

You ever go out in the woods and find those occasional stairs to nowhere? Usually stone or concrete, three or four steps high, starting at ground level or slightly buried, and rising to a spooky nothingness with infinite potential. It's the closest thing I've ever seen to Jacob's famous ladder. Those stairs mean something used to be there, probably a homestead consumed by the forest in the many ways forests consume such things. They were too heavy to move or too forgotten to care about, and they languish in the woods until someone notices them again. There's daffodils, too. Daffodils aren't native to the Americas. If you see them growing, they were almost always put there on purpose, even a long time ago. Maybe those buttery blossoms marked a property line, the edge of a garden, the borders of an old home's foundation. In the woods, they're just as clear an indicator that something was there as phantom stairs. Stairs and daffodils don't just tell you something used to be there. They tell you where the door probably was. They tell you whoever settled there arrived after the first European settlers. That the stairs and flowers are all that's left tell you what was there's been gone a long time. You can't say with certainty that that was a house or a general store or a church, but you can say it was something and something more specific than an unsolvable mystery in the woods. This is simple deduction. It's not flawless, but it's pretty good, and it's pretty basic.

Which is why I get so frustrated by the debates in our political world. Stay with me, here. We don't agree on initial facts, and if we can't agree on initial facts, we can't share deductions, and if we can't share deductions, I don't see how we come to shared conclusions. It's like walking into the woods, seeing stairs to nowhere and a line of daffodils and declaring that that means immigrants and trans people are killing democracy. As absurd as that sounds, it's about as logical a leap as the claims that came out last week labeling the political left as a global terrorism ring. In front of more than 60 nations, representatives of our country declared that the left represents "an encroaching darkness." One stated that "the left is fundamentally motivated by envy, by hatred, by jealousy. The leftist looks at what is beautiful and good and what is natural and is filled with envy and hatred." Another said, "When the leftist protests that we are violating his rights, understand that he is lying. ... We must stay the course and be completely unflinching in the pursuit of justice against these enemies of civilization."

The daffodils growing here present very different facts. There's little evidence substantiating the claim that left wing terrorism is on the rise or that it outpaces that from the right. The characterization of leftists and their motivations isn't just inaccurate, it's meant to discount both their positions and their actions. Next time you see a demonstration on the Village Green, watch. Watch and see how many people see those gathered for democracy and call them terrorists. The line of daffodils doesn't end there. In 2024, the president of the Heritage Foundation said, "the Second American Revolution will be bloodless if the left allows it to be." You understand that was a threat, right? Thursday, the Border Czar took it further, saying, "There's going to be more bloodshed unless (the Dems) shut their mouth."

There's more daffodils in these woods. There are currently 60,000 people held in concentration camps across the United States. Some of them are kids, and some of those kids've been in ICE custody for hundreds of days. The longest? 505 days. Detainees describe horrendous conditions including life-threatening medical neglect so bad that one man died from a toothache. A toothache! They're forced to live in filth, have squalid showers and toilets, go weeks without being let outside, and regularly have difficulty contacting attorneys. Guards raid their sleeping areas at night and beat detainees at random. There's more daffodils, still. In the Las Vegas airport, an elderly man who overstayed a visa was thrown to the ground and handcuffed by plain-clothes ICE officers. When a crowd gathered, they left with the man still on the ground, still handcuffed. Silly me, I

skipped a detail: he was waiting to board a flight to leave the country. The bouquet gets more gruesome. A contractor with ICE employed by the private prison group GEO shot a protestor in the back, which is somehow not the worst part. You see, GEO trades on the New York Stock Exchange, which means you, too, can make your fortune betting on ongoing systematic oppression. And even after all that, the two deaths since the last time I was in this pulpit, and all this information that came out over the past week, the president said that ICE is “doing a great job.” Those are facts. Don’t trust me to have the right of it. Go look at the daffodils yourself. When I look at those daffodils, I see a concerted effort by the US Government to inhibit the rights of immigrants and citizens in ways that are cruel, inhumane, and instill fear. I’m pretty sure there’s a word for actions meant to instill fear, I just can’t seem to put my finger on it.

Sometime last year, I encouraged y’all to decide what you would consider a bridge too far in this political world. What unfathomable line would you refuse to cross? I don’t know how many took me up on the suggestion, but maybe it’s time to do it again. If the children in federal custody weren’t it, if the public assassinations of immigrants weren’t it, if the public assassinations of citizens weren’t it, if threats against political opposition weren’t it, if nighttime beatings and death by toothache weren’t it, if the profit-generating soul-crushing machines weren’t it...what is? We need to get clear on what we believe. Theologically and politically, sure, but zoom out further. What do you believe about people? Do you believe everyone goes to heaven? How does that change how you treat people? Do you believe some go to hell? How does that change how you treat people? Do you believe the Bible has a claim on how you treat people? Have you read it? Do you think queer people truly represent an existential threat to Western Civilization? Do you think a father should be killed in front of his toddler by the government because he was the wrong color? And if you do, at what shade do you draw the line? It matters that you determine what you believe, or at least where the edges of your beliefs are, before someone else decides for you.

Look at those stained glass windows of Thomas and Elizabeth. We’ve enshrined them in our sacred space -- a man who took a king’s fortune and gave it to the poor and a woman who flouted the law to feed the hungry. Maybe those daffodils tell us something about who we are, that we’re not on the side of the powerful; we’re on the side of the ones the powerful despise. Our story returns again and again to the dangerous, faithful, hopeful place not behind history’s baton but between that baton and its target. That makes us vulnerable to batons, of course it does, but Christianity was never about taking a stand without taking a risk. It’s always been about standing firm in our claim that God favors the kind of people who end up on crosses over the kind that end up on thrones. I hope that future walkers in the woods find our daffodils blooming and deduce not envy nor hatred nor jealousy but love; not evil for the sake of profit but love; not cruelty masked in shallow justifications but love. I hope they never have to ask “how could they let that happen” because the stairway to a racially driven hell crumbled under our faith. I hope they’ll know that we never hesitated to stand up for those God told us to stand up for all those millenia ago. And I hope they’ll see what we’ve done and say, “Surely the Lord is in this place.”

In that psalm, we hear one of the great themes of scripture, that no matter where we go, we cannot get away from God. This is Good News, mostly. This is Good News so long as you want God around to see what you get up to. There is no fleeing from God’s presence, and I’m telling you, it matters that God is inescapable. It matters to those in cells, separated from parents, broken by misplaced anger, targeted for being born. It matters to those of us mystified by people who taught us to love our neighbors who now hate us for doing what we were taught. It matters on blood-stained streets, it matters in hidden faces, it matters in anger and truth and evidence for what cannot be seen. And it matters because God is where we are, and where God is, hope remains.