

“On Earth...God’s Kingdom”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
October 20, 2013

I want to begin with a side note. If you look on the cover of your bulletin this morning, the image is of an Israelite man blowing the shofar, which is a ram’s horn. On Friday night, just 2 days ago, we took the confirmation class to the Shabbat Service at Temple Emanuel. He showed us a shofar just like that one in the picture. Cantrell, who plays the trumpet, was allowed to blow the shofar, and it was a wonderful experience for the kids and for all of us to be in worship, which was Sabbath worship at Temple Emanuel.

This morning, in the adult class, we continued our discussion of Marcus Borg’s book, “The Heart of Christianity”, and the seventh chapter that we were studying for this week dealt with the kingdom of God and the biblical mandate for justice – justice in the sense of social justice and fairness, as Rosina was hinting at today in her children’s message.

We began the discussion by talking about how we look out on the world. We read the newspapers and we get our news on the Internet or wherever we happen to get it from. There are certain issues of the day, issues of injustice or lack of fairness, certain issues that touch us in particular ways. Everybody shared particular issues that touched their hearts, and there are many issues in our world today, both locally and globally, that demand attention and that touch our hearts in particular ways.

It is an interesting time to talk about social justice as a biblical mandate because, as we all know, in the past week or so, the House of Representatives in Washington, D. C. passed a bill that both reopened the federal government and provided a way for us temporarily to pay our bills as a nation. Clearly, if you follow this sort of debacle in any way, on any level, we know that it was a tense time for our nation. Also, on some level, it was an embarrassing time, as voices from other nations weighed in on it. They often said that it didn’t quite look like the United States was able to govern itself very well, so it was perhaps an embarrassing time for some of us. Finally, we came to an agreement. While it may be tenuous, and perhaps short lived, it has allowed our government to continue to function.

What I want to focus on is, amidst all the chaos of these weeks of government closure, in the last minute deal making, something very interesting happened. There was an unusual moment on the House floor, right after the bill had passed and government would be reopened. A woman by the name of Diane Reedy (the House stenographer, who was a well-known employee of the House of Representatives and who sits and types all that is being talked about and spoken--the recorder--and was, and continues to be, I think, an employee of our federal government and has been their stenographer for many years) walked up to the House podium, grabbed the microphone, and began screaming.

What is funny is that she was not just screaming about just anything. She was screaming about God. She said, among other things, screaming into the microphone while most people were just milling about, glad that it was all over with, “Do not be deceived. God shall not be mocked. A house divided cannot stand. You cannot serve two Masters.” She ended her words with “Praise be to God, Lord Jesus Christ!”. As she continued on in this rant, the House security and staff had to forcibly remove her from the podium and from the House chambers, and she was taken to a local hospital for psychiatric evaluation. Being interviewed, a GOP aide said “I don’t know what happened. She just snapped.”

The story of Diane Reedy is, indeed, sad, but it seems to me that lots of people in the last few weeks have seemed ready to snap. We have seen things sort of crumbling in our government. We have been pointing fingers as to who is responsible for it all, and we have just shaken our heads in disgust as we watched this play out.

Some of us (the House stenographer among them) has quietly, hopefully been wondering what God thinks about all this stuff. The sad point is that Diane Reedy will be dismissed as a nutcase but, in fact, she was not a nutcase. In fact, her fellow employees said that she was well liked, she was a good colleague, she was respectable and dependable, and she was a perfectly nice person, so it is too bad that her emotion-filled rant will not be taken seriously, because I think her rant could have been any one of us. More importantly, perhaps she was raising some good questions. What does God think about all of this mess? What does the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, reveal about our orientation towards government and the institutions that structure and, to some extent, control our lives? What is the church's orientation supposed to be in regards to government and social structures and social injustice? On some level, these were the questions that Diane Reedy was raising in her emotion, in her anger, and in her breakdown.

These questions are huge questions, and they can't really be adequately addressed in a sermon, but what we can say and talk about briefly is that (despite our social consensus that religion and politics should never be raised at the dinner table—and I don't know if you've ever done that at your dinner table because it can get a little "funky") to raise the issue of religion and politics is to raise two of the central concerns of the Bible. Our biblical text, both Old and New Testaments, are saturated with politics and religion from the beginning. The God of the Bible in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament is thoroughly political. We have tried and tried through history to take that element out because politics gets us all riled, and we want peace in our pews, which is a good goal, but the Bible is politically saturated with political issues and religious issues.

Here is the good news of that reality that our Bible is political and that our God is political. The good news is (and I know without a doubt that our God is a registered independent) that Republicans are not the party of God, and Democrats are not the party of God. All of that back and forth in our political stalemate in this country from God's point of view is silliness. No one has total control of God's politics. The politics of God are not represented in systems of government or in political parties, nor is any system of government or any political party independent from the politics of God. Everything we do in our world is of concern to God.

Of course, what the Bible says about politics, and the way the Bible sort of expresses politics, is in God's concern for justice. It is the way that God operates in the world, and God's intention for our world and God's intention for our lives is that we would have a society of justice, fairness and equality of some sort.

Let's take a quick look at politics in the Bible. A story we all know about is in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is about Israel's foundational story of liberation from bondage in Egypt. This oppression that they experienced in Egypt was political, economic and religious. The liberation that they experienced, the freedom from Egypt that they experienced, was also political, economic and religious. God is in all of these movements throughout history. Whenever there is liberation, whenever there are struggles, whenever there is oppression, whenever there is slavery, God is in the midst, trying to work that out.

The funny thing about Israel is that, after their freedom from Egypt, they would evolve over many, many years and become a nation state. They were, for awhile, just a band of free people, and then

they became a tribal confederacy, then they became a nation state of Israel. Of course, one of the great tensions in the Old Testament is the call for a king. They started calling “We need a king” and the refrain in that scripture is that “We need a king so that we can be like other nations so that we can get in the game of nation building”. There is a lot of tension around that decision to anoint a king of Israel, but Israel would, indeed, become a nation state. They would become oppressive, and God would send the prophets. Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and so on, were God-ordained, God-intoxicated people who God sent to Israel to say “You all need to get your house in order or it’s going to fall”, so Egypt had been re-created in Israel. The nation state of Israel had become oppressive and particularly under King Solomon when King Solomon expanded boundaries, and King Solomon needed more laborers and engaged in conscripting laborers, building more chariots and bases and so forth and so on, taxing the people to fund all of this. It was under King Solomon’s reign, especially, when Israel became an oppressive nation state. It wasn’t solely responsible for it, but it was really under King Solomon when it became The Great Nation.

In 587, after many years of prophets, especially Jeremiah, Amos and others, Israel would fall. Six hundred years later, after that fall, Jesus would come on the scene, and Jesus would talk about a political, economic and religious kingdom of God. He would talk about it in many, many ways. What Borg says is that the kingdom of God is what life on earth would look like if God was king. If God was calling the shots, this is what it would look like, so Jesus began his ministry from the scripture of Luke, and it is a critical scripture because it points back to some Old Testament realities that are interesting to confront. Jesus says “I am going to begin my ministry, and this is what it is going to look like. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. I’m going to bring good news to the poor. I am going to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free. I am going to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”, and that is the key piece—proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor. Jesus is referring back to Leviticus 25. What was that?

When the Israelites were organizing their new social order as the people of God, when they were free, they began to imagine how they could set up this new life, this new order, this new political, economic and religious order, and it would be quite different from Pharaoh’s, and this order would be based on the concept of Sabbath. It had three components to it: the Sabbath day, the Sabbath year, and then the Super Sabbath which was called the year of Jubilee. Now, the Sabbath day we are sort of familiar with. This is the day of Holy rest. This is the day when we rest with God. This is the day when we let our “beasts of burden” rest. We don’t use our lawnmowers. It is our slave day. They would get to rest. Aliens in our midst get to rest. Everyone takes a day off and remembers that there were slaves in Egypt, so the week would be grounded in Sabbath. We would begin the week, or we would end the week (depending on how you see it) by remembering who we were and simply resting from productivity. One day a week one would not have to consume or produce anything, but that wouldn’t be all for the Israelites.

Later on, in Deuteronomy 15, the scripture talks about the Sabbath year. Every seventh year, the Word is that you let the land rest. You let it take a breather, and while it is taking a breather, you let the poor of your people eat off your land, you let the wild animals eat off your land while it is resting, and, get this, on that seventh year, you release people from debt. That is to say, that guy who owes you \$50, no more! That guy you owe \$50 to, no more! On the seventh year, debts are wiped out. Your MasterCard bill is clean! In that Sabbath year, you give generously to those in need, and in that seventh year, you free your slave.

If you read that scripture (and I encourage all of you to go to Deuteronomy 15 and read through those tedious things), one of the things is that you free your slave, and you send him or her out with supplies. This is how particular the Bible is about doing justice. Don’t just tell your slave that he or

she can go ahead and get out of town. Send them with a backpack full of food and supplies so they can thrive in their freedom. It also says that if your slave doesn't want to leave, if your slave likes it with you and you have been treating him pretty well, he can stay with you if he desires to do so.

In that seventh year, the political, social and economic order is readjusted to remain healthy. How do we make society to remain healthy? We write it into the created order. We have a Sabbath year every seven years to try to straighten things out, but that is only two components of this sense of how we have social justice in our land.

The third sense is in Leviticus 25. This is what Jesus is referring to when he says the "year of the Lord". He's talking about the year of Jubilee. This was the seventh cycle of seven years, so this was the 49th year. Right after the 49th year, the year of Jubilee--the 50th year--was when it all got worked out completely.

During that 50th year, the Bible says every family of Israel will have the right to recover the land that they have lost in the last 50 years and return to that plot of land. Now, when you think about peasant agrarian culture, as it was back then, land was the key to life. Land was the key to sustenance. At the year of Jubilee, everybody goes back (talk about a bureaucratic nightmare—trying to figure out where everybody goes back) to that original plot of land that they were given when it was first set up. It goes on to say that, if you have struggling members in your family who are not making it, you have got to bring them in. You have to bring them back into your household so that they will make it. Of course, debts and slaves are all wiped out again. They get to go free again, debts are all released, and it is all back to square one.

In our kind of economic system, teachings like this are hard to understand, and perhaps even offensive because we, of course, live in the land of opportunity. We work hard, and the idea is, if you work hard, you can make it big in America. That is why people come here--to make that dream come to life. We learn some of our economic lessons about how we participate in this economy early in our childhood.

I want to tell you a story about how I learned to be a good American economically. This began with my friend, Mark Perry. He was a friend in my neighborhood. Mark and I got together for awhile every week, and we played a killer game of Monopoly.

If you remember the game of Monopoly, the point of Monopoly is that you get as much as you can, as quickly as you can, and you crush your opponent. You want to get Boardwalk and Park Place. You want to buy up as much as you could, and Mark would always kick my butt in Monopoly! That is one of the ways we learn about how to be economic in our economic system, that having abundance in Monopoly is a good way to go. It is sort of the counter-theme of that movie "Wall Street" where Gordon Gekko gives that wonderful speech about how greed is good.

I tested this out on my class. I used to teach "Introduction to Sociology" at the University of South Florida. One day, I told them all that we were going to have a big game of Monopoly, and that we were going to have six or eight games going at the same time—four people at a game. I said "All of you bring in your Monopoly games on Monday and we're going to have a game." They were "psyched" about playing Monopoly in school. We set up the teams, got the boards all ready, and everyone got their little pieces (I always wanted the hat.), and we started the game, but I said "We have different rules for this game. You, player #1, are going to start out with \$2000. You, player #2, are going to start out with \$500. You, player #3, are going to start out with \$100. You, player #4, are going to have no money and start out in jail." Well, that didn't feel fair from the "get go", but I said

“You all play. You’ve got 40 minutes to play Monopoly and let’s see where you all end up.” Almost without exception, the rich got richer, and the poor got “the shaft” because we do not start from equal places in our world. If you have a lot of money and resources to begin, you tend to increase that bounty.

Here was the one exception. We put \$1000 in the “Free Parking” kitty, and if you landed on “Free Parking” you got that \$1000. There was one game where a shrewd player who didn’t have much got the “Free Parking” \$1000, and he ended up winning the Monopoly game. He “won the lottery”, but it is a way, in that strategy of teaching, of showing people that where we start in our economic system is often where we end up.

The Israelites in the Old Testament, and what Jesus was talking about, set up a very different system, rhetorically pointing that it would be adjusted as needed as time went along because economic systems never stay in one place. They always tend to move and disenfranchise some while making others very wealthy. Israel tried to set up this sort of system. Scholars say that there is no proof that Israel ever practiced this, that they ever really practiced the idea of Jubilee. There is very little proof that they ever did that but, in the same breath, they say there is proof that their society failed.

If you read the prophets, especially Jeremiah, you read about a God-intoxicated prophet who was saying to turn from your greed, turn from your idolatry, turn from your injustice and violence or you are going to lose your society. All of that is to simply say that the Old Testament is not, in any stretch of the imagination, a blueprint for modern society, but it is a challenge to modern society, and it is a challenge to the church to continue to struggle and to think about how we make society just—how we create society so it can be as just as possible.

The church, of course, is always struggling with that—how do we make our world more just. It is probably a never-ending struggle, but one of the ways we, in the church, try to do that is by walking for hunger. The Crop Walk is one way that we try to do that. Housing homeless women is another way that we try to do that, so our vision of the world is never really calm. We are never really satisfied because the gospel in the Old Testament keeps pushing us to struggle with how can we make this world more like the kingdom of God, and that is the challenge before us now and forevermore, that, as the church of Jesus Christ, we will continue to find new and creative ways to make this world better for all people. Thanks be to God. Amen.