

January 10, 2021
Baptism of Our Lord (B)
United, Oak Park

Strong Words and Actions

I'm sure we have all heard it said that actions speak louder than words. This week we witnessed some truth to that in at least two different incidents—one national and one local.

This past Wednesday morning, when many people came together for what was billed as a “Save America” rally near the White House, the current president of the United States, along with several of his aids and associates, actually encouraged supporters *to fight* and to march on to the Capitol building. As troubling as that moment might have been, what happened later on in that day spoke louder yet when several supporters of the president violently entered the Capitol while the Electoral College vote from last November’s election was tallied. Several untruthful statements by the sitting president and his continued unwillingness to concede the election to the legitimate winner certainly encouraged an unruly mob of his supporters to cause chaos and violence in that iconic building, the likes of which probably have not been seen since the British military invaded it in 1814.

While the rhetoric coming from the president since last fall's election has been troubling enough, the actions taken on Wednesday of this past week were nothing short of horrifying, with elected officials and others who serve in the Capitol building on our behalf fearing for their own lives. The actions of that day will likely have lasting repercussions on our public life and institutions for quite some time.

Meanwhile—also this past Wednesday, but right here in Oak Park—a brick with a racial slur attached to it appears to have been thrown at the front door of the Live Cafe, notably where African American candidates for positions on the village board have met with people in the community. One of those candidates for the village board is someone who grew up in this congregation.

Though many of us like to think of Oak Park as a progressive community where people from many different backgrounds are welcome and have opportunities for leadership, clearly even this community can also be the location for a hate crime. We are no where near where we need to be on matters of race. There is plenty of work for us to do in making this a more just and livable village for all citizens.

Without a doubt, preachers in this community, across the country, and maybe even across the world today are trying to make sense of what has happened in recent days and to relate it to our faith. Though I must admit that my preparation for this morning took quite a different turn after Wednesday, I have come to find great relevance and power in the scripture passages that we had already been planning to read today. If there is any set of readings when powerful speech and actions come together, it is in what we have just heard.

When we read that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the heavens *tore open* and Jesus heard God's *voice* proclaiming, "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness" (CEB). I don't think the dramatic nature of the heavens being torn open can be emphasized too much. This was God entering the world in an especially powerful way. This was God proclaiming that what was about to happen in and through Jesus was of utmost significance to the world.

That proclamation also had to be of profound joy. Jesus had just received a strong blessing and commission from his heavenly father. It's the main event that sits at the beginning of what many people consider

to be the most ancient of gospel books. Jesus' baptism symbolizes what got the whole Christian enterprise going.

And baptism does a similar thing for each of us too. Just think of all the baptisms we ourselves have witnessed after someone is proclaimed a child of God, and the feeling we have as the newly baptized is held and celebrated right within our midst. It too is an occasion of profound joy. It also marks the beginning of a brand new life in service to God's mission in the world.

Speaking and acting have come together in other ways this morning as well. In the creation story from Genesis, when God *spoke* something into being it happened. " 'Let there be light.' And so light appeared" (CEB). And in Psalm 29, "The Lord's *voice* unleashes fiery flames...shakes the wilderness...[and] strips the forests bare..." (CEB).

What our scripture readings affirm today is that God's *voice* breaks into our world in dramatic and powerful ways. God's *voice* by itself creates a new reality that works God's goodness and blessing in the world.

Obviously our own voices can either amplify God's desires or try to thwart them, but we have a baptismal vocation to speak God's voice and to proclaim God's justice. During affirmation of baptism (confirmation), each affirmer is asked: "Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?"

Our baptismal identity then *propels us* to speak out for God's justice and peace and also to act in ways that promote those same things in the world. We act on our call to serve others in the manner of Jesus whenever we provide for hungry and homeless people. We strive for God's justice and peace whenever we challenge discriminatory laws or practices that deprive people of their human dignity. We strive for God's justice and peace whenever we stand up against hatred, and bigotry, and racism. We strive for God's justice and peace whenever we support leaders from poorly-represented communities whose voices have long been sidelined or marginalized.

That we have seen a better sense of God's justice coming into being in some corners of our world recently is a great thing for us to celebrate. When leadership is shared among people from a greater diversity of racial backgrounds it is a wonderful thing. When people who come from generations of poverty are also given opportunities to excel and to live to their full potential, that's also a wonderful thing.

We seem to be living in a world right now where many people are attuned to God's ways of justice and peace in the world, and where many old systems and structures that had denied people's rights are coming down. People who were actively denied the right to vote until the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965 also don't want to go back to the way it was before when people of color were regarded as anything less than full persons. And there's a reason why it is exciting for us to elect people who couldn't have been considered for positions of public leadership in a prior era. This is indeed a wonderful moment in time.

But then it also only stands to reason that many people who had benefitted from previous ways of doing things would resist what is coming into being now. Anyone who was privileged in some way before

—whether by their race, by their family’s wealth, or by an affluent community in which they were raised—might resent someone else from a different background now being able to share in some of those blessings.

But God’s voice doesn’t just tear open the heavens, it *tears us open too*, and re-orientes all people to abandon their self-centered ways and to walk in a more selfless direction that is akin to what Jesus did. God’s voice shatters trees and shakes wildernesses. God’s voice gives strength to people long marginalized and forgotten.

God also takes a cherished community meeting place right here in Oak Park—that experienced an act of hatred this past week—and raises up hundreds of people to come together in a peaceful vigil and proclaim through their *voices* that we can act together in unity and express love for our fellow human beings. And I am convinced that those *strong words* and those *strong actions* are what will truly live on.