

Do Not Be Afraid

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, August 13, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [1 Kings 19:9-15a](#) and [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

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Before I get into my sermon, I need to say some things about what has transpired over the past 40 hours in Charlottesville, Virginia. As you know, a group of at least a thousand white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and Klu Klux Klanners gathered there, along with five to six thousand counter-protestors.¹ It did not take long for things to turn violent, but then the mere rallying of white nationalists is in and of itself violent for people of color. According to the LA Times, the violence started within the white supremacist rally.² The violence peaked when a car was driven at high speed into a crowd of counter-protestors, apparently on purpose by a white supremacist,³ killing one and injuring many others.

I suspect that the vast majority of the white supremacists gathered in Charlottesville consider themselves to be Christians. But “supremacy” is the precise opposite of Jesus’ message. Jesus calls us to love one another – even our enemies – and to place others’ needs before our own, even to die for one another. The idea of ‘supremacy’ is absurd to Jesus. Racism goes against everything that Jesus taught. It promotes hatred, not love; anger, not compassion; vengeance, not mercy. It is a sin.

“So,” as Father James Martin put it, “‘Christian white supremacist’ is an oxymoron. Every time you shout ‘White Power!’ you might as well be shouting ‘Crucify him!’ And any time you lift your hand in a Nazi salute, you might as well be lifting your hand to nail Jesus to the Cross. And lest you miss the point, your Savior is Jewish.”⁴

Now, I don’t think there are any who disagree with what I’ve said. There may be some who are uncomfortable with the tone or the framing, but I’d be very surprised if any of you disagree with the substance. So, why did I say it? Because I needed to. Week after week, I get up here in this pulpit to preach the gospel of Jesus and when something is happening in the world that violates the gospel, I need to say so. To be silent is insufficient.

¹ Connie Larkman, “Charlottesville state of emergency ends ‘Unite the Right’ rally,” *United Church of Christ*, http://www.ucc.org/news_charlottesville_state_of_emergency_ends_unite_the_right_rally_08122017 (posted and accessed 12 August 2017).

² Matt Pearce, Robert Armengol, David S. Cloud, “Three dead, dozens hurt after Virginia white nationalist rally is dispersed; Trump blames ‘many sides,’” *Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-charlottesville-white-nationalists-rally-20170812-story.html> (posted 12 August 2017; accessed 13 August 2017).

³ Michael Edison Hayden, Adam Kelsey, and Lucien Bruggeman, “Man charged with murder for allegedly plowing into crowd in Charlottesville following white nationalist rally,” *ABC News*, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/car-hits-crowd-protesters-white-nationalist-rally-virginia/story> (posted and accessed 12 August 2017).

⁴ James Martin, SJ, *Facebook* post <https://www.facebook.com/FrJamesMartin/posts/10154669492056496> (posted and accessed 12 August 2017).

White silence is violence. To be silent is to offer my consent. And I do not consent to racism.

The events of the week, and especially of the last day and a half have left me wondering what else to say to you. I usually have a good idea of where my sermon is going by Tuesday. I typically have the main points figured out by Wednesday or Thursday. All that changed for me yesterday as news from Charlottesville, Virginia – that had started showing up in the Twitter feed the night before – was reported on NPR and I started reading more online. Yesterday afternoon, I pushed the work I had done on my sermon aside and started over.

And it wasn't just Charlottesville. The news of the dangerous posturing of the President of the United States and the ruler of North Korea tilled the soils of my heart and left me feeling a low-grade anxiety. I can't help but wonder about how those of you here and throughout our country – throughout our world – who deal with chronic conditions of anxiety and/or depression and/or post-traumatic stress are coping. I pray that you are doing the self-care that you need and I hope that the rest of this sermon may even be a balm in some small way for you as writing it has been for me.

As I went back to the texts yesterday, I found some comfort in the reading from 1 Kings and the verses that come before it. Elijah is depressed. “Elijah has come to the wilderness to die, certain that he is the only faithful one left in Israel. His orchestration of the upstaging of Baal – when, quite against the odds, the fire of the Lord consumed Elijah's water-soaked altar – caught the attention of Queen Jezebel, never one to suffer humiliation gladly. Now he has a price on his head. Exhausted, despondent, and somewhat resentful over this turn of events, Elijah sits ‘under a solitary broom tree’ and [turns to God in prayer and] asks to die (1 Kings 19:4).”⁵

Talbot Davis calls Elijah's prayer “the worst prayer in the Bible.” “[Elijah's] trauma piles up, the weight becomes unbearable, and Elijah wants to end it all. And although it is the worst prayer in the Bible, I'm really glad it's here. Because I know some of you have prayed it. Or [maybe, even now,] you are praying it.”⁶ When hope is gone, when madness seems to surround you, when the pain is relentless, it can seem like there is only one prayer to pray, “*Take my life. Do it now. Instantly. Painlessly. Fix it, take it, do it. I'm tired of being responsible for it.*”⁷

That is certainly where Elijah was. But listen to God's response. “All at once an angel touched [Elijah] and said, ‘Get up and eat.’ [Elijah] looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again” (1 Kings 19:5b-6). “And in case you missed it the first time, the same thing happens in 19:7-8a: ‘The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched [Elijah]

⁵ Kari Jo Verhulst, “Recognizing God's Presence,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/recognizing-gods-presence-0> (accessed 12 August 2017).

⁶ Talbot Davis, “How God Answers the Worst Prayer in the Bible,” *Ministry Matters*, <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8345/how-god-answers-the-worst-prayer-in-the-bible> (posted 10 August 2017; accessed 12 August 2017).

⁷ *Ibid.*

and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” So he got up and ate and drank.’

“And the repetition is the key. The answer to this painfully large prayer is massively small: bread, water, and a bed. Elijah wants a snap answer, a quick fix, and God grants the start of a slow process – bread, water, bed. [It is] As if recovering hope can never be a matter of great leaps, but always involves small steps.”⁸

Davis points out that God puts a burden on Elijah. It’s not a big burden. It’s a manageable burden, but it’s on Elijah. “God sent the provision but Elijah has to act on it to receive it. It’s not like the [angel] put an IV line in and Elijah will receive nourishment whether he wants it or not. He had to act. He had to own. He wanted to be totally passive – wanted God to do something instantaneous for him. Either kill him or make him all better in a snap. But instead God gives a task, a massively small task: Get up and eat. I’m sending bread, water and a bed but you’ve gotta get up and take advantage of what I’m providing.”⁹

So, here’s my takeaway from this exchange (and I realize I haven’t gotten to the reading yet, but bear with me): God won’t do *for* you want God wants to do *with* you.

Well, Elijah does get up and eats, and wanders the hills until he gets to Mount Horeb. And he finds a cave there and spends the night. And the word of Yahweh comes to him saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah says (and I’m paraphrasing here), “I’ve been faithful, but look at what they’re trying to do to me. They’re trying to kill me!”

God does *not* say, “Dude, you were just asking *me* to kill you,” which I think is awfully nice of God. Instead, God says, “Time for an object lesson. Get out of the cave and stand on the mountain.” Then there is a mighty wind, and an earthquake, and great fire. Surely Elijah recognized these signs, just as Moses had when he was on the mountain. “But this time, God is not in any of them. God has changed languages – speaking now in the ‘sound of sheer silence.’”¹⁰

It is in the silence that Elijah realizes the presence of Yahweh. It is in that profound stillness that Elijah realizes he is in the presence of God. And he goes and stands at the entrance of the cave. The voice comes to him again: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

“I have been faithful, but the people of Israel have not. I really think I’m the only faithful one left, and they are coming to hunt me down.”

And God says, “You’re not done. I’ve got more for you to do. Get going.”

And here’s take away number 2: Even when we’re at our lowest, God has work for us to do.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Verhulst, *op. cit.*

If you were here last week, you'll remember that the reason Jesus went off into the wilderness was because King Herod had executed John the Baptist. The principalities and powers of his day was doing their best to silence God's truth and so they killed John. Jesus, another proclaimer of God's truth, knew he could be next and he went off to do a little self-care. He went off to pray. It didn't happen. The crowd followed him. He fed them. Jesus ordered the disciples to get in a boat and go away. Then he dispersed the crowd. And Jesus finally got some time to himself to pray.

The night falls and the boat is out there on the lake when a storm kicks up. Waves batter the boat and even the wind is against them.

Even the wind is against them. When things are bad, it really does seem like things can pile on.

In the midst of all this, Jesus comes to them, walking on the water. Laurel Dykstra notes that the disciples' fear and Jesus' response is striking in this passage. "Although the boat is battered by waves and wind, the disciples are not 'troubled' (*tarasso* in Greek) until they see Jesus (Matthew 14:26). Certainly they are afraid to see someone walking on water, but the only other place in Matthew this word appears is when Herod learns that Jesus is born (Matthew 2:3)."¹¹ It seems to me that Jesus showing up in turbulent times is not necessarily comforting. In fact, for those of us who would follow him – and even for those who oppose him – Jesus showing up can be upsetting, even troubling.

And then there's what Jesus does. Jesus doesn't respond to the troubled disciples by stilling the storm. Instead, he just says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (Matthew 14:27). Dykstra points out that this echoes what the Israelites are told when they are backed up against the Red Sea and the Egyptian army is closing in on them. "Do not be afraid. Stand firm," Moses tells them (Exodus 14:13).¹²

"Do not be afraid." These words are so common to the biblical narrative that we almost don't hear them. The Israelites are told, "Do not be afraid," as they are backed up against the sea. Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, and the shepherds in the fields are all told, "Do not be afraid" leading up to and at the birth of Jesus. In Luke's gospel, those words are part of Jesus' invitation to Peter to become a follower. In a couple chapters from where we are today in Matthew's gospel, Jesus will speak these words to the disciples who are with him at the Transfiguration. And at the resurrection, the first thing the angel tells the women who come to the tomb is, "Do not be afraid."

But of course I'm afraid, Jesus. Have you been listening to what Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump have been saying this past week? Have you heard the hate being spewed by the racist, neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klanners in Virginia this weekend? Of course I'm afraid.

But it's not just that, Jesus. I know that when you show up, you're going to lay claim to me and ask me to do something risky. Of course I'm afraid.

When Peter stepped out of the boat to walk toward you, of course he floundered – and not just because he took his eyes off you. He floundered because he became afraid.

¹¹ Laurel Dykstra, "Here Comes Trouble," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/here-comes-trouble?parent=51401> (accessed 12 August 2017).

¹² *Ibid.*

And, quite frankly, that fear was justified. “It’s a storm, for heaven’s sake, raging powerfully enough to sink the boat, let alone drown a single person. He has, in other words, perfectly good reason to be afraid.”¹³ And so do I and so do the rest of the people here today.

Of course we have reason to be afraid. “Whether it’s a fear of the return of illness, of the stability of a fragile relationship, of loneliness after loss, of not being accepted by those we esteem, of whether we’ll fare well in a new chapter in our lives,... of the direction of our country”¹⁴ – you name it, there is a lot in our lives that gives us reason to be afraid.

So, of course Jesus needs to tell us, “Do not be afraid.” Fear is debilitating. “It sneaks up on us, paralyzes us, and makes it difficult to move forward at all, let alone with confidence. Fear, in short, is one of the primary things that robs the children of God of the abundant life God intends for us ...”¹⁵ I agree with David Lose: When Jesus says to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” I think it’s more of a lament than a rebuke.

“In response to Peter’s fear, however, Jesus doesn’t simply urge him to [have] courage [nor does he] instruct Peter to keep his eyes on him. Rather, when Peter begins to sink, Jesus reaches out and *grabs* him, saving him from drowning and restoring him to his vocation as disciple. And so also with us! Jesus will not let us go. Jesus is with us. Jesus will not give up on us. Jesus will grab hold of us when we falter and restore us to where we can be of service.

“This the promise at the heart of this story, all of Matthew’s Gospel, and indeed of our faith: that God will never give up, that God is with us and for us, that God, in the end, will do what we cannot. And this promise is the one thing I know of that helps us cope with and transcend fear. Transcend, not defeat. Fear is a part of our lives, and we should take care that being fearful is not equated with faithlessness. Courage, after all, isn’t the absence of fear but the ability to take our stand and do what needs to be done even when we’re afraid.”¹⁶

So, in the face of the news, let me say this to you – and to me: Do not be afraid.

Amen.

¹³ David Lose, “Pentecost 10 A: Something More,” *...in the Meantime*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-10-a-something-more/> (posted 7 August 2017; accessed 12 August 2017).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*