

“Awake”

Daniel 12:1-13

Matthew 10:34-39

Philippians 4:8-14

There’s a Leonard Cohen that I don’t know very well called “The Faith.” I’ve heard it a number of times, but somehow the words haven’t stuck in my brain. Maybe it’s something about the feel of the song that resonates. The lyrics are about many of the tragedies of life that continue to happen no matter how much time passes or how much we might hope we had grown beyond them. Amidst these lines of suffering, there is a refrain that is repeated several times throughout: “O love, aren’t you tired yet?” “O love, aren’t you tired yet?”

Every day – every hour some new story gets reported thrusting us from whatever we were doing into a new, breaking perspective or tragedy or crisis. Where before we were ignorant, now our eyes are opened, complete with video and the words of witnesses and the addition of commentators and the political factions and the fear and the anger and the grief. Any one of our present tragedies is enough to break our hearts – the continuing toll of the coronavirus, people dying in the streets, violence and looting at protests, attacks on journalists, people of color who see themselves harassed and harmed by the police, police who see themselves as hated, disrespected, and endangered by the people.

We are so overwhelmed – aren’t we? We just want it to stop – we just want to be able to rest and have peace together. But I think because we’re so overwhelmed, so often we’re doing the opposite of what we need to do to find justice and to find peace. We’re breaking apart from one another; we’re drawing battle lines; we’re seeing more and more of our neighbors as enemies. In many ways, all of the groups who are up in arms right now are telling each other “I can’t breathe.” And this is a cry borne of the utmost urgency – it is a desperate plea. “I can’t breathe” means that harm is real – that damage is happening in real time and please, please care

about this injury; do what you can to make it stop. Friday before last, I suffered one of the worst asthma attacks I've ever had and it left me gasping for air. I could hardly finish a sentence without needing to pause and gulp for the breath I needed to live. Moments like that are terribly vulnerable and unsettling. All you can think in times like that is that you want to live and you want your life and your struggle to matter to other people, too.

But what happens now when anyone tells their version of "I can't breathe"? When they say what angers or worries or scares them in the latest news? We take the shortest route possible to shutting them down. If someone is worried about the coronavirus, someone else will say they must be a sheep or a fool. You can't tell me what to do. If someone fears for the safety of black neighbors, someone else will say they must hate the police and be actively working to unravel society. If someone speaks of a police officer who has done good in their own experience, someone else will say they must be an ignorant racist. We see injustices that cut us so deeply that we start shutting down any other view.

We are not all looking at the same information and so our sense of moral outrage is shaped by political talking heads and media companies who are often more interested in ad sales than in fairly presenting the news. In the church, though, we have to remember that our sense of justice, righteousness, goodness, and grace come from God through Christ in the Spirit. Justice is justice. The work of justice doesn't belong to any single group or political party or age range or race or anything. We know what justice is because God shows us what justice is. How can we let our heads be turned so easily from the one who taught us what is right and what is wrong?

What we learn from scripture is that when someone cries out in anguish, it is not for us to slap them down in an argument. It is not for us to switch subjects or mock them or dismiss their concerns. If we hold up justice first, we see that we have common goals, common desires to

move forward together. We want everyone to be safe and treated equally under the law – that is just. We want police officers to have good training and be held to high standards so that they can truly serve and build up the communities where they work. We want to work together to figure out what needs to change so that we can have less violence and less use of force everyday. We want to find ways to rebuild our society so that we can all truly breathe free – why should we be convinced that we cannot care deeply about all of these things at the same time?

Paul writes to the Philippians that, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” He encourages the church to stay focused on that holy light of goodness and right and not to get derailed by time-wasters. Paul doesn’t expect them to solve every problem or be victorious in every grand argument or to make headlines as the greatest little church in Macedonia. Instead, he just says keep on going – keep on doing what you know is right, “and the God of peace will be with you.”

But some days it’s a lot harder to just keep doing good than it is to get roiled up into an argument with somebody. Our Gospel lesson this morning is a favorite among Christians who like to stir the pot, to get in peoples’ faces with the certainty of their own stance. Jesus says, “do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Those of us who hope for a peaceful tomorrow – heck, who hope for a peaceful today from the bottom of our hearts... This passage is so hard for us to sit with. What does it mean that the prince of peace has a sword and sets family members against one another?

It might be helpful at this point to look at the word for peace in Greek – it’s “*eirene*,” which is where the name “Irene” comes from. The root of this word means to join together. So, for them, peace was when you had a number of different pieces that would then be brought

together to form a whole. It was a harmony where many seemingly different things would just fit together when Christ touched and shaped and molded them. If we think of a sword, we think of something rather the opposite – it cuts, it divides, it violently separates. It is often used figuratively to talk about judgment and a reckoning of what is wrong.

If we stop and look at our own hearts, we must confess that we are sinners. It is all too easy for us to fall into old patterns of sin. We need God's grace so desperately. So, here Christ tells us – we need Christ as the sword before we can have peace. We need Christ to challenge the places within us that cling to sin and still seek to do damage. This sword isn't our weapon to wield against one another – it is Christ acting in us through a difficult blessing. We can't have real peace without this painful process of awareness and repentance, reconciliation and love. Then, once we have been pruned and reshaped, transformed in Christ's image – then we can grow into the pieces that start fitting together more and more. Then we grow into people of peace.

In these chaotic and tragic times, we are called to take on so much – our own pain and that of others. But Christ has called us to take up the cross and follow him. Christ has said, "those who lose their life for my sake will find it." He did not say it would be easy, but he did say he would be with us, upholding us, strengthening us. We remember Paul wrote in Philippians, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

In song, Leonard Cohen asked us, with all the suffering that continues – "O love, aren't you tired yet?" And our answer must be, "no." God is love and God is not tired; Christ is not tired; the Spirit is not tired. We may feel tired as we work our way through – God knows what will come next – but love is never, ever tired.

We know that we cannot personally be awake, alert, and on-call for every new disaster and crisis. Each of us needs rest and revival to make it through these days. But we should also remember that every act of courage and love and kindness – every step forward we take together in righteousness is leading us to an end that we already know.

This sermon is the first in our sermon series about visions in the Bible. It might seem strange to you that we are beginning with a vision of the end, but, somehow, it seems fitting. However much chaos and evil and suffering we find, God has shown us a vision of awakening. The language is apocalyptic and sometimes confusing, but we find such promises of hope! “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

In this vision of the end, we see that goodness will rise to life, that wisdom will be seen over the entire earth, and that those who lifted one another up will shine just as the stars do. God will do this – God is doing this day by day. Awake, friends, and do not be discouraged! In our vision of the end, the good is light and free. The good that connects us in Christ cannot be contained or cancelled out – it echoes and fills our land and cannot be undone.

The angel tells Daniel to keep going – to persevere to the end so that he can come to his rest and his reward. So, friends, let us hold on to this sacred vision. For now, we may grow weary, but we cannot grow cold. We must not shut out the real pleas for change. We must resist the lure of over-simplifying all the problems we face. See the light in your neighbor, your family member, your political enemy – see the light that will yet rise on the day of the Lord and listen for what you need to hear. Listen for the injustice and try to understand the problem instead of casting aside a child of God. Listen to understand and then speak to move forward together. Now

is a time when we need to be humble and show each other grace – and then, see what God will bring from our faithfulness! Work and wait and see what God can do through humble and active hearts. Amen.