

## Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Normally, when I'm putting a sermon together, I try to answer that old homiletical question: "What does the Holy Spirit want the people of God to hear from these texts on this occasion?" It's a four-parter. It's gotta be what the Holy Spirit wants, not just what I want, which is tough to discern. The people of God -- that's you. These texts are the scriptures we just heard. And this occasion is today, plain and simple. Usually I try to do all four parts with varying degrees of success, but today's occasion is a little different, and today's occasion kinda outweighs these particular scripture readings. We'll get to why in a bit but for now, know I'm not ignoring scripture, but this is important enough to talk about now. So, if you want to hear more about what the scriptures we read in the service have to say, we'd love to have you back next week.

We've talked a lot about what's happening in the world and why it's wrong. But we haven't talked much about why some people think what's happening is right. Now, I'm not trying to make anyone look bad. This is what I was taught. It's not true for all Christians, but it is true for a particular corner of Christianity. Also, this overview is incomplete. There's not gonna be a test, but this sermon is a little complicated, so hold on tight. And to be clear, while I no longer endorse these, growing up, this is what I was taught.

- Number One: don't be a great man. Great men speak out, become a target, and get killed. A truly great man quietly follows Jesus, goes into his room to pray, and stays there. Model yourself after Atticus Finch but don't talk like Atticus Finch. This is what I was taught.
- Number Two: don't be a great man, part two. Great men inevitably face false accusations. Women are intent on bringing down great men. Sexual harassment accusations follow great men because they are great, not because they are guilty. This is what I was taught.
- Number Three: don't be a woman. If you are a woman, tough luck. Read the Bible for detailed instructions on how to be a good woman but only the parts that valorize subservience to men. Remember that because Jesus was a man, men are destined for leadership, power, and control. How you love your husband reflects how you love God, so watch your mouth. This is what I was taught.
- Number Four: the world is going to end any minute now. The Rapture will take some and leave some behind. The sign of the beast is a constant threat, and to fight back you must hold to the straight and very narrow theology of that one little church in one little mountain range in one little state in one big country. That church gets it right and everyone else will -- and this is very important -- *justly* face their comeuppance.

The world is going to end any minute now, Part Two. Don't worry about harming the environment. People've got dominion over the Earth, so people can and should do whatever they like with it. Not to would be to reject God's gift.

The world is going to end any minute now, Part Three. Jesus is coming back. Get the world ready by gathering up the Jewish diaspora and sending them all back to Jerusalem. The Bible says no one will know when that time is, but what it really means is no one will know other than that one little church in that one little mountain range. It will be rough, costly, may even mean the literal end of the Earth. But it's worth any cost because the end of this world brings about the next. This is what I was taught.

- Number Five: evil is immensely powerful. We teeter on a knife's edge between salvation and damnation. Humanity has outsized influence, mostly on the side of evil. We've got some goodness but not enough to make a real difference. That's up to God, but confusingly humanity is powerful enough to upset God's plan. If you're not on God's side, you're the enemy, maybe even a demon. This is what I was taught.

- Number Six: don't chase wealth, but being wealthy is a good thing. The Prosperity Gospel says if you're living right, God'll reward you financially. The poor have done something wrong and the rich have done something right to end up where they are. The richer someone is, the more #blessed they are by God. One can become wealthy through nefarious means, but that's usually not the case, especially if the wealthy person in question says they're not evil.
- Number Seven: Anyone "not from around here" probably is evil. Outsiders don't know that little mountain life, they don't know what those folks need or care about. They don't know their songs or even their instruments. They see dumb hillbillies and assume they can pull one over on 'em, so that little church's gotta be wise as serpents to stay ready.
- Number Eight: The government is evil. If their people are running the show, the government can still look evil as long as it targets those outsiders. And if the people running the show do something wrong, it's forgivable, nevermind if they change. That they claim to repent is a greater Christian witness than what they do. With them in power, the connection between their functional inerrancy and the power of the flag makes God and Country inseparable. This is what I was taught.
- Number Nine: foreigners work for the enemy, except for the nice foreigner next door who comes to your church. Because of them, you know goodness and conversion is possible even for heathens. But that does not transfer to foreigners you don't know. But you can't be racist; afterall, you love your neighbor.
- Number Ten: the Christian God of that one little church in that one little mountain range is the one, true God. If you're not in that club, you're either misled, twisted, potential converts, or just plain evil. People of other faiths are the worst: they're wrong, they know they're wrong, and they're stubborn in their wrongness. Keep in mind, "wrong" isn't as simple as getting a red mark on a cosmic pop quiz. It's about heaven and hell, salvation and damnation. Their damnation but yours, too. See, if you knowingly let someone go to hell, you're partly responsible, so you have to try to "help" them by telling them about Christianity. And if they don't convert, if they remain stubborn in their infidelity, they become a danger not just to you but to Christianity as a whole. And that kind of danger cannot be allowed to exist. That is what I was taught.

But this is what I've learned: all that's part of how we ended up with silence in the face of injustice, misogyny, a disregard for climate science, Zionism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, demonization of enemies, racism, jingoism, isolationism, idolatrous patriotism, and a holy war. Not all Christians see the world the same. I believe there're lots of ways to be faithful Christians, but I have a very hard time acknowledging the legitimacy of a corner of Christianity that distorts so much so blatantly and so often. Now, this surface-level, broad-brushed overview isn't meant to pat ourselves on the back. It's to make sense of how so many supposed Christians can not only justify but endorse what seems so obviously evil. When we talk about the people mischaracterizing Christianity for personal gain, we gotta understand that they don't always see hypocrisy where we do. They see deep, courageous faith in the face of true evil. Only in their story, we're the evil. This is what I've learned.

I bring all this up today not because I'm trying to ruin "Bring a Friend To Church Sunday." I'm not trying to be a downer. I'm bringing this up today because Christianity is deservedly maligned for being what so many people see it as right now. The Episcopal Church makes up somewhere around 2% of the population. It's no wonder so few know that there are other ways from what I was taught. And it's no wonder so many have such a dismal view of Christianity. If what I was taught is all they know, really, no wonder. I bring all this up today because over 200 US troops have complained that officers pitched the Definitely-Not-A-War in Iran using Christian language, and the Secretary of Definitely-Not-War referred to Armageddon and God's Plan. In spite of the many ways Christianity's been misused over the millennia, war is not how Jesus did things, and it's not how we're supposed to do things. What's being pitched as sacred and holy is a gross perversion of the path of Christ.

Jesus preached peace, stopped a violent disciple, healed an enemy, converted soldiers, condemned killing, embraced children.

This is what I've learned: war never was Christ's way. Even in the book of Revelation, Jesus wins at Armageddon through the "sword of his mouth," his tongue. He defeats evil using nothing more than his words. If you've ever read Revelation, and I know a lot of you have 'cause we read it together, you'll remember chapter upon chapter building up to the greatest battle, building the tension, showing just how strong the enemy is, and when Jesus shows up, it's all over in about two verses. Evil stands no chance, has no strength in the face of goodness, and that goodness is apparent in God and people alike. That's what the Christianity I grew up around can't understand, that is what I was taught.

But this is what I've learned: there is goodness in humanity and in all the various kinds of humanity; there is goodness in those who believe different, look different, love different. It's no evil to embrace the fullness of God's Creation, including the varieties of humankind. It's no evil to see God in the face of your neighbor. It's no evil to serve your neighbor. And it is no evil to strive for peace for your neighbor. It might even be sacred. That's Christianity. Not bombs. Not wealth. Not control. Just good ol' fashioned Christ.