

Saying Voldemort
Earth Sunday, April 21, 2024, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

“Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.”

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When reality becomes indistinguishable from fiction, I turn to fiction for wisdom.

Albus Dumbledore gives us that piece of wisdom – naming the demons is the first step to addressing our fear of them.

Years before J.K. Rowling wrote those words, Peter Stone, writer of the musical 1776, put Rhode Island’s Stephen Hopkins as the deciding vote on whether the Continental Congress should debate independence, and he gives a quote that I have lived by ever since I first heard it 38 years ago.

“Well, in all my years, I ain’t never heard, seen nor smelled an issue that was so dangerous it couldn’t be talked about. Hell yeah! I’m for debating anything. Rhode Island says yea!”

And that was the beginning of independence ... fearless fierce conversations.

Years before that, H.P. Lovecraft, right up there with Stephen King at writing suspense that will make you sleep with the light on for weeks wrote:

“The oldest and strongest emotion of humanity is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

And then there is Octavia Butler.

Octavia Butler didn’t just name that which we fear, she painted a vivid picture.

If you haven’t read Parable of the Sower, well, it’s probably about time. In fact, it might be the most important book to read for such a time as this.

Butler wrote Parable of the Sower in 1993. Listen to the world she describes.

Climate change is decimating the environment, with mass migration coming across the California border from Central and South America and Americans trying desperately to get north into Canada or anywhere with more temperate climates and fresh water.

The economy is falling apart. Income inequality and homelessness are rampant. Resources are scarce and people live in fear and isolation because nearly everyone owns a gun, which was bad enough until resources started getting scarce and now has become unmanageable.

Even more, a strongman has risen to power in the United States behind the catchphrase “Make America Great Again.”

Seriously, not making this up. Read the book.

The year that Butler’s 1993 novel was set in?

2024.

Someone once asked Butler how she imagined this world. She said that she just took America and the world as it was in 1993 and fast-forwarded 30 years if we didn’t do anything about the problems that were facing us.

30 years later if we didn’t face a future that was so unbelievable we preferred to believe it was impossible.

30 years later if we didn’t realize that fiction can become fact ... if we keep living in the past as the world that was becomes increasingly fictional.

Forty years ago, U2 sang in Sunday, Bloody Sunday

*And it’s true we are immune
When fact is fiction and TV reality
And today the millions cry
We eat and drink while tomorrow they die.
Sunday, Bloody Sunday.*

It’s a tale as old as time.

At every stage of human history, as dystopian futures emerged, those who still had the resources to maintain the illusion that they could be protected refused to say Voldemort ... as if denying the reality could somehow protect them from its effects.

Nero didn’t really fiddle while Rome burned, but it’s an apt analogy.

A better reality is our own Congress, which last year passed only 27 bills, despite holding a total of 724 votes at a time when homelessness in this country rose 12% last year and the top 1% of earners in the US earn about 40 times more than the bottom 90% and roughly 33 million U.S. workers earn less than \$10/hour, placing a family of four below the poverty line.,

And an even better reality is this morning's reading from the prophet Jeremiah.

The government of Judah had become indifferent to the needs of the most vulnerable of the people – and the Temple had become more concerned with its own financial health and survival than following the love commandment of God.

And so, Jeremiah stands at the Temple gate and says these words:

"Hear the word of the Holy One, all you of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Holy One. Thus says the Sovereign of heaven's vanguard, the God of Israel: Reform your ways and your doings and I shall dwell with you all in this place. Do not trust in them, these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Holy One, the temple of the Holy One, the temple of the Holy One.' For if you all truly reform your ways and your doings, if you all truly do what is just between one person and another, if you all do not oppress the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow, or pour out innocent blood in this place, and if after other gods you all do not go to your own harm, then I will dwell with you all in this place, in the land that I gave to your mothers and fathers from forever and to eternity."

Do not trust that just being the church is enough.

Do not trust that the most important thing is that your income and expense sheets balance.

Do not trust that your own economic sustainability means anything.

The Word of God that Jeremiah proclaimed at the Temple gates is that if we are not primarily concerned with the liberation of the immigrant, the orphan, the widow. If we are not primarily concerned with protecting those who are dying as Jeremiah says these very words. If we are not primarily concerned with following God's revolutionary word instead of following the economic wisdom of the world ... this isn't going to turn out the way we think it will.

Do not trust in them, these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Holy One, the temple of the Holy One, the temple of the Holy One."

And, in fact, Dr. Gafney was kind to us this morning cutting off the reading from Jeremiah where she did in her Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church. She could have gone to the verses that come next where Jeremiah says:

"Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and *then* come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations?' Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold. I. even I. have seen it," says the Lord.

Centuries later in an event not predicted by Jeremiah but spoken in the same vein, John the Baptist would say:

“And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’”

This is hard language.

It’s hard language because most of the time the church has taken on the prophetic mantle of God it has not been to stand up for the most vulnerable among us but to condemn them, substituting purity culture for the righteousness of God’s kingdom.

It’s especially hard for us to hear because at All Saints Church, we have built our whole identity around being on the right side of all these things ... and, frankly, condemning those who have been actively on the wrong side and feeling more than a bit superior to them. And I absolutely resemble that remark, too.

And yet, Jeremiah is speaking God’s truth to us. Not a truth of condemnation of who we are, but a truth of calling us to live more fully into who we are. A truth that is liberating if we can just say Voldemort and acknowledge the challenge ahead of us ... and trust that it is not the power of money, the power of privilege, the power of power that will save us, but the power of the love of God in Christ.

Eight years ago, when I was meeting with the dear, wonderful, faithful search committee that brought me here, among many other things, I was intentional about telling them these two:

The first is that if All Saints Church wanted a CEO, you should call someone else.

That wasn’t because I didn’t realize there were parts of this job that had to be about running a complex organization ... but because I believed the strength and promise of All Saints Church was not seeing ourselves as All Saints Inc ... but trusting that we are the Body of Christ given for the life of the world and the way of thinking and leading we need to live into that is different than what it takes to succeed as a CEO.

Now that is hard, because there are a lot of CEOs and people who have helped companies and institutions flourish sitting in this congregation. And that has been amazing, faithful, work. And it is more than just muscle memory, it is a deep conviction that what has been faithful and successful work in those areas is the definition of faithful and successful work here ... especially because we are living in the same economic realities.

And ... here is the difference. In the economic reality of American business, the primary goal is the survival and thriving of the institution, of the business. And I am not indifferent to that. I want All Saints to survive and thrive. And ... the word of God to Jeremiah is that the only way that will happen is not by following the wisdom of the world but by being worthy of survival and thriving by paradoxically not putting that at the center. To be worthy of survival and thriving by

putting the caring of the most vulnerable among us and the dismantling of the systems that oppress them at the center of our life and work.

To not measure our success or failure by the ABC's of Empire, "attendance, buildings and cash" but by how boldly we are living into those values we have named as our definition of the Christ living through us – Radical Inclusion, Courageous Justice, Joyful Spirituality and Ethical Stewardship.

Which brings me to the second thing I said to the search committee eight years ago,

I said, "In my seven years as Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis we got younger, more mission oriented, more diverse, more Christ-centered, healthier, smaller and poorer... and that I would take that combination again in a second."

I said that I believed that if you are going to live out the Gospel in bold ways – ways that challenge the status quo of racial capitalism, you will get smaller and poorer. I believe the poorer piece is probably inevitable because of generational demographics, but that the smaller piece will only be temporary because once you have a healthy core that is truly living out our values in bold ways, the community will grow ... and it will be especially attractive to those on the margins because it will be the good news that Jesus preached in the synagogue in Luke 4.

It is seven years later, and guess what ... we are younger, more mission oriented, more diverse, more Christ-centered, healthier, smaller and poorer.

And it is absolutely understandable that we are freaking out about the poorer piece.

It is understandable because the poorer piece cuts to the heart of what many of us have loved about All Saints ... the programs and staff we are able to have.

It is understandable because the poorer piece is about real jobs held by real people that we love ... that I love.

It is understandable because there is something in us that has been ingrained throughout our deeply faithful lives that especially if we are leaders in this congregation that our fiduciary responsibility to maintain financial health is the most important definition of faithfulness and we love this church so much we don't want to be the ones who let down on that on our watch.

And ... it is also understandable because fixing a struggling business is right in the wheelhouse of many of us, particularly those who have traditionally been and some of whom currently are in leadership here at All Saints Church. We have done this before and we know what levers to push to keep the customers happy, to keep the product coming and to keep the money flowing in.

And it is not only second nature for us to push those levers, it is not only what we experience as deep faithfulness to push those levers, it also makes us feel good to push those levers.

I've spoken before about Dr. Ron Heifetz, who is a professor at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. In his great book, Leadership Without Easy Answers, Heifetz distinguishes between technical problems and adaptive challenges.

Technical problems are where we know the problem and the solution is discoverable.

We love technical problems because fixing them makes us feel in control and powerful.

Adaptive challenges are the opposite.

Adaptive challenges are so paradigm shifting that not only do we not know the answers, we don't even know what questions we should be asking.

Heifetz found in a study across many, many cultures that because human beings have a value of feeling strong and in control, in the face of huge adaptive challenges we tend to deny them and instead focus our energies on technical solutions that in many cases don't address the problems at all ... but help preserve our feeling of strength and power.

As we are now halfway through April and don't yet have a 2024 budget, I wonder if that might be what is happening to us.

It's not that attendance, buildings and cash aren't important.

We want people to be involved in the life and ministry of All Saints Church.

We want to make sure the legacy of these buildings is preserved, especially after decades of neglect.

We want to have the resources to do incredible ministry.

And ... we are treating an adaptive challenge as a technical problem. As if we can just get more people in here ... or maybe get back some of the people who have left ... if we can just get the money flowing in here and hire more staff and produce more religious goods and services and sustain these beautiful buildings, we can return to the glory days of All Saints Church.

Except even though that logic and practice produced some transformational results, it's also what got us where we are today with \$10 million in deferred maintenance in our buildings and basically no endowment to help.

Except even though that logic and practice has been our formula for success in years past, and even though pushing those levers makes us feel powerful and good ... none of it addresses the reality that I believe we are terrified to name even though it is keeping us up nights.

A reality that the transfer of wealth from generation to generation that has allowed the economic sustainability logic of just bring in young people and as they grow their income they will sustain the church ... is no longer true. That the wealth of the Boomer Generation will completely pass over Gen X and when it hits Millennials and Gen Zers it is going to get soaked up by educational debt, consumer debt, medical debt, national debt, and the lack of savings that comes from being shut out of the housing market and having no access to retirement plans.

A reality that climate change has reached a point where even though we absolutely need to be doing everything we can to reverse it, we have already passed key markers that make it inevitable that we in Southern California are about to become the front door for one of the most massive migrations in human history as people whose resources we have already stolen flee across the border from the effects of the climate change we have largely caused.

A reality that even though the results of the national election in November matter greatly, 2025 is probably the least predictable year in all of our lifetime because either Trump will win and we will have the power of the state even more than it currently is trained against those who are most vulnerable ... or Biden will win and the protection of those most vulnerable among us will remain minimal at best and nearly 70 million people who are part of the most personally armed population in human history will be convinced that an election has been stolen from them for the second time in five years and are not going to just sit home and watch Sean Hannity.

2025 is the least predictable year in our lifetime. And in times of instability and unpredictability, those of us with resources historically have used those resources both to anesthetize ourselves from the uncomfortable realities of present and future and to build walls around us to try to protect ourselves from them.

And neither has ever, ever, ever worked.

And if you are shaking your head and think I've lost my mind ... maybe – frankly, for all of us, myself included, that might be the best case scenario. But I encourage you to ask anyone under 35 what they think about what I've just said and listen to their response.

And ... there is good news .

I'll bet by now you're ready for it. And I've got it. And it's really good news.

And it's from our Gospel reading this morning.

It's the 14th chapter of John and Jesus says: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."

That's the first piece of Good News. Jesus is promising us the only thing God ever promises us ... that we will never be alone.

The 23rd psalm sings “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.”

God and Jesus never promise to solve all our problems or make the hard stuff go away ... they always promise to be with us through the hard stuff. To never abandon us or leave us orphans. To always come with us.

And yet that’s not all, Jesus also gives us a roadmap ... and for this we need to look at the leadup to these words in John 14.

Jesus is with his disciples at the last supper and here is what he says before he says “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.”

In John’s Gospel, Jesus not only institutes the Last Supper, he takes the role of a servant and washes his disciples’ feet. Then he says:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone should know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will ask the Creator, and the Creator will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees her nor knows her. You know her, because she abides with you and she will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned.”

We can do it.

We can be the incarnation of the transformational love of Christ ... and Jesus promises us Christ will never leave us if we do.

And ... if we are to do this. If we are to be Christ’s church in bold and transformative ways, we have to say Voldemort. We have to not be afraid to have any conversation. We have to look around and recognize that Octavia Butler’s dystopia is closer to reality than we want to believe. And that love is the answer. The only answer. The only way.

When reality becomes indistinguishable from fiction, I turn to fiction for wisdom.

The main character in Parable of the Sower ... the Jeremiah of this world who can see the new tomorrow even though the world is heading in the opposite direction ... is Lauren.

Lauren was born with a syndrome that makes her feel extreme empathy. She feels everyone's pain. It's absolutely exhausting ... and yet feeling everyone's pain gives her the wisdom she needs because it is in the pain of those suffering the most that the wisdom for the future resides.

Facing this world, and having given up on all the structures of the world's power to help, including the church, Lauren says:

"God is Change, And in the end, God prevails. But meanwhile... Kindness eases Change. Love quiets fear. And a sweet and powerful Positive obsession Blunts pain, Diverts rage, And engages each of us In the greatest, The most intense Of our chosen struggles"

Voldemort is real. And I am not afraid. I'm done with "you know who" and "he who must not be named."

Voldemort is real and the healing power of God's love is more powerful ... if we have the courage to care more about the mission than the money. If we have the courage to care more about the most vulnerable among us than the institution we have supposedly built in their honor.

Voldemort is real. The future is uncertain. And the love of God is our birthright, our purpose and our legacy.

Bring it on.

Amen.