

Making All Things New

A Sermon Preached by Pilar Millhollen for All Souls Bethlehem Church, November 4th, 2018

Readings: "A Little Bit of Joy," blog post, Rabbi Jeffrey Myers; Revelation to John, 21:1 – 6a

Last Saturday morning during a naming ceremony for a new baby at Shabbat services, a man who identified as a white nationalist walked into the Tree of Life synagogue with an automatic weapon, screaming, "I want to kill all the Jews," and opened fire. Located in Pittsburgh's historically Jewish neighborhood of Squirrel Hill, Tree of Life is a multi-generational progressive Jewish community comprised of medical professionals, students, Holocaust survivors, artists. When the police arrived on the scene after the shooter killed 11 people of God and wounded 6 others, 4 officers were wounded before overtaking him and sending him to Allegheny General Hospital. At the hospital, he continued to yell violent rhetoric about killing Jewish people while a Jewish doctor and a Jewish nurse tended to his wounds. The Jewish president of the hospital, Dr. Jeff Cohen, checked on the shooter to see how he was faring. When interviewed on CNN he said, "I looked at him and tried to understand why did he do this, and I have no answers." And then moments later, almost in answer to his own shock, he reflected, "It's time for leaders to lead. With all the chaos that's going on...[this man] listens to the noise, he hears the noise, and the noise was telling him his people were being slaughtered. He's completely confused...the words mean things, and the words are leading to people doing things like this; and I find it appalling."

Dr. Cohen's instincts are valid. Repetitive rhetoric matters. The Atlantic Monthly published an article right after the attack exploring French Jewish communities' horror and the vigils they've held in solidarity with our friends in Pittsburgh; because between 2015 and 2017, France has lost 239 people to anti-Jewish attacks. Journalist Rachel Donadio reported the shock and horror that French Jews felt at this recent crime in Pittsburgh, which is reported as the worst attack in American Jewish history. "I had so many American friends telling me, 'It'll never happen here,' in America," Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur said of the attacks in France, getting at the crux of Donadio's article – that while Europe has always been seen as a precarious place for Jewish residents to live, particularly given the history in Germany, the United States has been seen as a kind of Balm in Gilead where Jews could live without fear. What shocked me about this article is that it that this has never exactly been true. While Jewish immigrants never experienced the kind of genocide that Europe saw

during World War II, anti-Jewish hate speech is nothing new to America. From Constantine to Shakespeare, we are left a legacy of deep religious hatred combined with an underlying ethnic bias. Did you know that the highest number of hate crimes every year, which have risen in recent years, is attributed to anti-Jewish bigotry? According to FBI reports, even now anti-semitic (which includes middle eastern ethnicities such as Arab) but specifically anti-Jewish attacks outweigh the number of hate crimes against LGBTQ individuals, women, and people of color. It surprised me when I learned this a few months ago while doing research, but the fact that it's surprising to all of you too is important.

In light of the tragedy of last Saturday's attack, I've been reflecting a LOT on the significance of words. As a country that prides itself to a fault on our freedom of speech, we certainly have lost a sense of boundary between what defines free speech and what becomes hate speech. While many defend the former as a sort of umbrella which must grudgingly include the latter, the events last week in Pittsburgh follow a long line of occurrences of cyber-bullying, physical and sexual assault, and murder which have been on the rise since, not coincidentally, right before the 2016 presidential election. It's no coincidence because whether we want it or not, we are invariably affected on a conscious and unconscious level by words that are spoken to us and about us. Language that is repeated and disseminated on a mass level has an embodied effect upon us all. Meaning, and intent, all dissolve behind the wrong choice of words – and speech that is carelessly tossed about by people we view as leaders has a profound effect on the psyches of even the most conscientious people. Language is our primary source of communication – it becomes our chief mode of communicating once our brains are developed beyond the initial stages of infancy. Through it we form our identities, expressing our needs and desires, creating and sustaining relationship and deepening our experience of being alive. It is how we process that which cannot even be contained in language – from the sense of the ineffable to the reality of suffering, to the magnitude of the universe and the mystery of existence itself – which shapes and anchors our religious traditions and how we locate ourselves within the great mystery of life.

So when we hear words spoken over and over, words that plant seeds of fear and panic, they have an embodied effect upon the hearer. It takes a concerted effort to resist the imprint the words have upon us, whether they are directed at us and about us, or at and

about others. IKEA recently conducted a simplistic experiment to explore the effects of bullying in schools by placing two identical plants near each other, given identical amounts of food, water, and light. One plant had a sign that encouraged students passing it by to provide it with compliments. The other had a sign that asked students to bully it. And indeed the results were profound. After 30 days of the experiment, the comments – which were fed to the plants through a speakers rigged into each enclosure surrounding the plants so that no one could physically alter their appearances – seemed to have produced a physical effect. The complimented plant was strong and thriving, its leaves crisp and alert. The bullied plant, though still green, was wilted and withered. And while even IKEA admits that it wasn't the most scientific of experiments, its results are similar to other studies done with molecular changes in water and vegetables exposed to various rhetoric. If a vegetable withers under harmful words, how much greater an impact must we feel as humans? And though there have not been enough scientific studies exploring just how strong the influence of hate speech is upon individuals and nations, it's difficult to deny a direct correlation between hateful rhetoric and hateful acts. Jim Wallis of the evangelical justice magazine Sojourners responded this week that, "If it weren't for the bigoted and hateful words of presidential political rhetoric with its anti-immigrant and refugee attacks; the 11 Jews [and two black Americans killed in a grocery store after an attack on a black church failed] might still be with us and their families. When the President of the United States now proudly calls himself a 'nationalist,' in the midst of such hate and violence; the white nationalists, supremacists, and anti-Semites do feel supported and emboldened."

In such a context, it's a holy challenge to approach the extreme language that is found in the Revelation to John. I've been waiting for a chance to tackle this fierce text, commonly called the Book of Revelation. It's the last book in the Biblical canon, and not just in order, but for many, in significance. In fact, it barely made it into canon because so many church fathers objected to its extreme apocalyptic narrative and its unwavering critique of Rome. End-times fundamentalists love it; progressive Presbyterians ignore it; Unitarians theatricalize it. It's too easy to read Revelation as sort of a holy horror story – but in the context in which John of Patmos wrote it, the imagery goes from the delirious ravings of a lunatic mind to a kind of Greek tragedy of epic proportions. While he speaks of beasts rising out of the sea, a dragon that consumes and destroys everything in its path, and heavenly

warriors fighting against earthly principalities, it is easy to miss that John was not predicting the eradication of the earth and every living thing along with it. Rather he was depicting a universal battle between opposing forces that were coming to a head: the cruelty and pain of the war economy, the commodification of human beings, the excessive focus on acquisition of goods, and the ensuing ravishing of the earth's resources. All of this, under Rome, was in direct opposition to Jewish values and particularly the new gospel of Jesus Christ: right relation first, everything else second. No poverty, no commodification, no worshipping of material things, and thus no pain caused by *human cruelty*. John, whom modern scholars agree was unlikely to be the apostle John, was believed to have been exiled by the Roman government to imprisonment on the island of Patmos, perhaps for his anti-imperial speech. What's interesting is that the visions that John describes are wildly violent and have often been read as a proof text that we need not worry about the war and death and injustice that humanity wreaks upon itself, because God will eventually swoop down and destroy everything to create something new. Well, that's nihilism. When read alongside the words of Jesus, whom the very Jewish John clearly sees as the new emergent leader of the world – his message echoes Jesus' odd sense of time outside of time: that if the Kingdom, or Kin-dom, of God is at hand, is now, is at our fingertips, then heaven is coming at us whether we like it or not. Not only is it coming at us, it's been coming at us all along. The problem is, are we ready for it? John's visions suggest a sense that heaven and earth are continuously colliding but Rome is preventing this from happening. Revelation's ensuing violence between the various heavenly beings and the strange beasts is not an offensive attack, but appears to be a defensive response to imperial ethics clashing and crashing in a holy battle against the incoming realm of God. The "New Jerusalem" then becomes a kind of fusion of heaven and earth, where God shifts God's dwelling place from outside of creation, alienated from creation, separated after the fall in Genesis – to right back where it belongs – in the center of creation. The new heaven and the new earth, rather than a replacement of a creation destroyed, becomes a revision. A restoration to the garden, where God's dwelling place began, with Adam and Eve. *See, the home of God is among mortals, John proclaims, he will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them.* Because that's where God had been trying to dwell all along, but kept getting pushed out. Pushed out by hierarchies of absolute rule that placed a

monetary value upon both material goods and human beings, where common decency was reserved for 'citizens' but the occupied could be torn apart in stadiums for sport or punished for crimes by crucifixion, where conquering was slaughtering, famine, pestilence and ecological devastation. With that kind of earth, no wonder God could find no room. But John saw something different. He saw the rumblings of a new heaven and a new earth coming at them in a way that could not be suppressed, in spite of a death-dealing government – that could not be destroyed, in spite of the profound destruction of an empire of hate. That could not be destroyed, no matter what narrative was being told by the powerful. He dared to see the possibility of every tear wiped away, of mourning and crying and pain ceasing to exist, because that which caused it would cease to exist. It couldn't in the face of a love that burst forth from God's self, a love so powerful that every word spoken and every action taken could only be shaped by the creative goodness of such a love. "See," God finally says, after wiping every tear from every eye, "I am making all things new."

The vision isn't way off in the future nor is it lost in the past. It's crashing into us every second of every day – but it's easy to miss in the face of the epic battle between fear and love. It crashed into the face of the shooter when his Jewish physicians and nurses stepped up to heal him. It crashed into the Kavanaugh hearings when women AND men stood on the capitol steps and refused to be silenced. It crashed into the gathering hosted by Jeff Sessions for religious freedom when two clergy – one white, one black – interrupted Sessions to remind him of Jesus' words: "for I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me; sick and in was in prison, and you did not visit me." It crashes into the lives of us all when the Poor People's Campaign moves legislation for minimum wage and the Southern Poverty Law Center frees incarcerated persons, and in the Movement for Black Lives. It crashes into us, directly, in the many faith groups, including all of you, that have risen up to defend the human dignity and fundamental rights of immigrants who deserve the same things that we all deserve. It continues to crash loudly through the persistent and sustained work by faith communities and grassroots organizers who will not rest until every thing that destroys is transformed to a thing that creates. *They will be his peoples and God himself will be with them... see, I am making all things new.* See, you are making all things new. *We* are making

all things new: from war to reconciliation, from devastation to restoration, from
destruction to abundance. Keep it coming. Till we can say, behold – the New Jerusalem.