

They came looking for a miracle, primed to hear and see what they wanted to hear and see, and they left with the truth instead. For this, and this alone, the people of his hometown tried to kill Jesus.

Will you pray with me: God, may these words reflect your presence among us. May they, and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our strength and our salvation.

In the preaching class I took last fall, we were given a pretty foolproof outline for crafting a sermon. Start with the text, think about your people, consider the state of the world, and return to the text.

Read, think, reflect, write.

While the format is simple, the task, today, is most certainly not.

Let's start with the state of the world..

No matter one's political leanings, it is undeniable that in the last two weeks, systems we previously thought we knew well have been turned on their head. Everything from the economics of trade to the impartiality of federal career employees, to the rights of states to manage their own educational curricula, to the rights of citizens to serve in the military based on their fitness for duty, without gender bias, to the rights of those in the process of seeking asylum, all of these things are now playing under a different set of rules, and again, without judgement about where you stand, you can't deny that it's unsettling, and people are scared.

Think about your people. Well...how are you doing today? What's on your minds? Shout it out. (*congregational response ranged from "great" to "terrified" to "gassy"*)

And finally, at the beginning and end of the writing process is the text.

This week, the Revised Common Lectionary drops a reading on us in which Jesus promises the people of his hometown that they will not be the recipients of the miracles they have heard about, indicts them with their own scripture, and for this, he is brought to the edge of a cliff to be thrown off, only to calmly walk away and go about his messianic business.

It's just a little intense, this week is.

When Walt Whitman said "I am large, I contain multitudes", he could have easily been talking about Luke, Chapter 4. It would be doing this key teaching of Jesus an injustice to skip quickly

over it, when it's so inextricably linked with the state of all that surrounds us...so strap in. We'll hear this more than once.

As a very new preacher, I've wondered what would ever provoke one to consider a sermon series...it sounds daunting...and now I know. You don't always plan it...sometimes the text does it for you.

This short yet loaded reading has a few distinct themes, each one worthy of in-depth exploration. So we're going to spend a couple weeks on it.

Next time, we're going to address the role of Jesus' hometown in his ministry, why he might have felt compelled to disappoint them, and finish with his calm stroll through the crowd, and the power of nonviolent resistance it communicates. Today, though, today, is about delivering the tough news, backed up by scripture, even in the face of an angry mob.

What it is to speak the unpopular truth.

Last week, Hannah introduced Episcopal Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde's sermon to us as a beautifully written, courageous plea for unity, centered around the core values of respecting the dignity of all people, being honest and acting with humility.

She described the last paragraph as the bravest part of all, a final plea in which Rev. Budde gently urged our president to have mercy on those in our country who are scared, specifically suggesting mercy for groups of individuals that have been targeted.

I don't disagree one bit.

What concerns me is not the reaction the sermon received from the President of the United States...we know he's not a guy who likes to be challenged.

What concerns me are comments from politically opposed faith leaders, such as:

"The bishop used the pulpit and the service to not only lecture the president but to promote a secular worldview and her woke ideology."

"A sermon is supposed to have scripture, and there was no scripture in what she was saying. It was just a lecture".

"she had the opportunity to talk about the death, the burial and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but instead she practiced spiritual and theological malpractice. I was so offended by how she used her platform".

"The fact that President Trump demanded that God remain as the foundation of America should have received non-partisan praise from all of our nation's clergy. We are addressing DEI and wokeness in our government and businesses, and it's time to address wokeness in churches as well "

I think they perhaps missed about 90 percent of the sermon, so eager to condemn the last paragraph, easy to do in this culture of division and soundbites.

If you have not yet heard the entire sermon, allow me to share some key points. Please listen for the absence of scripture, or a woke, secular worldview.

Quote 1:

Unity, in this sense, is the threshold requirement for people to live together in a free society, it is the solid rock, as Jesus said, in this case upon which to build a nation. It is not conformity. It is not a victory of one over another. It is not weary politeness nor passivity born of exhaustion. Unity is not partisan.

Quote 2:

What are the foundations of unity?

Drawing from our sacred traditions and texts, let me suggest that there are at least three.

The first foundation for unity is honoring the inherent dignity of every human being, which is, as all faiths represented here affirm, the birthright of all people as children of the One God.

In public discourse, honoring each other's dignity means refusing to mock, discount, or demonize those with whom we differ,

choosing instead to respectfully debate across our differences, and whenever possible, to seek common ground.

If common ground is not possible, dignity demands that we remain true to our convictions without contempt for those who hold convictions of their own.

A second foundation for unity is honesty in both private conversation and public discourse.

If we aren't willing to be honest, there is no use in praying for unity, because our actions work against the prayers themselves.

We might, for a time, experience a false sense of unity among some, but not the sturdier, broader unity that we need to address the challenges we face.

Now to be fair, we don't always know where the truth lies, and there is a lot working against the truth now, staggeringly so.

But when we do know what is true, it's incumbent upon us to speak the truth, even when – and especially when – it costs us.

So far, I don't hear the secular worldview or political ideology there. I hear a call to unity within a truly faith-based life, in which we accept sacrifice as part of the cost of admission. Lastly, quote 3:

A third foundation for unity is humility, which we all need, because we are all fallible human beings.

We make mistakes.

We say and do things that we regret.

We have our blind spots and biases, and we are perhaps the most dangerous to ourselves and others when we are persuaded, without a doubt, that we are absolutely right and someone else is absolutely wrong.

Because then we are just a few steps away from labeling ourselves as the good people, versus the bad people.

We're now not a few steps away, we're right there. I would say that the *response* to Budde's call for unity did just that...labeled one side as good, the other as bad. Just as the people of Nazareth were furious that the miraculous acts they heard so much about were done amongst the Gentiles, Budde's critics were equally incensed at the suggestion that the ministry of Jesus might well be focused on the liberation of oppressed and marginalized people.

I still believe we must stand proud and embrace our Christian identity, for it shines a light through the division of the world. How amazing it is to have a God who accepts and loves all. That is indeed, the good news. But it's hard. In standing proud, though, we cannot ignore the teachings of Jesus, solely to focus on his birth, death, and resurrection.

We must look inward when we don't like the message and ask ourselves why, not attempt to toss the messenger off the nearest cliff.

Or, perhaps, we should have just listened, the first time around, to folk singer Jim Croce, when he asked in the late 60s...

Which way are you lookin'?
Is it hard to see?
Do you say what's wrong for him
Is not wrong for me?
You walk the streets of righteousness
But you refuse to understand

Say you love the baby
And then you crucify the man.

(silence)