

Today's collect's got an amazingly timely line: "Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul." Evil thoughts are assaulting souls on a daily basis, and God knows bodies the nation over are in dire need of defense. And if that passage from Luke is as prescient as it sounds, it won't be long before "bodies the nation over" begin to include "regular" people like so many of you and me.

I need to stop here and acknowledge something. The way the news's been spreading lately, as groups become out-groups and out-groups become criminalized, my own identity's being defined for me whether I like it or not. As I've been reading the news lately, I've watched as adversities hit other people from the safety of who and what I am not. At first it was criminals being targeted.¹ Well, I'm not a criminal, so I can read about criminals and bemoan the unfair treatment they receive. Then it was immigrants who came here without documentation.² Well, I'm not here illegally, so I can read about them and grow angry over their treatment. Then it was immigrants who are here legally.³ Well, I'm not an immigrant, so I can reach out to my immigrant friends and send my love. Then it was children who were born here.⁴ Well, I was born here, but my parents are citizens, and plus I'm not a child. Then it was trans people in Texas.⁵ Well, I'm not a trans person and, by the grace of God, I've never lived in Texas. Do you see what I'm getting at? It's not just that I'm not in those categories; it's that something's working on me from within that has not only identified myself as not being in those endangered groups, it's also identified those endangered groups as "not regular people." Y'all, that's an evil thought of my own implanted by the evils of our society that assaults my own soul. In other words, it's not great. So let me try that line again. If Jesus is right, it won't be long before "bodies the nation over in dire need of defense" begin to include "regular" people like so many of you and me. What does "regular" mean there? Native-born? Documented? Christian? White? Male?⁶ Unfortunately, "regular" is coming to mean all those things, and any exception to "regular" isn't just called "different," it's called "dangerous."⁷ Much as I try to land on the inclusive side of things, I'm aware of the power of propaganda to redefine even my most stubborn of brains -- evil thoughts assaulting souls.

But back to that Gospel. A story unfolds as some "regular" people tell Jesus about "the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices," an event that sounds strange to our ears and abhorrent to theirs. In case you aren't up on your 1st Century headlines, the story goes that Pilate got upset with some Gentile foreigners living in Galilee because they committed the bold crime of sticking to their belief that they "ought to call no man master." Their punishment was death, and to really drive the point home, Pilate had their blood mixed with the blood of sacred sacrifices to show just exactly who was the master there. But they weren't "regular" people. Jesus mentions a second headline, the tragic story of 18 apparently "regular" people killed when a tower collapsed. And then he asks the same question we all ask when bad things happen to "regular" people. Did they deserve to die? Did the 18 deserve to be crushed? For that matter, did the resistant Gentiles deserve to be sacrificed? And then he turns that old question on its head. No, it's not about whether or not they deserved it. It's about whether or not you think you don't. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered

¹ <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6370346351112>

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/protecting-the-american-people-against-invasion/>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/2025/03/11/mahmoud-khalil-green-card-deportation/>

⁴ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/us-citizen-child-recovering-brain-cancer-deported-mexico-undocumented-rcna196049>

⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/texas-bill-identify-transgender-state-felony-rcna195642>

⁶ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/doj-makes-case-trump-could-fire-all-female-agency-heads-people-over-40/ss-A1BqAtL?ocid=SNYDHP>

⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferecing/>

in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, but unless you repent, you will perish just like them.” In other words, Jesus says, “Change or die.”

I wanna switch gears and tell you about two headlines from the 21st Century. The first is about foreigners sacrificed to our system. The second is about a building collapse. On Friday morning, Time published an article titled, “What the Venezuelans Deported to El Salvador Experienced.”⁸ A quick caveat: vocabulary matters. There’s an error right there in the title that helps to normalize an enormous crime. “Deportation” is the forced repatriation of an immigrant; deportation means the government makes someone go back to their country of origin.^{9,10} Venezuelans can be deported to Venezuela. Salvadorans can be deported to El Salvador. But Venezuelans cannot be deported to El Salvador; that’s kidnapping. It doesn’t matter if they’re here illegally, if they’ve committed crimes, or if they’re gang members. They’ve been kidnapped by the government without criminal charges and sent to a prison on foreign soil in an egregious abuse of due process and the prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. That’s the truth hiding in that simple headline. And if you think, as a “regular” person, you are immune to egregious abuses of due process and the prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment, you might want to listen to Jesus. Change or die.

The author of that article witnessed 261 men removed from three planes in the middle of the night. They were met with rows of a heavily armed police and military presence who were told to “show them they are not in control.” Immediately upon arrival at the prison, they were beaten. After being thrown to the ground one man cried, “I’m not a gang member. I’m gay. I’m a barber.” Prison guards aggressively shaved their heads, stripped the men naked, and threw them into cells with 80 men crammed in each, where they had only steel planks for beds--no mattresses, no pillows, no blankets, no phones, not even a radio to catch snippets of news about their own capture. One Venezuelan mother in Caracas didn’t know where her son had been disappeared to until his face happened to appear on a news report about that prison.¹¹ As the author puts it, “it was exile to another world, a place so cold and far from home they may as well have been sent to space, nameless and forgotten. Holding my camera, it was as if I watched them become ghosts.” Do you think that because these Venezuelans suffer in this way they are worse sinners than “regular” people? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

The second headline comes from Serbia. Back in November, a train station in Serbia’s second largest city collapsed, killing 15.¹² Protestors pointed to growing government corruption as the cause and have been demonstrating in the streets for months. Those protests have grown considerably and included more than 300,000 people at their most recent peak. As one protestor put it, “We just want a country that works.”¹³ At the largest of those protests, one week ago yesterday, the enormous crowd gathered and began with 15 minutes of silence, one minute each to remember the victims of the collapse. In the middle of that moment of quiet and still reverence, an attack like something from the imagination of Jules Verne hit the crowd. It’s easy to find videos of this online; you can watch it for yourself.¹⁴ The international community thinks the government ambushed them with a sonic cannon.¹⁵ I didn’t know this was a thing. Maybe y’all did? It sounds made up, the sort of thing only conspiracy theorists and sci-fi writers talk about. But no, it’s very real. A sonic cannon’s attack isn’t just an

⁸ <https://time.com/7269604/el-salvador-photos-venezuelan-detainees/>

⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/20/americas/venezuela-el-salvador-us-migrant-deportations-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/News/A/Index?id=554>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz032xjyzyo>

¹² <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-roof-collapse-china-protests-3cfa282938b1ddec12c4795b9ecb3e95>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2g8v32q30o>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvY9sVUERV0>

¹⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-sonic-device-protest-vucic-e5a6f8c2aad995764c424a6f0d619887>

uncomfortably loud noise that's invisible, impossible to defend against, and travels at the speed of sound. It's so much worse. The effect's been described as feeling like being inside a microwave.

Protestors were struck (hopefully) temporarily deaf, their skin burned, their organs rumbled with the vibration. The full-body pain was so overwhelming that all their normal thought processes stopped, leaving their minds empty of all but a single, urgent message: "Get out of here. Now."¹⁶ In the video, the silent crowd stood still until the high-pitched whine ripped through the middle of the protestors, sending the crowd rushing to safety and terrified relief. It's a wonder no one was trampled. Some believe a deadly stampede was the miraculously-avoided goal. Do you think that because these Serbians suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all "regular" people? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

I know, I know. Our government isn't Venezuela or El Salvador or Serbia or Ancient Rome. We're Americans, "regular" people, safe...right? Sorry, but a sonic cannon was used in 2011 against Occupy Wall Street.¹⁷ A naturally-born 10-year old American citizen with brain cancer was expelled from the US to Mexico last month.¹⁸ And American vandals have been threatened with 20-years in a secretive prison hidden away in another country.¹⁹ We, so-called "regular" people, are being sacrificed on an altar that has yet to reveal what it truly serves, be it greed, power, cruelty, chaos. Whatever it's an altar to, it ain't an altar to God. Evil's assaulting all around us. If you haven't felt it or haven't seen it yet, brace yourself and thank the random chance of your birth that you're currently among the "regular" people; you may not be for long. In case Jesus didn't put it bluntly enough, I'll try my hand at a 21st Century rewording: do you think you're better than them? You're not. Change now or die like them.

Y'all, we've been piling manure up against this fig tree to see what kind of fruit it'll bear, and it's wild. It keeps producing rotten fruit, and we keep acting like if we get rid of enough not-so-"regular" people, it'll suddenly make honeycrisp apples. But it's not gonna. Attacks on the soul don't bear sweet fruit. They bear more and more rot, and right now, rot rules. This tree won't bring us life and it won't bring the oppressed relief. It will feed more anger, more resentment, more kidnapping, more military weapons used on civilians, more disappearances, and more tragedy. And so many will go back to its roots anyway and give it a little more time and a little more positive thinking in the hopes that it'll tire out, learn its lesson, and return to sanity and normalcy and compassion. My people, I love you, but that isn't going to happen. Rot will produce more rot and more hate and more violence until you yourself face the fate of the Galileans, the 18 in Siloam, the thousands in Serbia, the hundreds in El Salvador. Wake. Up. You thought you were better than them? You thought you were safe? You are not. And your chance to change may soon be too late. Change now, or ... well, you know the rest.

¹⁶ <https://www.reddit.com/r/woahdude/s/IHTE8t32RO>

¹⁷ https://www.cleveland.com/nation/2011/12/loudspeaker_or_weapon_sonic_bl.html

¹⁸ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/us-citizen-child-recovering-brain-cancer-deported-mexico-undocumented-rcna196049>

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/21/us/politics/trump-tesla-vandalism-prison.html>