

Lent 3—Year C  
Exodus 3:1-15  
Psalm 63:1-8  
I Corinthians 10:1-13  
Luke 13:1-9

So many **images** in our scriptures today; so many **threads** weaving together; so much that **weighs on our hearts** as we come to them. All week long, I've been **reading and rereading these texts**, and all week long, **Christchurch, New Zealand, and the unspeakable violence that happened there**, have been **swirling around my mind** and **troubling my heart**, and it's partly the scripture's fault. You see, the **Gospel passage** for today starts off with this: *"At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices."* Those **Galileans** were **killed in the very act** of offering their sacrifices, **killed in the very act of worship** itself, *just as our Muslim brothers and sisters in Christchurch were killed in their act of worship, just as our Jewish brothers and sisters in Pittsburgh were killed in the act of their worship, just as our Christian brothers and sisters in Charleston were killed as they gathered in their sacred space around our sacred scriptures.* It is **chilling**, and it is **sobering**, and it **more than crosses my mind** when I stand at **that altar** and **we are gathered here in worship.**

And this week, what sank in deeper, and deeper, and deeper is just how **insidious** and **globally connected this hate is**. This **gunman** was **methodically intentional** and **strategic** about *how to make this extreme act of violence go viral, making use of the internet and the media.* He was *inspired by those who have gone before him*, and he *sought to inspire the next wave that will come behind him.* The **gunman's manifesto** quoted others from **Europe to the United States** who are **perpetuating this hate-filled ideology.**

We hear the words **"white supremacist"** and **"white nationalist,"** but **Kathleen Belew**, a **University of Chicago historian** who studies this, noted last week that **this ideology transcends national boundaries**, which is why she argues for calling this **"white power"** rather than **"white nationalism."** She says, *"The nation in white nationalism is the Aryan nation, not the US or New Zealand."* One news article noted that **the gunman in Christchurch** made frequent reference to **"white genocide"** in his **manifesto**, *"writing of immigration as an 'assault on the European people' and adding, 'This is ethnic replacement. This is cultural replacement. This is racial replacement. This is WHITE GENOCIDE.'"* This is why those marching in the **Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017** chanted, *"Jews will not replace us."* The **Christchurch gunman** also quoted **"The White Genocide Manifesto"** penned by **David Lane in 1984 when he killed a Jewish radio host.** Lane wrote, *"We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children."*

**White power spans the globe**, and *at its heart is a desire to establish a white homeland, and to do that, you have to eradicate "the other."*

*And why am I spending sermon time on this? Because this is evil, and we have taken a vow in our baptism to persevere against it, but we can't persevere against it if we're not talking about, and trying to understand, it.* And frankly, as a **member of the dominant culture, who is**

descended from northern Europe, Germany to be specific, who is Christian, whose skin is white, *I have the luxury of turning a blind eye because I am not the “other” who will be targeted.*

And let’s be honest, **discussion of white anything is just hard going.** We have been taught to take our *whiteness* as so normative that *we don’t even know how to examine what whiteness, and the power that automatically accrues to it, even means,* and if we **DO** start to explore it, guilt and shame immediately hit us and stop us in our tracks. *It’s just easier not to talk about it.* This is way beyond what *this sermon* can tackle—but I am flagging that **THIS WORK IS OURS** to do. *My Jewish colleague and colleagues of color, with whom I and other pastors meet regularly, are begging us to lay this before our predominantly white congregations.*

*So, the first item to note today is this—what happened in Christchurch is evil, and the tentacles of this evil transcend national boundaries and reach across the globe.*

*People of faith have confronted such evil and oppression before.* God sees the suffering of his people. From Exodus 3 this morning: **Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”**

God sees this suffering, and God comes to Moses, and to you, and to me, and to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to say, *“I’m sending you to confront the evil powers that be, to bring my people out of Egypt, to bring them up to a good and broad land, to a land that sees “the other” as brother and sister, to a land where love is stronger than hate, to a land where we beat weapons designed to exact maximum casualties with chilling efficiency into plowshares and such violence is no more.”*

And we, like Moses, may reply, *“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” “Who am I that I should go, could go?”* God answers us, just as God did Moses, *“I will be with you.”* And then, God promises Moses a sign—*“When you’ve brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”* We go confront the evil, take on the suffering, let this misery touch us, and, we are promised that we **WILL** find our way forward to a place where we can worship without fear of our blood being mingled with our sacrifices.

And when Moses asks about how he is to answer the question, *“What is his name, this God who sent you?”* which is really just a way to press Moses on that most feared question, *“By what authority are you doing this?”—we always fear having our authority challenged—when Moses asks God how he is to answer the authority question, God replies, “Moses, you just tell them, ‘I AM WHO I AM,’ you tell them ‘I AM’ sent me to you. They won’t like that answer, but trust me, I AM the ground beneath your feet, I AM the ground of your very being,*

*and of BEING itself. ‘I AM’ is more than enough. You have me; you have all the authority you need.”*

*Is it going to get messy? You bet.* We will have to contend with the kind of voices that Jesus is answering in that passage from Luke this morning—this whole temptation to separate the world into “us” and “them.” This morning, Jesus obliterates that kind of thinking: “Do you think those Galileans, or those Muslims, who suffered in that way, murdered while at worship, do you think they were worse sinners than other Galileans, or what about those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, or those thousands killed when that cyclone ravaged Mozambique, do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in the area? Do you think that, somehow, those who have died in such tragic ways deserved what they got? No,” Jesus says, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. You can’t separate yourselves out from their tragedy, you can’t cut yourselves off from their suffering; you can’t place a wall of safety around yourselves. Do that, and you yourselves will be lost, no less than they.”

And then, Jesus told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

The *evil* that murders innocents at worship, the *evil* of thinking that they *actually* deserved to die, the *fig tree*, or maybe more accurately, *Isaiah’s oak of righteousness* that can COUNTER that kind of hate, *it’s not going to grow and produce the fruit of peace and love and non-violence if we don’t do the work.* It’s not enough to name these evils, we’ve got to get our hands in the soil, we’ve got to dig around in it, we’ve got to get our hands in the manure. Some translations prettify this and call it “fertilizer,” but trust me, the word in Greek is “dung,” and it stinks.

Learning about these strains of white power, that odor that turns our stomach is going to stay with us. We’ve got to dig around in this manure SO THAT we have the strength to know what kind of hate we’re up against, and SO THAT we can COUNTERACT it with the soil and nutrients of kinship, respect, common humanity, dignity, empathy, compassion, and fierce solidarity—all elements of that strongest of nutrients, LOVE. Then, this *fig tree* whose fruit is sweet, this *oak of righteousness* whose roots are deep and strong, then, *these trees can grow and bear the fruit they were meant to bear.*

I want to close with lifting up the witness of Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand. *From start to finish*, she has been an icon of what it looks like to *hear and engage the suffering of her people.* I do wonder, *where and when did she have her burning bush moment with God that prepared her for the unspeakable task that has been entrusted into her hands* this last week and a half. Her *statement*, right out of the gate, was powerful.

This is what she said **on the first day**: *“Clearly what has happened here is an extraordinary and unprecedented act of violence. Many of those who will have been directly affected by the shooting may be migrants to New Zealand, they may even be refugees here. They have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home—they are us. The person who has perpetuated this violence against us is not. They have no place in New Zealand. There is no place in New Zealand for such acts of extreme and unprecedented violence which it is clear this act was.”*

She claimed, *immediately*, kinship with immigrants, refugees, Muslims; she claimed kinship with “the other.” She went to meet the families of the dead wearing the traditional head covering required of women when meeting Muslims *showing intense respect*. She refused to name the gunman thereby **not taking the bait to unintentionally help him** in his task of perpetuating his ideology. And she **galvanized the government of New Zealand to ban all types of military style assault weapons, or any part to make a weapon function in that manner. It’s been 10 days.**

Jacinda Ardern heard the cries of her people, and she **answered the call to confront this evil ideology with power and grace and action**, and she is **inspiring people all across the globe to do the same**. She isn’t afraid to **dig deep** and to get her hands in the manure, trusting that **the sheer goodness of the people and country she loves and serves will grow exponentially**. And it seems to be doing just that.

I have just one more place where **we’re going to have dig even deeper**. In her initial statement, Jacinda Ardern said that *“the person who has perpetuated this violence against us is not [us].”* We won’t root out this *evil* if we can’t also understand that the person who has perpetuated this violence **IS us**.

The **gunman** is also a part of the human family—a *wounded, broken, hard-hearted, hate-filled part, but a part nonetheless*. Even while we stand firmly against the *evil* he stands for, somehow, in **OUR hearts**, we have to hold a space for him, *too*, or we, *just like those who thought the Galileans that Pilate murdered and those who perished when the tower of Siloam fell got what they deserved*, otherwise, we will be lost, too.

I am reminded here of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s words: **“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?”**

*I wish I could tie this sermon up in bow and call all these things done, but you and I both know, God is always going to be seeing the suffering of his people; God is also going to be in need of Moses’ to encounter, call, and send; God is always going to be needing people not to give up on the hard work of making the fruit of peace and beloved community grow; and God is always going to be needing people who aren’t afraid to dig deep and get their hands way into the manure.*

Sisters and brothers, this is where the rubber meets the road. We **vowed it in our baptism;** today, **will we live what we have vowed?**

*“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”*

In the **great I AM’s infinite mercy**, in **Jesus’ constant companionship**, in the **power of the Spirit**, *may we have the courage to answer this overwhelming call*, **“I WILL, WITH GOD’S HELP.”** Amen.

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