yes it is true. Our God is Busy Restoring Us! So, in your thirst to live fully - embrace life - balance it, carry it when you cannot and would not, put it down. Amen.

* In this sermon today, all the quoted sections are drawn from pastor and poet, Nancy Rockwell, found in her piece, **The Dying Time**, Posted online, November 17, 2013.

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