A Spiritual 'No' to Fascism

Proverbs 14:31; Proverbs 22:22-23; Matt. 8:1-4

Our second reading this morning illustrates the way that Jesus violated the taboos and prejudices of his own time to reach out to lepers and others who were denied basic human rights. Jesus believed we all have rights because we are all children of God. I read from Matthew 8. When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. **2** A man with leprosy[a] came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."**3** Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.

I tee this sermon up with a little fear and trepidation. Like you, I'm exhausted by this administration, so ready to change the channel that I have a hard time even reading the paper. Our congregation is made up of thoughtful Republicans and thoughtful Democrats who do not ***need or want*** the clergy to tell them how to vote, so we pride ourselves at Christ Church on just teeing up the issues of the day and letting the congregation debate with each other. We do that well enough that we had two members of the

congregation run against each other for the U.S. Senate in 2002; the Democrat Jon Corzine ran against the Republican congressman, Bob Franks, who sadly passed sixteen years ago.

But these are not ordinary times, so I reviewed notes from my dissertation on the rise of fascism in the ‘30s, from all the books I read by Hannah Arendt, who lived through it and was struck by how Germans willingly handed over their freedom. What would she say now?

Most people do not know that the churches in Germany supported Hitler by and large, probably about 85%. They were hoping for a renewal, literally to make Germany Great Again after a crushing defeat in World War 1. But in 1934, a group of Christians met to write the Barmen Declaration opposing Hitler. And they listed a series of reasons that Naziism was an affront to their moral conscience. Sometimes, we just have to say an

unequivocal “No” to the attack on the political order. Unfortunately, they spoke up too late to stop Naziism from taking over. After the war, the people who signed the Barmen Declaration were hailed as heroes because they realized that saying nothing gives tacit complicity with illegal and illegitimate power. But it was too little, too late. Next time, we will know better, we said.

What is it that we should have known? What must we resist that is happening around us right now? Jonah Goldhagen wrote a book titled “Hitler’s Willing Executioners” in which he described this long, slow, fairly subtle process by which German society evolved from being “rule followers” to placing their trust in “one leader,” “one party,” just a little at a time, stretched over years.

Fascism wasn’t imposed on them from the outside, but they didn’t stop it either. And in “Not stopping it,” they set themselves up. They lived through a slow erosion of rights, a regular, steady

violation of small civil protections that they were willing to live with. The dissolution of rights was gradual year after year, a little here, a little there, so that when the big changes came (when Civil Rights were suspended in 1939 with the invasion of Poland and the start of WW2), they were conditioned to ‘not respond’ and ‘not act’.

Hannah Arendt saw this early on. It is about what we, as free people, as moral citizens, are willing to put up with. Right out of the gate with Hitler, there was an assault on the truth. He had a story about why the Germans lost World War 1. It wasn’t a series of bad military decisions. It wasn’t running out of critical supplies. It wasn’t being on the wrong side of history. It was being undermined from within by Communists and Jews. He called them ‘The enemy within’. That was the stump speech he gave, mostly to drunk World War I veterans in the Beer halls of Munich. It

appealed to their ‘wounded ego’. Drunk men are vulnerable like that, prone to believing people who espouse their prejudices to deflect responsibility.

History was replaced with propaganda in Hitler’s speeches. Fact was replaced with propaganda, and that propaganda was repeated over and over and over again. And the lies got progressively bigger and more brazen, like the big lie we hear today about the 2020 election being stolen.

It is easily refutable if you are interested in the facts. I had to read lots and lots of these speeches by Hitler. Early on, I used to ask myself, “Who could believe this crap?”

Slowly, you start to get it. The whole function of persistent lying is to erase the distinction between truth and falsehood. The lies get progressively bigger to erase the distinction between truth and falsehood more broadly. Immigrants are the problem.

Immigrants take your jobs and lower your standard of living. They are flooding your neighborhood, eroding your culture, your heritage. They have become a national emergency that your existing laws can't stop. Slowly, but slowly, the rhetoric gets ratcheted up to the point that political lies become constitutional threats. Conspiracy thinking predominates. The sheer volume of lies becomes too exhausting to rebut.

But what was astonishing about the decade of the '30s is that Germany, the country with the best education system in the world, the country that was arguably the most fact-based society in Europe at the time, eventually stopped caring about the facts in the headlines. People stopped reading the papers to understand what actually happened. They started reading papers to understand what the people in power were signaling to the world by their propaganda. What was difficult for me to understand as an outsider

was that they stopped thinking in a way that distinguishes fact from fiction altogether. That is why I'm so alarmed by people like Stephen Miller. He is a case study in what not to do. And we live in a world where, because tech algorithms feed us into like-minded groups on social media, we are less likely to engage in dialogue about 'what is true' or 'what is factual'. It is not systematic like fascism was, but slapdash like everything in this administration. But it is a disturbing trend nevertheless.

And the erosion of standards of truth corresponded with the erosion of rights among vulnerable citizens in the '30s. You got these slogans like "Germany is for Germans"; the more German you were, the more Aryan you looked, the more rights you should have. At first, it was used to attack Jews, but then they used it to attack people they didn't like, such as gays and transgendered people, then good Germans with bad political ideas (like

Communists), and they started to expel them or make their lives so miserable that they emigrated (like Klaus Fuchs, one of the greatest physicists of his generation, who fled as a Communist Jew and came to the U.S. and developed the atomic bomb at Los Alamos with Robert Oppenheimer, along with dozens of other intellectuals like him).

Right now, we are living through a constriction of rights for immigrants, particularly from Central America. ICE has added a policy of mandatory detention without bond, so that we are swooping up people on the streets this week in Morristown, in Plainfield, using a flimsy legal justification found in the "Alien Terrorist Removal Court" that allows them to deport individuals using classified information and circumventing the regular courts. This has never been done before, and it lacks constitutional precedent. The lack of constitutional precedent is critical here.

Circumventing the constitutional order is a foundational feature of fascist, authoritarian movements.

Hannah Arendt said that all of us “have the right to have rights”. We need a legal system of due process and a structure for redress of violations. That is not what we have gotten in the United States.

We still need real immigration policy reform, which we have not gotten from either side of the aisle in Congress, so in the interest of expediency, we are living through the suspension of rights and the arbitrary enforcement of an unspoken new policy not explained to the American people, nor endorsed by Congress. To paraphrase M. L. King, a threat to our rights anywhere is a threat to the establishment of rights everywhere. And this is the moral critique of the present political order: it has effectively decided that following the Constitution is too cumbersome, so we are forced to

violate it to get the job done. That is the ICE argument in a nutshell.

Hannah's third observation, a correlate of treating some people as special, others as less so, is the use of political conformity to establish your "in-group" status versus your "out-group" status. Just this week, progressive members of the Press corps were banned, an overt violation of the 1st Amendment, on the justification that they are **"not with us".** That follows dozens of lawsuits against universities that are also **"not with us"** because of their commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. That followed dozens of lawsuits against law firms who are "**not with us**" because they represent Democrats. That followed dozens of lawsuits against comedians who are "not with us" because they make fun of our buffoonery.

All of these lawsuits lose in court because they are unconstitutional, but they still effectively censor criticism, make it harder to organize opposition, and extend government power to political loyalists. Slowly by slowly, when you let this approach develop, you sanction the idea that some people are more deserving of protection than others, not just legal versus illegal residents, but a distinction that separates legal residents from each other as well. You get this permanent “Insiders” vs. “Outsiders”. And that becomes dangerous because it conditions the public to accept a “new normal” that justifies what happens next.

Once they established enough power, the fascists started calling for “emergency declarations”. “The communists are dangerous,” they said; “we have to suspend the Constitution and deal with these 'enemies of the state' because we are in a dire situation.

In our country, it started with the border emergency and illegal immigration. But these emergency declarations have expanded to more areas.

Right now, we are hearing that we have an emergency in our voting regulations. Never mind that no proof has ever been presented of voting irregularities. Never mind that the courts heard 62 lawsuits on this subject and the Administration lost all 62, with a half win on one for a minor legal point that was insignificant. Never mind that independent review after independent review shows that the U.S. is right at the top among the safest, fairest elections in the world today,

The claim is that we have an emergency. And here is the point that Arendt made. These allegations justify a new, unprecedented government intrusion into the voting process. It normalizes

dramatic governmental overreach and establishes a new set of powers that the Constitution prohibits.

Who gets to decide when the “emergency” is over? We in the Executive Branch will let you know. But it is a long process, purging the “enemy from within”. The Nazis made it permanent; so did the Communists, a never-ending test of loyalty to prove that you are a ‘true believer’ and that you ‘really belong’.

Emergency suspensions expanded to address more and more groups through the ‘30s until all-out war was waged in 1939, giving the fascists a reason to declare a permanent suspension of rights.

And this is a large part of why you are so miserable right now when it comes to matters political. Hannah Arendt noted that for Democracy to function effectively, you need opponents. What makes authoritarian politics so menacing is that authoritarian

regimes need enemies to work. It seems subtle, but it is an enormous distinction between opponents and enemies.

You play soccer against opponents; you kill enemies. That is why I love the Army/Navy football game. Raise your hand if you do too? Tough game: the winners get leave for the rest of the weekend of the game; the losers are confined to their dorm rooms for the rest of the weekend of the game.

Every time out, a commercial airs where Navy makes fun of Army or Army makes fun of Navy. It is a year-long competition. But at the end of the game, all the players go to the opposing side, hear their team sing the school's anthem, and stand in respect for what each other brings to the defense of our country. We are all in this together.

On our best days, our capitalist economy does something similar. We organize ourselves into limited marketplace

competitions to develop the best new computer, with some companies winning and some losing out. But rules keep this competition constructive so we become more efficient as a society overall, producing better, cheaper products that lift the standard of living for all of us. That is the principle behind healthy competition with opponents.

Authoritarians make their opponents illegitimate: they are vermin, they are criminals, they are traitors, they are the enemy from within. You are not in a healthy competition with them. You have to eradicate them. They aren't your neighbors, and they don't possess rights that you should respect, even if you disagree with them. That is why all of our leading political thinkers won't use terms like "vermin", "criminals", or "traitors" to describe opponents. Those descriptors are inherently dangerous.

What happened in Germany was that people caved one by one. Civil servants complied with the new mandates to keep their jobs. Lawyers devised legal rationales to keep their practice open. Businesses accommodated themselves to the Nazi order. Universities became cautious in their lectures. Journalists stopped filing certain stories. Judges ignored precedents. And ordinary citizens just withdrew from the public realm to live their lives in their private circle.

Most people don't want to fight their neighbors, so they retreat into private life. These are new habits that you develop, but you don't notice you have changed until the world changes around you because of your lack of leadership and involvement. Then you have that "Oh Merde" moment, when you realize the warming waters are starting to boil around you and it is too late.

You have to get involved, for your children, for your grandchildren. We need new, better habits. We can't wait for a savior to rescue us from the outside. We have to prevent the worst from happening by being involved right now, when we least feel like it. It is not too late. We live in a 'free society,' and we do have rights here.

That was my personal takeaway from writing my dissertation. The people who lived through that era with the biggest regrets were the people who tried to keep their heads down and play it safe. Years later, they wished they had spoken up. They wished they had stood for their values. They wished they could have been counted among those who dissented.

At the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the last word, the moral of the story, was penned by Yehuda Bauer, the historian of that period. Up on the wall as you leave are the words,

written in Ye Old Biblical style. They say, “Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.” Find your voice and your moral resolve. Lean into the world you want to leave your people. You will not regret being counted among those willing to follow their conscience. And may the peace of God, which passes ordinary understanding, rest upon you as you live out of your integrity. May you be able to sleep with yourself, knowing your children and your grandchildren will be proud of the way you led. Amen.

Our first reading this morning illustrates why the Scriptures give a moral critique of the existing political order and why we should be faithful spiritual people and citizens in a free society. I read from Proverbs. "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God." And Proverbs 22 says this, "Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not

crush the needy in court, for the Lord will take up their case."