

"LIGHTING THE DARK NIGHT"

Matthew 5:13-16

August 4, 2019

We are a storytelling people. Our stories connect us; our stories teach our young ones who we are and what we value. On this 74th anniversary week of the end of World War II, let us tell our stories and witness to our lessons. Let us be God's light in the world when others would have us stumble and fall in the dark. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church in Matthew's Gospel, the 5th Chapter, beginning with the 13th verse:

And Jesus said to them:

"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

Here ends the Gospel. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

This week marks the 74th anniversary of the atomic bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the action that effectively and immediately ended WWII once and for all. The war in Europe had concluded with Germany's surrender on May 8, 1945, after

which the Allies turned their full attention to the Pacific theater. The Allies called for the unconditional surrender of the Imperial Japanese armed forces in the Potsdam Declaration of July 26th, the alternative being stated as "prompt and utter destruction." Japan ignored the ultimatum and the war continued.

Meanwhile in Sumatra, what remained of a large group of women prisoners of war languished in a crude compound high in the mountains and far away from any civilization or hope of wartime rescue. Their Japanese tormenters were cruel, immovable, and inhumane, yet vulnerable to the courage and community shown by the women for whom they were responsible. Music sustained the women who were not taken by malaria; music became the bridge between captor and captive that allowed a thin beam of light to illuminate the utter darkness of their souls as apart from their immediate experience the war continued.

Not one of us in this room fought in World War II. Some of you were alive at that time, but none of us were direct participants in the war effort. Many here have family members who were however, and one living member of our congregation, Jeanne Wells, age 100 now, served as a nurse and was forced to take up arms in defense of her medical compound while she was in the European theater. I myself had someone near and dear to me survive WWII, where he was a prisoner of war on the Pacific Island of Palau at the ripe old age of 15

years. The physical war ended for him, as it did for the women held in Sumatra, when the U.S. dropped those atomic bombs on the heartland of Japan.

It took not the first of those bombs, a blast that took upwards of 250,000 lives in the City of Hiroshima, but a second devastating delivery three days later, on the drop airline named Bockscar. That second attack plane carrying 7 crew members, including 4 from the attack on Hiroshima just days before, was originally bound for Kokura, but as fate and weather would have it, Kokura was spared, and Nagasaki was hit instead.

It was after the second attack that Emperor Hirohito finally gave up the war effort. He issued this statement to the people of his Empire:

Despite the best that has been done by every one—the gallant fighting of military and naval forces, the diligence and assiduity of Our servants of the State and the devoted service of Our one hundred million people, the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage, while the general trends of the world have all turned against her interest. Moreover, the enemy now possesses a new and terrible weapon with the power to destroy many innocent lives and do incalculable damage. Should we continue to fight, not only would it result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization.

Such being the case, how are we to save the millions of our subjects, or to atone ourselves before the hallowed spirits of our imperial ancestors? This is the reason why we have ordered the acceptance of the provisions of the joint declaration of the powers.

As I refreshed my knowledge of that August week of 1945 yesterday, I had before me two books: *Night*, by Elie Wiesel, written about his experiences as an Auschwitz concentration camp survivor, and the Bible, specifically this passage from Matthew.

Scholars and world citizens alike still debate whether there was ethical and legal justification for the bombings on Japan, but as I watched the film, "Paradise Road," I couldn't help but think those women being held didn't care *what* it took to win the war; they were just grateful to God and the Allies that they were rescued and returned home to their families and lives. As one character in the story tells another of the value of their witness, "Ah, my dear, this one's to tell your grandchildren."

Jesus knew oppression and he knew armed conflict. He was part of a culture of marginalized persons, common people regularly terrorized, threatened, killed for sport and silenced by power. He knew what it meant to dwell in darkness; he knew what the people felt who had been robbed of safety, stripped of dignity, and enslaved by a brutal occupying army.

Many people misunderstood Jesus. Judas was hoping Jesus would be a great soldier, that he would use his special relationship with God to free the Jewish people. Simon the Zealot was wanting Jesus to join his movement, the "avenging priests" inspired to overthrow the Romans and create a world Jewish theocracy, a system of government in which priests rule in the name of God. Jesus loved their zeal, their fire, their wish for a different life for the Jewish faithful, but Jesus ultimately and decidedly chose the path of nonviolence. Rather than take up arms, Jesus chose to use the weapon of human love and the Good News of God's redemptive love in his effort to change the course of human history.

He had no access to the tools of warfare—no planes, no tanks, no ships, no bombs, no guns. He instead called on people—*people*-- to bring light to the darkness, love to the systems of hate, forgiveness to the tormentors, and hope to the captives.

The women of the Sumatran prison camp drew on the strength of Jesus to survive their ordeal. Armed with their knowledge of his teaching, they told each other their Christian truth:

"Faith," says one to another captive who has lost hers, "you can do little with it and nothing without it."

"Love," assures another, "is like a flame. It burns and is visible to all."

"Sometimes," one whispers her truth to the others, "God reaches down and pulls the wings off the butterflies."

Paradise Road is where the women go when earthly life leaves them and they can no longer keep up their fight to live. Paradise Road is also the path the survivors take to reclaim their humanity and their beauty, though their skin is scorched, their hair is falling out, and their bodies are riddled with disease. Music is their Jesus; song is their hymn of praise. Defiance is their Holy Spirit. They live so that their story will be told to the grandchildren.

Elie Wiesel wrote about his survival and documenting of his experiences as both profound and critical:

In retrospect I must confess that I do not know, or no longer know, what I wanted to achieve with my words. I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer-or my life, period-would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory.

This is why I am showing this film today here in our Christian church. This isn't a fantasy movie and it's not a comedy. The producers call it a "docu-drama," and I suppose it is. But it is also, like Elie Wiesel says, a witness to a story that needs to be told. It is, as Jesus says, the means that people have to bring light to the darkness, to bring the God-colors of universal love into focus.

Paradise Road is a story of completely unequipped, untrained, and unarmed prisoners of war to fight their oppression with love, to find their inner strength through community, and to reclaim their inner beauty through music.

Statesman Norman Rice of Seattle wrote, "Dare to reach into the darkness to pull someone into the light. Remember, strong people not only stand up for themselves, they stand up for others, too." We owe much to this story of brave women. We owe much to those like Elie Wiesel, who survive and witness to others. We owe much to our veterans who carry the wounds of the world's sins on their hearts. And we owe much to Jesus, who reminds us to be the light for others even as evil is determined to have us live in darkness.

We must tell our painful stories to our grandchildren; please don't keep them locked up inside where the light of God cannot get in. They must know. They must learn. You *might* start healing. Our youngsters must appreciate what they have and what it took to preserve it. They must know God's love and how to grow it if we humans are to survive.
May It Be So.