

Pentecost 7C + July 3, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit

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³Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.
⁴Our soul has had more than its fill....” (Psalm 123)

We have had enough. Enough of the dark forces that are gripping the world and defying the efforts of powerful nations to overcome them. Enough of the senseless violence that brings an abrupt end to innocent lives. The dichotomies are almost too much to bear:

- In Dhaka, Bangladesh, slaughter during the holy month of Ramadan at a popular restaurant with a global clientele.
- In Istanbul, late-night terror in one of the world’s busiest airports with happy travelers whose journeys suddenly come to an end.
- In Orlando, death and destruction in a lively place where people go for a fun night out.
- In Boston, lives shattered at the Finish line, a milestone of celebration and accomplishment.
- In Sandy Hook, horror in a place where teachers are opening children’s eyes to the beauty of life and learning.

The names of other cities are now imprinted with similar acts of devastation: San Bernardino, Oklahoma City. There are parts of the world where such violence has become numbingly routine. But to us here in America, reading about these renews our deep sense of shock each time. We cannot help but be affected by each of them. Martin Luther King said it so eloquently and memorably in his Letter from Birmingham Jail:

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Today we focus on our text from the Zechariah, a prophet and priest who was writing in the late 6th century B.C. after the people of Israel were returning from the

Babylonian exile. Biblical prophecy is not fortune-telling, but TRUTH-telling in the context of the coming fulfillment of God's kingdom on earth. Zechariah heralds the peoples' return not only as a historical event but as one that represents how God will restore all things in love. "Rejoice!" he exults. "Shout aloud!" Your Savior is coming, he continues, victorious over the world's dark forces! He will bring peace to all nations, to the end of the farthest ocean! And you will be set free--free to live, free to hope!

Our nation's day of independence is also not simply date on which we mark the events of 240 years ago. It represents a vision of the future, a vision of the victory over forces of death that would suppress and oppress us. That vision is freedom. Here in America freedom is our guiding light and our greatest treasure. Prophetically speaking, freedom is our hope, our dream. This is why these words from Martin Luther King, proclaimed on the mall in Washington D.C. 53 years ago, may well be the most patriotic that we have after those of the Declaration of Independence:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

Our calling as a nation, as a people, and as children of God is to communicate this vision of the future in everything we do. Without even thinking about it, we embrace the stranger and welcome the children. We offer cups of cold water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothing to the needy, and solace to those in prison. We bear each other's burdens and Christian hope to those who suffer. We strive to love even those who seem to be set against us.

Our psalm today takes us to the time when all things are fulfilled, but our reading from Luke 10 shows us how to get there. Jesus has just started out on his long journey to Jerusalem and is forming disciples along the way. Here he sends out a large group to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near—that God's plan to gather up all things into God's love is beginning. Travel lightly and proclaim the good news fearlessly, he tells them. When they encounter rejection, Jesus goes on to say, don't be discouraged; just shake the dust off your sandals and continue on. If anyone rejects you, he tells them, they are also rejecting me and God, my Father.

And what is the result? Our text tells us, "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' And Jesus affirms their ministry in saying to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightening!"

The advent of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ marked the beginning of Satan's end. God is calling us to join these disciples in the same mission. Darkness may be pressing in from many sides, but we know the end of the story: Love has the upper hand, because Christ has won the victory over death. Be joyful in your vocation as disciples of our Lord and Savior. Push the darkness away with acts of love at every opportunity. All the while we hear these words

from John 13 echoing in our ears: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” The light shines on, and the darkness will never overcome it.

This is good news for God’s people!

Amen.