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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X44
3 Advent (Year B) 8:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 17 December 2017

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
1 Thess. 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

The Grammar of Violence and the Way of Light

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances... Do not quench the Spirit...” (1 Thess. 5).

1. Who are you? At holiday parties when you meet new people how do you answer this implied question? For that matter how do you respond every day in your gestures, the way you dress, what you look at online, what you buy and say? Do you begin by telling someone about your job, home, school or family? What are you afraid that people might see in you?¹

Who we really are depends a great deal on what we believe about the world. The theologian David Bentley Hart writes that today we have a choice between two narratives.

On the one hand there is the story that in his words, “finds the grammar of violence inscribed upon every foundation stone of every institution and hidden within the syntax of every rhetoric.” If you are thinking of Nietzsche or Foucault you are on the right track. In this dark picture of things, might makes right and everyone always acts selfishly to get away with as much as possible regardless of what might be best for others.

This is the kind of cynicism that justifies delaying approvals for Supreme Court nominees until your party has another chance to get into power. It is the cynicism that leads to endorsing a candidate just because he might support your policies even when he has done horrifying things. It justifies lying about your enemies and the belief that since we cannot really get to the bottom of things we can just choose to believe what is most convenient for us. This attitude funds the pessimism, scapegoating and blame that has become so much more obvious to us this year. It may be the reason some powerful people are calling for the suppression of ongoing FBI investigations.

Sometimes there seems to be no break in the extent of the darkness. Hart contrasts this with the idea that, “within history a way of reconciliation has been opened up that leads beyond, and ultimately overcomes, all violence.”² For me this way beyond violence is the way of the light – the way of Christ.

2. The Gospel of John opens with a spectacular hymn of cosmic beauty. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him... in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn. 1). At his very core John believes that despite the hatred, violence and cynicism there is a light. We long for it and we can come to experience it.

If you really believe in this light it can even lead you to heroic acts. Let me change the image from an ordinary exchange at a Christmas party to a congressional hearing. The question is still the same, "Who are you?" But it has a different meaning in this setting.

In October 1991 Anita Hill testified at confirmation hearings about Clarence Thomas who went on to become a justice on the Supreme Court. She described in vivid terms the unrelenting sexual harassment she experienced from him and its terrible effects on her life. In one video frame of the testimony you can see her alone before seven white men in black suits. It took incredible courage to face Congress and to speak a difficult truth in the face of immense pressure for her to suppress what happened.³

Not long after those days my wife Heidi taught a class together with Anita Hill and we became friends. In fact Anita was the first person who predicted Heidi was pregnant with our firstborn child. But this is not what made her a prophet. Her power as a prophet came from believing that there is more to our life than darkness. Even when she seemed totally alone Anita trusted in the light. We still believe you Anita!

I really want you to imagine what it would feel like to sit in her chair on that day. You face your accusers. They say, "who are you?" And you know that any response you give will be held against you. That is how this Gospel depicts the situation of John the Baptist when the religious leaders from Jerusalem seek him out in the desert.

Even the language John uses, the words "witness," "confess," "testimony," "deny," come from the courtroom. Although the Greek word *erōtaō* is translated in our text as "ask," a better rendition would be "to interrogate." This is the same word used for the high priest's interrogation of Jesus before his crucifixion (Jn. 19:19).

For me there is a huge difference between a genuine seeker asking a friendly question at that holiday party, ("Hey, by the way, are you the Messiah?") and the men John faced. Those religious leaders repeatedly asked him who he was, because they were not satisfied by his answers. "Are you Elijah?" "Are you the prophet?" They even asked him to sympathize with their need to provide their bosses with an answer. "What do you say about yourself" (Jn. 1) they insist.

For us baptism is the sign of faith and repentance. It marks a new participation in the realm of God. For those leaders it seems like a terribly subversive act aimed at overthrowing the social order. Finally, John bravely and simply quotes the prophet Isaiah, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" And in what might even sound ominous John seems to say something like, "You are right to be worried. If you think that I'm dangerous, among you stands someone you do not know but who is even more threatening than me."⁴

3. This week, John's Gospel has taken on new meaning for me. I have always been moved by that beautiful hymn, the one about Christ's presence and activity at the beginning of all things. But this time I noticed the fierce warfare between light and darkness. I realized that before the earthly Jesus even makes an appearance, we meet his enemies, his accusers, the ones who eventually succeed at putting him to death.

This does not lead me to blame someone else for Jesus' death. Instead I see that I am like

those religious leaders. I too am blocking my own way to God. Although the Word creates the world so beautifully in and through himself, we do not experience that perfection first. While the world's goodness is the most original thing, everyone steps into a history that is already broken. In Martin Heidegger's language everything is "always already" in the darkness of conflict.

The theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes that there is something desperate about our drive for "self-preservation." It leads us to assert our independence so forcefully that we end up resisting God (and carrying the whole world like a kind of Atlas). He says, "Therefore finally and at the deepest level [the human being] will always be an enemy of grace and a hater and denier of his [or her] real neediness."⁵

The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) dedicated his life to understanding what belief means. In his early days he hoped to establish a philosophical superstructure that would support all mathematical reasoning. After groundbreaking work in this field he abandoned this project.

Wittgenstein realized that the way philosophers understand language was one of only many different possibilities. What seemed to be genuine philosophical problems turned out to be misunderstandings of how language really works.⁶ He felt strongly that faith could not be reduced to some form of certainty.

His biographer writes, "Wittgenstein did not wish to see God or to find reasons for His existence. He thought that if he could overcome himself – if a day came when his whole nature 'bowed down in humble resignation in the dust' – then God would, as it were, come to him; he would then be saved."⁷

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) said that original sin is "the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith." Although the situation may seem hopeless, at the heart of John's Gospel lies a faith that belief is not about accepting a set of propositions about reality. It is about coming into a new relation with Jesus that allows us to find our way back to the light. Trusting Jesus makes it possible to overcome this fatal part of our nature, to be reunited with the beauty of the universe's creator.

As a cathedral our theme this year has been "the Gift." I hoped for us to enter more deeply into the realm beyond commerce and marketing. I wanted us to move beyond those dominant places where everything has to be earned and advertised. We tried an experiment together. We wondered if we really began to experience our existence as a gift how would that change our lives? What would happen if we stopped always asserting ourselves and opened our hearts to what we are receiving?

The monk Thomas Merton writes that the begging bowl of the Buddha, "represents... openness to the gifts of all beings as an expression of the interdependence of all things."⁸ I hope that we have become more conscious of that interdependence and of the generosity of God.

Who are you? You are a child of God who sees beyond the grammar of violence to recognize the light that shines in the darkness. You are the prophet, like John the Baptist or Anita Hill, nurturing a vision of what is right that gives you strength as enemies

confront you. You are the one who knows that faith cannot be reduced to false certainty. You receive the gifts of God. You walk in the light of our brother Jesus.

So “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5).

¹ I keep thinking about this story about a woman who was afraid of this question that lies at the heart of so many of our social interactions. Pella, the only female character in Chad Harbach’s novel *The Art of Fielding*, dropped out of Yale to marry a much older San Francisco architect. Harbach writes, “It was confusing to have leaped precociously ahead of her high-achieving, economically privileged peers by doing precisely what her low-achieving, economically unprivileged peers tended to do: getting married, staying home, keeping house. She had gotten so far ahead of the curve that the curve became a circle and now she was way behind.” The questions she feared most [were]: Who are you? What do you do? Well, what do you *want* to do?” Chad Harbach, *The Art of Fielding: A Novel* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011) 84-87.

² David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003) 2.

³ Anita Hill Testimony, CNN, 11 October 1991. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWD1Cce2AUo>

⁴ D. Mark Davis, “Witness Under Fire,” *Left Behind and Loving It* (December 2017).

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com>

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1 The Doctrine of God* tr. Parker, Johnston, Knight, Haire (NY: T&T Clarke, 1957) 371, 136.

⁶ For Wittgenstein language is not just representation. He distinguished between meaning as representation and meaning as use. There are many different language games including: joking, translating, thanking. There is more than to human experience than a view of language as just a kind of model of the world.

⁷ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (NY: Penguin, 1991) 410.

⁸ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Poetry* (NY: Vintage, 1979) 23-4.