

**Sermon: “Naming Evil: White Supremacy and Nationalism”** (Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20); and John 1:43-51)

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, January 14, 2018

By: Dr. Jenny Whitcher

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*The following sermon and benediction were written by Dr. Jenny Whitcher, as an invited guest preacher to Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ in Denver, CO.*

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Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries are filled with amazing children of God.

And yet our president asked, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?”

Trump then suggested that the United States should instead bring in more people from countries such as Norway, which is about 95% white.

This is the language of white nationalism and white supremacy uttered just four days before Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

A day on which we celebrate the birth of Rev. Dr. King, a minister who provided pastoral care to a lost nation, an activist who moved people to justice, a key leader in the Civil Rights Movement which ended racial discrimination in federal and state laws through the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Trump’s language is not unexpected. It is not coincidental. It is not ironic.

This is white nationalism and white supremacy—the belief that white people are a superior and a threatened race and must take action to maintain their majority.

A world power, an individual, so antagonistic to Jesus’ teachings has another name: The antichrist.

There is power in naming. God spoke the world into being when God said, “Let there be light.”

Many of us mainline protestants don’t feel too comfortable with the word evil or sin. Those are church words we prefer not be spoken in church.

The problem is that if we don’t name evil for what it is and understand it, then evil has the ability to build power in pervasive and dangerous ways.

Let us name the evil, so that we may also name what is Good, just, and Christ-like.

Hiding from evil and pretending it doesn’t exist is simply denial.

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You cannot hide under the bed covers and expect the night-time monsters and dragons to slink back into the closet. You have to leap up tie a bedsheet cape around your neck if it helps you feel more courageous, and face evil head on.

Imagine Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcom X, and Bayard Rustin with flannel bed sheet capes hanging from their shoulders sitting at “white only” lunch counters, at the front of the bus, and standing to face police dogs and firehoses.

Imagine Civil Rights Movement leader and peaceful march organizer Amelia Boynton beaten unconscious by police, wrapped in her bedsheet cape at the base of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965. The bridge is named after a Grand *Dragon* of the Ku Klux Klan.

There are so many courageous people who have tied on their capes and stood up to the dragons of evil. On Monday we celebrate the life of just one of these leaders, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr..

May we be reminded that we too are called to put on our capes and face evil.

This fall I had the opportunity to hear two theology scholars talk about evil, and in each conversation someone asked them how they define evil.

Dr. Tinyiko Maluleke, Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Professor in African Spirituality and Culture at the University of Pretoria, South Africa shared with us:

“Evil is the collapse of a dream that becomes a nightmare.”

Later that same day, Rev. Dr. Emilie Townes, Womanist Ethicist and Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, said:

“Sin is individual, evil is when we systematize sin.”

You see, evil is formational, meaning that evil emerges from our ability and willingness to systematize and empower sin. Sin understood as those actions that separate us from a loving relationship with God and one another as children of God.

When I read the news, I see evil—the ways in which we are complicit in systematic violence, hate, and injustice.

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Well, there is a reason that the Gospel is called the “Good News.” We are in desperate need of a different way forward.

Jesus was doing just that as we enter our New Testament scripture for today. If you read the entirety of John 1, the pattern of writing is that each section starts with “The next day...” followed by a story of how Jesus was gathering disciples. It is the story of how Jesus organized leaders.

When you heard the scripture read this morning, who might you have thought of when Nathanael responded to Philip saying, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

*[Trump]*

Ok, you and everybody else on my facebook feed! But that is not where I am headed with this sermon, so kindly try to disassociate Nathanael from Trump.

Let me help paint a different picture...

The scripture says that Philip was from Bethsaida, on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee, and he sought out Nathanael who was from Cana in Galilee.

Now Cana and Nazareth are approximately 7 miles apart, both are small towns in Galilee, both are about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean sea—about a days walk in either direction.

At the time, farming was the largest industry in what is a land dominated by desert and rocky hills. One might imagine that it would be ideal to live by the coast, where you could fish and access water.

So Jesus and Nathanael are from what we might call in the U.S., the rural midwest. Imagine a very small town, because archaeologists estimate that Nazareth was home to 400-500 people when Jesus was alive.

What if Nathanael is just from a rival small town whose football teams play against each other for the biggest game of the year. “What good can come from Nazareth?” sounds like petty rivalry.

In terms of birthplace, Nathanael and Jesus are not too different. So, by Nathanael questioning a messiah coming from a town like his, may more accurately be portrayed as his sharing his own fears of inadequacy.

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Another interpretation is that Nathanael balked at Nazareth for political reasons. Nazareth was part of Roman-ruled Judea, a Jerusalem-controlled settlement in Galilee. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth, a Roman-occupied town?”

Finally, maybe Nathanael’s statement is a satirical method of the author. The geographic context of Jesus’ ministry is hardly Nazareth. As the Son of God, Jesus’ geographical context is beyond human understanding of place and space.

The more important part of this scripture is when Nathanael goes to see Jesus.

Upon seeing Nathanael, Jesus walks toward him and makes a bold claim about Nathanael’s character, or moral and ethical quality, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” Nathanael, probably honored and confused, asks where Jesus got to know him. Jesus responds, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

The importance of the fig tree is that some scholars believe that Nathanael was sitting under a fig tree at his home praying. So Jesus is explaining to Nathanael that they knew each other through prayer. At a time when the Bible tells us others are praying loudly in the streets in order to be seen, Nathanael prays in private, at home.

“I see you,” is a way of saying I know you, who you are, your character, your faith. I know what is in your heart.

How often do we truly see one another for character, faith, and heart?

Maybe we focus on seeing what the other person can do for us? Or, the promises they will make, the gifts they give, the social status they might impart on us if we could just come a little closer to them.

As a country, we’ve lost the ability to truly see one another, the way Jesus might see us, and we’ve turned right relationships into transactions and usury. Our character, faith, and hearts suffer along the way.

Here again is the good news. Despite our relational surroundings, we can be of good character, we can act out our faith in the world, and we can embolden our hearts to love more deeply and more often.

Our Hebrew scripture presents just such a story from the book of Samuel.

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Samuel was called by God to rise above his earthly relationships and circumstances to be a powerful leader for the common good, and obedient to the word of God.

Before the Hebrew people demanded a King, they were ruled by 12 judges for the 12 tribes of Israel, one of which was Samuel. In preparation for this role, Samuel was raised by Eli, a high priest and judge, whose two sons Hophni and Phinehas were also priests.

As is often the case when reading the Hebrew Scripture, we might find it difficult to listen to the words of an angry God. It sounds like God is being an egotistical maniac cursing the house of Eli. However, if you read the rest of the book of Samuel, you might find you would use similar language if you were in God's shoes.

The scripture refers to Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas as “scoundrels.” There are two specific evil behaviors that the scripture mentions with regards to Hophni and Phinehas. One is about sacrifices and one is about sex.

Now, it was religious ritual to offer sacrifices, which meant that the people would bring meat to be boiled. It was customary to wait for the sacrifice to be offered and then as the meat boiled down, the priest's servant would take a three-pronged fork and thrust it into the kettle. Anything that came up with the fork, the priest would take for himself to eat. Much like how part of our offerings to the church go towards taking care of the pastor, but not to the point of excessive luxury and privilege. Pastor, did I get that right?

In the case of Hophni and Phinehas, boiled meat was not good enough. They instructed their servant to demand raw meat from the people in order to roast the best parts of the offering for themselves. If anyone disagreed, the servant would threaten to use force.

Here we learn another lesson, God gets angry when we take the best parts of the offering for ourselves.

One might translate this to our public ritual of taxation. We make an offering in contribution to the whole nation in support of the needs of ourselves and our neighbors. Now, imagine people in positions of power instructing the IRS to take money given up by the people, for say, their Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and a safety net for the poor; so that it can in turn be given to their wealthy allies and supporters. God has righteous anger for this kind of evil.

The other large offense committed by Hophni and Phinehas the Hebrew scripture refers to as “laying with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting.” Many male scholars read this text as the two priests sleeping with married women and therefore adultery being the primary concern, which as we know is forbidden in the Bible.

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I read this sexual assault. Hophni and Phineas are two powerful priests, the sons of the high priest and judge of the entire land. They lord their power over the servants and the people. And it is not lost on the people that Eli is incapable of dealing with his felonious sons.

Two men who are in positions of highest power are having sex with “employees.” Some scholars have interpreted these women as cleaning servants. However, others argue that the Hebrew word for “task” refers to military service.

These female sanctuary guardians were stationed at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting for religious-military duty, and were sexually assaulted by Eli’s sons. Not only was this a violation of these women, it was also a violation of the entire community who were not safe within their place of worship or prophecy.

Here we learn that God is righteously angry with clergy, celebrities, and leaders who use their power to sexually assault those who work or volunteer within their organization.

It’s not like no one knew what was going on, but no one dared say or do anything. Sound familiar?

Eventually, the people had enough and spoke to Eli.

God was angered and spoke to Eli.

Eli finally talked to his sons, but they didn’t change, and Eli just let it go.

The high priest and judge, Eli, falls from power because he knew that his sons were sinning and he failed to restrain them.

Here we learn that God expects us to intervene, to speak up when we see injustice, and to hold one another accountable.

That can be tough and we know we would rather stick to our own business, rather than confront our neighbor, family, friends, employer, or elected officials about sin and evil. Truly a lesson for our time.

According to the Hebrew scripture, God eventually put Hophni and Phinehas to death in order to end their evil behavior.

We need to name what is sinful and evil in our world, and we especially need to do it in the church. And then we need to ask ourselves what we are going to do about it.

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White supremacy and nationalism is evil—systemic sin that pervades our country up to the highest levels of power.

What are you going to do to face this evil?

What are you going to do in your church, in your family, in your friendships, in your workplace, in conversation with your elected officials, and when you vote?

Despite the evil role models in Samuel’s life, the prophet Samuel was raised and became venerated by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

We too are also called to be prophetic, like Samuel; to act out our faith in good character and conscious, despite our circumstances. We are each called in this moment not just despite, but because of our current leadership.

As another prophet, Micah, wrote: “What does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

In the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with adjustment for inclusive pronouns:

“Those who passively accept evil are as much involved in it as those who help to perpetrate it. Those who accept evil without protesting against it are really cooperating with it.”

This is not a weekend in which we can seek a comforting sermon. God knows, we often come to church for comfort, but we are also called to be uncomfortably prophetic.

The comfort that the scripture gives us is in truth a call to the difficult and sometimes painful work of creating beloved community.

So, put on your bedsheet cape, leap out of bed to face evil, and seek redemption for all.

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**Benediction:**

May you not wait for a hero,  
But find courage through your faith in God to rise up.  
Let there be light,  
Let there be light,  
Let there be light,  
And let it begin with you.