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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X4  
3 Epiphany (Year A) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 22 January 2017

Isaiah 9:1-4  
Ps 27:1, 4-9  
1 Cor. 1:10-18  
Mathew 4:12-23

### **Listing Dangerously**

*“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”* (Mt. 4).

You are in grave danger. That's what everybody has been saying. But what is the witness of Jesus?

Friday night at dusk I ran along the cliffs above the Golden Gate. Thirty mile per hour winds drove rain and sleet nearly diagonally against my back and whipped the ocean surface into foam. Forecasters predicted forty-four foot seas that night and already steep thick waves hemmed in the entrance to the Marin side of the channel.

You could practically taste the diesel smoke as a massive container ship limped in under the bridge. I don't know anything about packing those ships but it seemed like it was missing about a dozen containers and was listing dangerously to its starboard side. I thanked God that those sailors would soon be safe in the Port of Oakland.

That massive, perilously balanced ship totally at the mercy of even more powerful forces is America. The riskiness of the situation seems to be all that we agree on this week. The only difference among us is whether you believe the ship is returning safely home or is just heading out into even greater danger.

The via media lies at the heart of our Episcopal tradition. It is the middle way – historically it meant we walked between Roman Catholic and Protestant extremes. Today we describe it as the place between reason and mystery, feeling and knowledge, the church and the world, ritual and words, service and beauty. You might call it the peace that passes all understanding or the place where we rest utterly dependent on God.

These days challenge people who feel at home in the middle way. But brothers and sisters, what a great time to follow Jesus! I will probably offend everyone here but let me tell you what concerned me about Friday's inauguration speech and what I appreciated about it.

I have come to better respect the effectiveness of President Donald Trump as a communicator. In the inauguration address he was very clear. The slogans “Make America Great Again” and “America First” really are two ideas, two ways of telling the same story about reality.<sup>1</sup>

They share a simple logic of fear and scarcity. They ignore complicated forces like technological change, globalization and environmental degradation. Instead they make everything personal. They divide the world into two groups. There are the politicians and the people, the foreigners and the Americans, the ignorers and the ignored, the victimizers and the victims.<sup>2</sup>

In short President Trump asks us to see ourselves as victims and to enjoy that feeling of despising the other. In his address he invoked the name of God a few times. But this theology really has nothing to do with the Bible. It is a “me first” theology. A theology of fear, resentment and blame. It is thinly disguised selfishness combined with bitter scapegoating.

And yet even by pointing this out we run the terrible risk of making the same mistake. Is there a way for us to embrace the full humanity both of Donald Trump and his detractors? Is there another way to be human than to simply retreat back into our own distrustful tribe? How do we stop ourselves from becoming merely another version of what we hate?

This morning, in what seems to be divinely-inspired timing, we have the story of Jesus’ inauguration. After his baptism and temptation in the wilderness Jesus really is in grave danger. The authorities have arrested Jesus’ predecessor John the Baptizer (the Greek word *paradidomi* means to be delivered over and has terribly sinister connotations throughout Matthew’s Gospel).

In this setting of real danger and justified fear Jesus begins his public life with a speech. He says, “Repent for the kingdom of God has come near” (Mt. 4). Unfortunately we have worn out the meaning of the word “repent.” I’m afraid that for many people in our society it means – you need to believe what I do so that God will save you. But this is not it. The Greek word is *metanoia*. It means a transformation of your very soul.

Instead of focusing our thought and energy on how someone else is failing to live like a child of God, Jesus reminds us to take responsibility for how we distort or magnify the beautiful holiness so near at hand.

But there is more to this. The English translation drops out a word that seems important to me. Our version says only, “Jesus began to proclaim.” But the passage more literally reads that Jesus began, “to preach and to speak” (Mt. 4:17). The point I believe is that the preaching is not just the words.

The preaching is also what Jesus does. The preaching is an invitation to join him. The preaching is the way that his very presence brings light to people in darkness. The preaching shows God’s great love for the world and God’s stubborn determination not to leave us to our own devices. It is the act of healing.

I know you now. I have been watching since I first arrived. And I see that you too preach with your life, with your presence, with the face you show to the world, with the love that is in your heart.

This brings me to something that I appreciated in Donald Trump’s inauguration speech. He says simply, “we will be protected by God.” You may take this in another way, but I choose to receive this as a Donald Trump’s first gift to me as president. It is the challenge to enlarge our conception of the Divine.

Too often in churches like this we fall back on an impoverished picture of God. In 1953 the author J.B. Philips published a book called *Your God Is Too Small*. He makes the

point that God is more than a judgmental old man, a CEO or a police officer. But I mean something different than this. Today we tend to think of the word God as if it is mostly an idea to inspire or comfort us. We talk about Jesus as if he died a long time ago and isn't present here today. Somehow we have become embarrassed with the idea that God might actually do something.

But this is not the God we experience in the Bible or in our own lives. Isaiah said, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa. 9). When people in darkness, people like you and me see Jesus – it changes everything. When Jesus says, "follow me" Peter and Andrew leave their boat and their nets. Imagine just walking away from your car on the side of highway 101. What we are talking about involves much more than just hearing a really great speech. It takes more than this for James and John to leave their father.

We do not have time for the details this morning but my own encounter with Jesus has changed absolutely every aspect of my life. It has been a total metanoia, a transformation that still continues to unfold every day. Like Peter and Andrew, James and John, when we meet Jesus at the deepest level of our being, we discover that we have the same power that he did. We too begin to bring light to the people in darkness. We too discover new reservoirs of energy and eloquence that flow from the most intimate connection to our mysterious creator. We too become free from the power of death.

Jesus called Martin Luther King, Jr. and gave him a new strength to turn the world on its head. Fifty-two years ago he preached from this pulpit to the largest crowd ever assembled here. It was the opposite of America First. He thanked us for marching with him in Selma. In contrast to a theology of selfishness he said, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere... We must learn to live together as brothers or we will perish together as fools.. We are tied together in a single garment of destiny... so that I can't be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be... This is the way God's universe is made..."<sup>3</sup>

Maybe these do not feel like dangerous times to you. Perhaps you think that the container ship is really on an even keel, or too large to be upset, or that we are safely headed toward port. But you do not have to look too far to find people who are hurting right now.

This week I lingered a little in the Cathedral. As a result I met people who are seeking peace in the midst of the storm. One young tech worker named Ben talked about how desperately he would like to find a way out of the cynicism and manipulation. He wants to move beyond hating the people we fear, or those who we believe hate us. He feels like he cannot trust the media, but he is not ready to give up seeking the truth.

Every day we are surrounded by people like Ben. We need to wake up, to repent and in the light of Christ recognize their hunger for meaning and love. This is our time. The gift of this moment is the chance to rediscover the power of our creator. Remember who you are. Preach with your whole life.

As people divide into their tribes and scapegoat the others, we have Jesus' promise that we are all brothers and sisters who are loved by God. If policies change and endanger immigrants, dissenters, the poor, people of color, women, Muslims, prisoners and nature, this is the chance to bring your light into that darkness.<sup>4</sup>

You do not have to be defined by hate or scarcity or blame. You can see good in every child of God because we believe in a God who is big enough for everyone. We believe in God's Grace for all.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump, "Inauguration Speech," 20 January 2017.

[https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/20/us/politics/donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/20/us/politics/donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup> According to the president, the politicians enrich themselves at the expense of the citizens, the educators "flush with cash" neglect their students, elites callously send jobs overseas that should go to American workers, immigrants violate the borders at the expense of deserving citizens. Washington seeks peace overseas instead of solving our problems here at home.

<sup>3</sup> He quoted the poet preacher John Donne who said the any man's death diminishes everyone else. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Sermon at Grace Cathedral," March 1965. For a similar presentation of these themes see one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last sermons "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," 31 March 1968. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10>

<sup>4</sup> When we hear people talking out of their fear, we have the hope of the resurrection. When selfishness seems to undermine the very possibility for democracy, we have our citizenship in God's kingdom of love. When we watch the news and wonder what to believe, we have the everlasting truth of our savior.