

Sermon for the First Sunday After the Epiphany: Baptism of Our Lord

The Rev. Brooks Cato

On the eve of the Trojan War, a priestess named Cassandra prophesied that the prince Paris would bring war to Troy if he took Helen as his own. She warned against the trap set by a horse full of soldiers, the death of her mother, the extended wanderings of the Odyssey, and several others' tragic fates. The problem was, thanks to the whims of the gods, Cassandra was cursed to always prophesy the truth but never be believed. Her warnings fell on dismissive ears. The same could be said about many of our prophets. Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Elijah, Amos, Micah, Zechariah, Uriah. The list goes on, but I'd like to keep going with the sermon. Now, sometimes the people listened to their prophets, but they met grizzly fates anyway -- like Paul or John the Baptist. The world has a hard time with prophets. Prophets make us uncomfortable. They seem alarmist. They challenge the way things are. They're often shrouded in mystique, like they've got access to some secret seer's magic that lets them peek beyond the veil, and that makes us nervous. They're also just spooky enough to slough off their warnings as ridiculous ravings of the mentally unwell. Society undercuts their insights, parodying prophets as sandwichboard-wearing bums shouting "the end is nigh" on city sidewalks.

Now, I don't want to discount the miraculous nature of 'em, but not all prophets are God's mouthpieces. Some simply know history and can recognize patterns. But even those secular prophets' warnings get discounted. Nevermind proven, time-tested reality. We're too invested in our national mythologies to listen. "It could never happen here," being one the most powerful, followed closely by "You're just paranoid," "It's a hoax," and "Why do you hate America?" as though warning against atrocities and wanting atrocities are the same thing. All that to say, modern Cassandras've been disregarded for at least the last decade (I know, it's been a lot longer). Those of us who've listened feel like we're losing our minds as predictions come to pass. At best, our protests are met with some saying these atrocities weren't what they wanted -- to which I say, if this isn't what you wanted, why didn't you listen to the prophets? Louder voices shout about who "deserves" to be on the receiving end of atrocities. Remember the poem "First They Came For?" I'm no prophet, but I have referenced it in at least four different sermons before today. "First They Came For" starts with atrocities that can be "justified" by those who would justify such things aimed at criminals, illegal immigrants, drug dealers. It may not be everyone, but enough people agree that the atrocities are excused.

But this kind of beast that thrives on meals made of bodies never gets its fill, and so when the first course ends and the beast remains hungry, the beast demands another source of sustenance. So, we scooch incrementally toward a new kind of person allegedly deserving new atrocities, like immigrants that might be here illegally, people that don't fit the mold of sexual preference or gender identity, Native Americans who just happen to get caught up in sweeps feasting on brown skin. Our prophets told us this would happen. Loudly. Repeatedly. Our prophets opened the Owner's Manual for this beast, called Project 2025, and showed the world exactly where the manual said these atrocities aren't just gonna happen but are part of the published and widely disseminated plan. But that was just paranoia, and those who supported the growling belly of that beast said the beast wasn't real, the Cassandras anti-American, and the people gullible. Then citizens got shoveled into its maw. Even immigrants at their naturalization ceremonies ready to take on their hard-earned American identity became awful sustenance for the beast. They may be in Alligator Alcatraz (which remains open). They may be in another country or in any number of detention centers across this country. Reports tell of abysmal conditions that 'd be considered torture were they done to enemy combatants. But imprisonment isn't all. Protestors, including high school students last week, are regularly teargassed. I want to pause on that for a second. We've seen teargas deployed so much that we're becoming numb to its usage. Tear gas is classified as a chemical

weapon and is banned from wartime use by the international Chemical Weapons Convention, but we use it regularly on our own people. Cassandras told us that would happen, too.

Renee Nicole Good was killed last Wednesday by an ICE agent. Videos from at least 6 different angles including from the shooter's own phone paint a damning picture contradicting the government's versions of events. The killer was not dragged. He walked away and found the time to swear at Good as her corpse sped into a parked car. Her final words to the shooter were, "it's fine, dude. I'm not mad at you." She waved for other vehicles to drive past her saying, "Go around, go around." Good was surrounded by officers telling her at the same time to stop moving, to quit blocking the road, to get out of the car, and to leave the scene. She was afraid, and for this she was killed. A federal agent executed a civilian, saying he was afraid, but the unarmed, untrained citizen was expected to comport herself coolly in the face of her own fear. That doesn't make any sense. And yet, it's the world so many Cassandras told us would come. In all the talk of her death, a storm of lies have attempted to justify her killing. She was a terrorist, she was an agitator, she was blocking the road. They called her "in the way," but they can't bring themselves to call her "human."

Good is not the first person killed by ICE. In the past year, ICE has been responsible for no fewer than 40 deaths. I have a list of them all in my pocket right now.¹ We were warned this would happen, we repeated the warning, and we were disregarded. Good was not the first to be killed by ICE, but she is the first white woman to be killed by ICE in this awful wave of atrocities. And look at how the nation's reacting. When it was brown people, especially brown men, there was some anger. But now that it's a white woman, the nation's fuming. We've known for a mighty long time that race is a deep issue in this country, and I'm not saying we shouldn't be angry about the death of Good. I'm saying we should've been this angry at every other death before hers. But we weren't because the hierarchical structure of race in America exists and holds great power over even those of us that like to think of ourselves as more aware. I'll admit it for myself. I should've been this angry before. Maybe I felt a degree of safety? Clearly, I haven't worked all the racial stuff out of my system, but y'all, I'm ready to cash in all the privilege I've got to stand up for other people because of the danger the color of their skin represents for them. And also, I'm more aware now of how the public execution of a white woman indicates a dissolution of the perceived safety the color of my own skin afforded me. In other words, if even a white mother is a potential target, then who's left that's still safe? "First They Came For" indeed.

Project 2025, brushed off by authoritarians as a partisan hoax, is now 51% complete. Prophets, preachers, academics, historians, social scientists, psychologists, journalists, doctors, researchers, authors, lawyers, Constitutional scholars, everyday people, and countless Cassandras across disciplines and areas of expertise scream the truth for all to hear, but too many still can't recognize the truth. This is a systemic problem that goes far beyond who's sitting in the big chair. Many act like these atrocities are an acceptable cost for freedom. There are as many rebuttals to that as there are Cassandras, but I'll leave it at this. If the cost of freedom means masked, armed, unidentified executioners can shoot me simply for trying to get out of a scary situation, that is no freedom.

Isaiah says God's servant won't kick the wounded while they're down and won't extinguish an already weak flame. God's servant will bring justice, give life, inspire hope, spread righteousness, and free prisoners rather than imprison more. Remember "you will know them by their fruits?" You'll know freedom that way, too, assuming Cassandra's warnings haven't been enough. When you get home today, please, do me this favor, all of you. I'll do it, too. Consider the beast that hungers for its next meal of the innocent. Consider Cassandra and her warnings, the countless reports of atrocity, the mythology of what should've made our nation great, the

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<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2026/1/9/2362232/40-civilians-dead-from-Trump-s-military-and-federal-deployments-targeting-immigrants-across-U-S>

words on the base of the Statue of Liberty, the inspirational victories and glaring flaws of our history, our scriptures, our neighbors taken from our sight, consider it all. And when you've considered it, pray. For God's sake, pray. America is not okay, y'all. We are not okay. We hold onto the hope that one day we will be, but right now, we are not okay. And if nothing is done, the beast will turn its maw on you.

I'll leave you with the terrifying last words of America's most recent "domestic terrorist:" "It's okay, dude. I'm not mad at you."