

“Pushing Back the Darkness”

Responsive Reading, “Broken Cisterns”¹

This morning’s change of sermon from the planned message is a most unusual event—but not as unusual as tomorrow’s eclipse will be. My sermon topics are planned several years in advance, and I seldom change them due to current events. If I’ve made such changes here in Columbia, it hasn’t happened more than once or twice (I do change the schedule around for other reasons with some frequency). But, of course, this has not been an ordinary week.

It is my responsibility as your pastor to do what I can to help us all to think theologically about our lives, our culture, current events, and moral issues. That’s the main reason I go to the trouble to write “Dave’s Laptop.” It’s our mutual responsibility to encourage one another toward biblical literacy and spiritual maturity, and that’s why we have a DISCIPLESHIP team and a Sunday School. Though we do these things together, in the end, each of us will be individually accountable to God for what we’ve done with the resources God has provided, through the Church and in other ways.

While it’s crucial for followers of Jesus to be involved in politics, legislation, and government in general, you’re not going to hear me telling you how to vote or for whom to vote; and you’re not likely to know whom I vote for myself . . . but I will and do encourage you TO vote! At the same time, partisan politics has no place in worship; but *politics*, as distinct from partisan politics, is part and parcel of the Gospel.

Doing justice and caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the imprisoned, the sick, and the immigrant are major themes in both the Old Testament and the New. Our faith calls us to be meaningfully engaged in these things, because it is largely in these ways that we Push Back the Darkness.

Even so, it’s crucial to recognize that Christians who are just as born again, just as committed to God’s work, and just as compassionate as one another may also have very different ideas about what such engagement should look like. This is why Paul spent so much time in his letters urging churches toward *unity*. Paul didn’t urge the churches to *uniformity*, except in their wholehearted commitment to obedience to God’s Spirit.

This has been a distressing week, because the events of the past week have highlighted how *disunited* we Americans are these days. We have deep and significant divisions between liberal and conservative, between Republican and Democrat, between Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, and secularist, between red and yellow, black and white, between white collar and blue collar, between gay and straight, between old and young. None of these divisions is new, but their recent virulence has been unsettling for many of us.

Some will say that the events of the last week are moving us toward civil war, or that these are signs that The End Times are upon us. Those who study such things tell us that even these recent traumas do not yet begin to approach the kinds of violence and trauma that we experienced in the sixties, and we can take some small comfort in that, I suppose.

Whether these are the End Times or not, I don’t know. These could indeed be signs of such a gathering Storm; but every generation since the time of Jesus has thought they were the last, and we do well to be so prepared ourselves. But Jesus told us quite emphatically (1) to *be ready for His Return*; and (2) that *it would be a complete surprise*.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 20, 2017.

I submit to you that it doesn't really matter very much whether these are the End Times or not. What *does* matter—and it matters a *lot*—is how you and I play our parts and live our lives in the times that are given to us.

So let's consider briefly where we are as a nation, given the events of the past week. Those who track such things tell us that there are 917 hate groups currently operating in the United States, and, while hate-related groups and hate-related crimes declined somewhat between 2011-2014, since 2014 there have been noticeable increases, as the *PowerPoint* illustrates.

MSN reported this week the ten states with the most membership in hate-related organizations, and the slide shows those "top ten" as well as the locations and concentrations of the rest.² What do you see when you look at this graphic? What do you feel?

That we have such a cancer of hate in these United States in 2017 absolutely boggles my mind. While the graphs do suggest that things are getting worse, much of what we're seeing lately may have more to do with the fact that such hate is becoming uncovered. Hate is no longer hiding in America. Hating other Americans, loudly, profanely, and violently, is our "latest thing."

And it's more than a little troubling to me that many of the members of those hate groups are at the same time active participants of Christian churches. What in the world ever happened to our Lord's command to "*love your enemies*" (Matthew 5:44)? How in the world can we in the Church have failed so miserably to encourage one another toward Christlikeness?³

Ah, but before we mount our "high horses" to look down on all these "heathen," let us remember Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's lament: "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"⁴

It is, in fact, God's purpose to cause us to become dead to our old sinful, willful, destructive ways, as Paul's writing, in particular, makes clear; but the dying is long and protracted, and we do well to examine ourselves (Galatians 2:20; Romans 7:14-25). We also do well to remember that people very seldom get up in the morning and consciously say to themselves, "I'm going to be a perfectly evil influence in everything I do today."

It helps me to remember that, for the most part, people do what they do—and you and I do what we do—because as we understand things, it is in our best interest to do them. I submit to you that every human person does virtually everything we do, our whole lives long, because we believe that doing those things will help us to achieve "A Life that Matters" and "Relationships that Last." That was true for the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville last week. It was true of those who demonstrated against them. And it is true of you and me.

² <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/10-states-with-the-most-hate-groups/ss-AAq4BGR#image=1>

³ John Pierce has suggested that this has come about for three primary reasons:

1. We have made salvation an end rather than a beginning, neglecting the necessary process of sanctification.
2. We have redefined Christian ethics in purely partisan terms.
3. We have traded a life of faith for agreement with a litmus test.

John D. Pierce, "Why does American Christianity reflect so little of Jesus?" *Nurturing Faith Journal*, July-August, 2017.

⁴ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*.

Humans are not born into this world as haters. People must be taught to hate. As I looked at those photos, I wondered what sort of life experiences turn babies into white supremacists? Whatever it was, it had to be awful, and perhaps this recognition can stir the tiniest bit of compassion in our hearts.⁵ But beyond this, what can we who follow Jesus do about those things?

As I asked myself those questions this week, I was reminded of the hopelessness of poverty and unemployment, no matter what our skin color. And I was reminded that, while I have not ever been involved in “white supremacy” in any specific way, I *have* been the beneficiary of a system that has been significantly engineered to privilege persons with white skin over any others—completely disregarding any questions of competence or character or justice.

It is we who are white who need to repent of the whole idea of “white supremacy.” We need to acknowledge that the evil idea of “white supremacy” was invented by white people and enforced by white people. Indeed, *who else* would make it up?

My white brothers and sisters, I submit to you that Dr. King was right when in his magnificent *Letter from Birmingham Jail*,⁶ he wrote that “I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’ Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

Yet, while I believe Dr. King’s words are still true today, and that we white folk need to ponder them afresh, the real, central, primary, overwhelming dynamic that has been at work this week has been, as far as I know, completely and totally missed. Yes, we need to unequivocally stand against racism and hatred of every shape and form; but it is crucial that we remember that **people are not our enemies. People are never our enemies. Satan is our enemy.**

My friends, a cosmic battle rages around us and within us, and if we misunderstand what is really happening, we will be conquered. Here’s what the Bible says:

¹⁰ Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens. ¹³ For this reason take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand (Ephesians 6:10-13).

The *real* battle we face is not fundamentally about demonstrations and counter-demonstrations, though those may be necessary, and I participated in one last week. Paul reminded us that “*though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power*

⁵ Paul Young wrestles with this idea toward the end of his powerful autobiographical novel: *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

⁶ http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular_requests/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf

to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

The real focus of our concern, then, in such a week as this, is to ask with the psalmist, “When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3). In a week like this, we can ask ourselves what King Zedekiah asked Jeremiah the prophet: “Is there any word from the LORD?” (Jeremiah 37:17). Happily, there is.

There were quite a few “words from the LORD” in the responsive reading we shared earlier, and I commend those verses to your prayerful reflection; but I want to focus in these last few minutes on Ezekiel 22:30, where God said, “I searched for a man among them who would repair the wall and stand in the gap before me on behalf of the land so that I might not destroy it, but I found no one.” **What might it look like for you and for me to “stand in the gap” of the wall of righteousness that protects our land in days such as these?**

Several of you responded to my request for your prayer for this message, and some of you offered suggestions of one sort or another. Ben Davis urged that we stop using adjectives on each other, noting that it is more useful to say “racist” than “white racist” and more helpful to say “terrorist” than “Muslim terrorist.”

“Labels of any kind,” Ben wrote, “only serve to divide, to separate ‘us’ from ‘them.’ Groups may plan things together, but it is individuals who act. When the Judgment comes, we will be separated into two groups, ‘sheep’ and ‘goats,’ HIS single division, by how I treated those I viewed as ‘them.’ As He pointed out, loving ‘us’ is easy. He cares much more about how we loved ‘them.’ And He cares even more about the fact that I see others as ‘them’ at all.”

If we see clearly, things are virtually never a matter of “us” and “them.” In his famous letter, Dr. King noted that “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.”

To the extent that we mistakenly perceive others as our enemies (rather than understanding the evil to which they are captive as our real enemy), Jesus taught us to pray for and to seek the highest good of those we perceive as our enemies. And we would be wise to join Dr. Booker T. Washington in his famous commitment that “*I will permit no man, no matter what his color might be, to narrow and degrade my soul by making me hate him.*”

While much of our nation’s history is noble and good, much of our history is also dark and shameful. But we do not need to despair. Maya Angelou reminded us that “*History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.*” So, after all this, here are ten things we can do to **Push Back the Darkness** that has attempted to overwhelm us this week. I suggest to you that this is what “standing in the gap” might look like:⁷

⁷ These have clear, if not one-to-one, connections with “the full armor of God”: ¹³ *For this reason take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand.* ¹⁴ *Stand, therefore, with truth like a belt around your waist, righteousness like armor on your chest,* ¹⁵ *and your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace.* ¹⁶ *In every situation take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.* ¹⁷ *Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God.* ¹⁸ *Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints”* (Ephesians 6:13-18).

1. Examine and detoxify yourself first. Be careful with social media. Don't feed on Darkness and Evil (Lamentations 3:40).
2. Reread Matthew 7:1-6 about judging others. Repent of your bad attitudes.
3. Don't take cheap shots. The Bible warns us to "*not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen*" (Ephesians 4:29).
4. Treat every person as one who bears the image of God, as a person beloved by God, no matter what they look like, and no matter how they behave (John 3:16).
5. Check your facts. Don't be a source of fake news. Ask yourself whether you can demonstrate that this is true. Then ask yourself if passing this on is truly necessary.
6. Break the cycle of tit-for-tat and general vengeance. Return good for evil (Romans 12:21). Vengeance belongs to God (Romans 12:19).
7. Pray for those you perceive as enemies (Matthew 5:44). Really. Persistently.⁸
8. Create a prayer group to pray consistently and persistently for those who govern us, whether you like them or not (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Stay in touch with them to encourage them to make wise, non-partisan decisions.
9. Invest time and money in groups that are addressing solutions to hateful behavior that matter to you.
10. Remember that the future belongs to God. Jeremiah wrote, even after his nation was completely destroyed because of its wickedness: "*Yet I call this to mind, and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's faithful love we do not perish, for his mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness! I say, "The LORD is my portion, therefore I will put my hope in him." The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the person who seeks him. It is good to wait quietly for salvation from the LORD*" (Lamentations 3:21-26).

Let us examine our ways, my friends, and test them, and let us return to the LORD (Lamentations 3:40). **We are the lights God has placed in this present Darkness.** Let your light shine! (Matthew 5:14-16).

⁸ Modified from Mike Smith, "7 Suggestions for Addressing Toxicity," *Nurturing Faith Journal*, July-August 2017.

Broken Cisterns

Leader: *Then King Zedekiah sent for [Jeremiah] and had him brought to the palace, where he asked him privately, "Is there any word from the LORD?" (Jeremiah 37:17).*

People: ***"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jeremiah 2:13).***

Leader: *"A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way. But what will you do in the end?" (Jeremiah 5:30-31).*

People: ***"From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush" (Jeremiah 6:13-15).***

Leader: *"A lion has come out of his lair; a destroyer of nations has set out. He has left his place to lay waste your land." . . . "Oh, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the agony of my heart! My heart pounds within me, I cannot keep silent. For I have heard the sound of the trumpet; I have heard the battle cry (Jeremiah 4:7, 19).*

People: ***We hoped for peace, but no good has come, for a time of healing but there is only terror. The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved (Jeremiah 8:15, 20).***

Leader: *"This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD's house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from their evil ways. Then I will relent and not inflict on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done" (Jeremiah 26:2-3).*

People: ***"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:11-13).***

Leader: *"I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart" (Jeremiah 24:7).*

People: ***Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD (Lamentations 3:40).***

Together: ***Amen, and Amen!***