

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered Down

Tuesday, November 3, 2020

“Days of Rage” and People of Hope

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. —James 1:1-20

“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. —Ephesians 4:26-27 (Psalm 4:4)

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. —John 10:10

In these months of COVID frustration reports of riots and the destructions of statues have become common, and I have become aware of a new title being attached to these orgies of violence: “Days of Rage.” On Columbus Day I read of statues of Teddy Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln being destroyed during an “Indigenous Peoples Day of Rage.” Martin Luther King affirmed that every riot is a statement of despair. Apparently there remain those who seek to dignify hopelessness with an avant-garde sounding title. How are we to answer this trend of anger and violence? It is reasonable to call for better policing and riot control, but beyond these matters of law enforcement, how are we to respond?

James offers a great start in our response to this anger—listen! While one does not want to dignify those who foment violence, we still do well to listen and watch carefully to discover the real problems which may lie at the root of the matter. Poverty is real and soul crushing. Prisons are overcrowded and sentencing policies are much in need of review. The difficult work of policing and law enforcement policy is always worthy of reconsideration. Our mental health care system is worse than inadequate and our educational system is not in synch with our job market. Native Americans continue to suffer. These are all valid, crying needs which receive far too little attention from our governing bodies. Let us listen, and let our hearts be broken.

Just as we need to listen, we must also denounce the anger and violence, and here again we find wisdom from James who warns against the damage which anger and rage can perpetuate. *Man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.* We may speak of anger as being understandable, but it is still toxic and anger running rampant is not to be tolerated. So much of this anger comes from a culture of grievance which has been simmering for years on our college campuses. Injustices of former days are cataloged and treasured, long after the perpetrators are dead and gone. A sense of grievance turns to a bitterness which cannot see clearly or look

forward to a positive outcome. I am reminded of my father's frustration with his labor union and their mindset which would hold on to injustices of eighty years ago as if they were still happening today. Big labor in America's heavy industries became so caught up in cherishing past wrongs and perpetuating grievance that it could not deal creatively and realistically with the present world and markets, and we know what happened to our country's heavy industries. This is not to absolve management of their sins, nor is it to say that workers do not deserve good representation! What they do need is leadership with a positive present and future oriented mindset. What is needed is hope.

Rage, riots and a culture of grievance are a dead end, and the great heartbreak in all of the recent tumult and destruction is that it is completely counterproductive. A riot has never helped a neighborhood or a city. Jesus tells us that the author of riots *comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*. In the Ephesian letter Paul warns against anger creating *a foothold for the devil*. Excusing or attempting to justify violence is a path in the wrong direction.

What I find tragically absent from the scene in these tense days is a call to deliberate on real positive approaches to these problems. Do the leaders of these riots even care about positive responses, or are they so caught up in their own sense of revenge that they cannot see? I am not one to look to the government for every solution, but we are dealing with so many *governmental* responsibilities which are crying to be re-evaluated. How sad that in these months and even over the election season there has been so little mention of investigative commissions and reviews being made of public policy for law enforcement, prisons, mental health care, education and Native Americans. A few months ago, I was heartened to hear of the administration sending a prison reform proposal to Congress, though I have heard nothing of it since! Perhaps it is time to write to our Congress people. Certainly, today is the day to vote for forward looking leaders who care and will respond.

As a people of hope and grace, may these "Days of Rage" not take us off of our proper grounding. Let us listen and care, let us pray, and let us seek, not magic answers, but a positive response to the hurting which surrounds us.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Strengthen us, O God, to relieve the oppressed, to hear the groans of poor prisoners, to reform the abuses of all professions; that many be made not poor to make a few rich; for Jesus Christ's sake. —Oliver Cromwell, 1599 - 1658