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## **“Christ the Center”**

**A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas**

**33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Dedication Sunday; Year C)**

**November 13, 2016**

**Isaiah 65:17–25; Romans 12:9–21; Luke 21:5–19**

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On any other Sunday on which this lectionary text appeared, I might have skipped right over it. After all, apocalyptic texts are not usually my cup-of-tea. They are difficult to explain and more difficult to understand. But this Sunday is not any other Sunday, is it?

This Sunday is different. This Sunday is post-election. No matter how you voted, you know that this week has our country in the most divided state many of us have ever seen. This Sunday is one that sees cities divided, churches divided, houses divided, and families divided.

This Sunday is also different because many people are afraid. People are afraid for their own lives and they are afraid for others. Perhaps you have seen the news this week about the KKK, the white supremacist hate group who plans to hold a rally in North Carolina celebrating the victory of their candidate. It is no wonder that people of color are afraid. Here in Durham, some of you stood this week to block hate speech painted on a fence, which said “Black Lives Don’t Matter.” It’s no wonder black lives are afraid. Two of my friends of color in different cities on different occasions were confronted in a public place and told to “go back to where you came from.” It is no wonder people of Hispanic and Asian descent are afraid. This week in Wisconsin a young Saudi Arabian Muslim man, Hussain Alnahdi, was beaten to death for unknown reasons. It is no wonder why Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent are afraid. There are good reasons why many people are afraid.

The people who are afraid this week are the very people that this congregation has stood up to protect and to fight for their rights. They are our Muslim neighbors who have heard rhetoric about being added to a list or keeping others like them out. They are our African-American brothers and sisters who fear walking around in their own skin, in their own black bodies, and who have experience first-hand the effects of white privilege across the decades and generations. They are our LGBTQ sisters and brothers who now fear discrimination and persecution and a reversal of laws that have given them the same rights as heterosexuals, to marry, to be in love publicly, to be who they were created to be. They are our Latino/a brothers and sisters who fear deportation and the break-up of families. They are our sisters, our mothers, and our daughters who have been abused, harassed or assaulted by men who have had power over them.

These are the people this congregation has stood up for, and we continue to stand up for them in what we say and the work we do here at First Presbyterian. It is the way we follow Christ, who has told us to love our neighbor as ourselves and has demonstrated in his own life his concern and care for the poor and marginalized. This has not changed.

We are aware, however, that the world around us might.

The one thing we can be sure of in life is change.

In our passage for today, Luke writes to a people who have seen much change in their lives. They have lived through the destruction of the holy temple, the place that represented the strength and power of their God. In his gospel, Luke tells of the time *before* the temple was destroyed. In this passage, Jesus approaches the disciples who stare all googly-eyed at the glory of the temple. It was an amazing place, I am sure, adorned with magnificent stones, an edifice of beauty and wealth. It was Herod's temple, and Herod was a master builder. The temple was a place of glory and awe, and the disciples could not hide their admiration for it.

Luke writes, however, fifteen years after the destruction of that very same temple. The people reading Jesus' words already knew that the place of beauty in which they had put their trust had come down. And Jesus knew that a building, an institution, was no place to put one's trust. Theologically, Luke tells this apocalyptic tale of war and insurrection, famine and earthquake in order to remind

people that God alone deserves our trust. God alone can assure everlasting peace. God alone can save us from death. “Do not be terrified,” Jesus says in an extreme version of God’s “Do not be afraid” that we hear throughout the entire Bible. “Do not be terrified. Not a hair of your head will perish.”

Do not be terrified; though, as the psalmist writes, the earth should quake in the heart of the sea, though the waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Do not be terrified; though change is ahead—be that change because of a difficult health diagnosis, change as the result of the death of a loved one, change which comes from job loss, change because of mental illness, change as a result of divorce or separation, change that comes after an election. Do not be terrified. God is in the midst of us. We shall not be moved.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus says some pretty scary things in this passage from Luke. He starts with that which is near and dear to the disciples’ hearts—the temple. He reminds them that like all things temporal, it will not last. Do not put your trust in things on the earth, where moth and rust decay. Put your trust in God alone. God alone will stand. God alone is eternal. God alone is worthy of our trust. Not a Presidential candidate. Not a system of government. Not this sanctuary. Not even the institution of the Presbyterian Church. All that is earthly will fail us eventually and will prove unworthy of our trust. But God is our refuge and our strength, our very present help in trouble. “Be still,” says the Psalmist in the voice of God. “Be still and know that I am God.”<sup>2</sup>

Considering the events of this week, I think being still was a good first thing for us to do. As we opened the sanctuary on Wednesday for prayer, I sat in one of these pews and pulled out a hymnal. I opened it and saw the words of the response we sang following our prayer of confession this morning, “Be still and know that I am God.” As I read the words, it was as if a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I was still confused and worried about the future, especially for my friends of color, but in those words from Psalm 46 was a deep and abiding reminder that God is God. No one and nothing else in this world is God. God is the creator of the stars of the night, the bringer of light to the world, the one who became human, who knew suffering, who gave all for the sake of love. God was at

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 46

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 46

the beginning and will be at the end. All else will fade. All else will come to an end. God alone is sovereign. God alone has gifted us with a grace beyond our deserving and with a peace that passes all understanding.

Apart from God, we are lost and alone, afraid and empty. Apart from God, we live in fear and anger, hatred, envy and strife. With God, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we live in the light of love, we walk in that light, we overcome evil with good.

After this time of stillness and remembrance of who God is, we soon move to the next step of wondering what it is that we are called to do. You may have also been praying for wisdom and thinking about what our next actions should be. To be honest, our next actions should be similar our last. We should continue to follow Jesus in all we say and in all we do. We should continue to love our neighbor as ourselves and live in kindness toward all. We should continue to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned and care for the marginalized. We should continue to be good stewards of the environment, making sure that we do not abuse the land and the resources of the land. We should continue to seek peace and not war. We should continue to care for the sick and to visit those who are grieving. We should continue to work for justice so that no one is oppressed, no one is treated unfairly and all are seen as those who bear the image of God, no matter the shade of their skin, their country of origin, their gender, orientation or ability. We should continue to seek to understand white privilege and how we who are white have benefited from it and how we who are not white have sacrificed for it.

We should live as Paul exhorts us to live in the book of Romans: “Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor; do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (12:9-12, 21).

On this Dedication Sunday, we bring our pledges to God—financial pledges, of course, but we also pledge our lives, recommitting our lives to the work of the gospel. Each year during Stewardship season, folks are asked to increase their financial pledge by a few percentage points, so that the work of this church can continue in the ways it has in the past and even expand the work of witnessing to

God's love in the world. This year, I wonder if this week might be to be a call to action—a call to double down in our financial giving so that the work of this congregation can intensify in the areas of peacemaking and justice-building. I wonder if this season should be one that calls us to double-down in our own peacemaking and justice-building efforts in this community. I wonder if this season should be the one that calls us to double-down in the ways we love one another: strangers, enemies, family, neighbors. I wonder if this season we should commit ourselves to love more intensely in every facet of our lives. Can we, in whatever ways possible, seek to stand with those who are afraid, to stand against hate speech directed toward others, to stand against physical and emotional abuse, to stand against racism, sexism, classism, misogyny, and homophobia? Can we, in whatever ways possible, seek to understand those who are different than we are—by listening to them, by working with them, by seeing them as fully human and as gifted by the grace of God's love as any of us are? Can *we* define for the world what it means to be Christian? Can we show the world that following Jesus *never* leads to pride and hate of the other, but *always* leads to humility and love of every life God has created on this earth? As people who know that God alone stands forever and God alone is worthy of our trust, it makes sense that every day, in every way, we should double-down in our faith in God, in our dedication to caring for the least-of-these, in our commitment to work for justice in our love, in our love for one another.

Many things have changed this week. The most important things have not: God is with us. God is God. God is good.

So double down out there friends! We've got work to do.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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