



That was then...this is now
5 december 2016

THAT WAS THEN

I have been a gospel preacher and teacher for some thirty years. As I embarked upon my ministry all those years ago, I made a very conscious decision. In my preaching and teaching, I would channel the apostle Paul, and determine “not to know any thing... save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”¹ I would not confront the unrighteousness of man, either great or small. I would not focus on what we are, or what we should or shouldn’t do or be. Rather, I would focus on *Him* and *His* righteousness.

I have largely been true to this commitment.² I can honestly say, as the Psalmist said,

“I have preached righteousness in the great congregation:

lo, I have not refrained my lips,

O LORD, thou knowest.

I have not hid *thy righteousness* within my heart;

I have declared *thy* faithfulness and *thy* salvation:

I have not concealed *thy* lovingkindness

and *thy* truth³ from the great congregation”⁴

¹ 1 Corinthians 2.²

² I have, for the most part, maintained the same focus on the pages of my website.

³ Read, “the truth about you.”

⁴ Psalm 40.⁹⁻¹⁰. My emphasis added

I made this ministerial decision for several reasons.

First, and most importantly, upon encountering Jesus, I found his beauty and grandeur to far, far surpass the beauty and grandeur of anyone or anything I had ever witnessed. Now, after many years of life experience and meeting many, many people, the distance between Him and others, to my eyes, has only increased. No one and no thing stirs by soul, fills me with hope, and gladdens my heart as he does. I could now, as I have done in the past, go on and on, waxing eloquent on His unsurpassable greatness and goodness. For now, I'll just let the Psalmist's witness stand alone,

“His name alone is excellent.”⁵

Even as I say and write this, I do not do Him justice. I still say too little. It would, as the inspiring hymn of Charles Wesley declares, require “a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise.”⁶

And then, when I consider that He entered so willingly, even anxiously and happily, into my very, very flawed life; when I consider that He removed the hateful and vile cup of the wrath of God from my trembling hand in order to, Himself, drink it up... well, I “scarce can take it in.”⁷ I am simply “confused at the grace that so fully he proffers me.”⁸

Well, perhaps you understand to some degree why I made the decision all those years ago to speak only of Him and *His* righteousness. I deem it to be the noblest of vocations to witness of Him. I am extremely grateful to have been so privileged as to do so.

There was a second reason behind my decision. As a young man, a young husband, and a young father, I faithfully attended church services every week, hungering after righteousness. Distressingly, I would attend, sometimes week after week after week, without ever hearing the name of Jesus uttered outside of the formulaic language of prayer (it has gotten marginally better over time). It seemed that He was only permitted to lurk about our services,

⁵ Psalm 148.¹³

⁶ “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”

⁷ “How Great Thou Art”

⁸ “I Stand All Amazed”

never actually invited to appear.

“What on earth could you possibly talk about if not him?” you ask. Ourselves, mostly. We seemed, to me, to be obsessed with ourselves. All we seemed able to talk about is who *we* are. What *we* should and should not do and be. Who *we* ought to be.

In our church, we sing a hymn, “If You Could Hie to Kolob.” In that hymn we speak over and over again of those things which “have no end.” Well, it seemed to me that “there was no end” to our narcissism (Even as we speak highmindedly, and often self-righteously, of “obeying God” and “serving others,” we cannot help but remind the listener that they will surely be blessed. We must, it seems, always be assured that there is something in it for us).

So, I made my decision: I would act as a kind of counterbalance. I would be imbalanced in the opposite direction of the church’s imbalance. As there seemed no end to their speaking of themselves, so there would be no end to my speaking of Him. Perhaps, taken together, we could achieve a sort of equilibrium. If such a decision was hubris, Lord, forgive me.

There was yet a third reason for my decision. It was only slightly less reactionary than the second. You see in the midst of the narcissism, the saints by whom I was surrounded, seemed in near constant anxiety, uncertainty, suspense, and guilt concerning their “state and standing with God.”

Creedence Clear Water Revival once asked in one of their hits, “How much should we give?” The answered, “More, more, more.”⁹ The Mormon god can seem a demanding tyrant, who simply is never satisfied with the efforts of his subjects. The saints could and would only be saved after doing all they could do. But, of course, they could never do enough. Their perfectionist fixation often wrought contradictory depression and debilitation, and/or legalistic self-righteousness—the former more common among females, the latter among males; but both the result of spiritual insecurity.

So, I decided, I would not be yet another voice telling them to do and be “more, more, more.” I would “comfort the afflicted” rather than “afflict the comfortable.” I would preach the good news, rather than what so many, it seemed, took to be bad news.

⁹ “Fortunate Son”

Now, there was and is plenty of improvement to be had, to be sure. There is plenty of sin to be confronted. Additionally, there are many who are self-righteously comfortable who could, maybe, use a dose of affliction. I have not been blind to this reality. God does wish to sanctify His people. But, to my way of thinking, the church too often sees the dangers of “false security,” and rails against it, but ignores the equally dangerous place that I call “false insecurity.” I chose to tackle the latter evil rather than the first.

Finally, in making my selection of Christ as my focus, rather than ourselves, I believed and hoped that my witness of Him would fill my students and audiences with a hunger for Him. I hoped that it would contribute in some small way to their engaging in a more intense and productive inquiry after Him. I hoped that through their inquiry, they would encounter Him. I hoped that in encountering Him, they would see the kind of being He is. I hoped that in seeing the kind of being He is, they would be inspired to seek to follow Him, seek to be like Him without compulsory means.

I hoped, too, that, as He ministered to them as only He can do, they would understand what it means to minister and what it means to be “at-one.” I hoped that they would understand His desire that they minister to and be at-one with others as he did and was with them. In particular, I hoped that as they experienced His open and willing mercy, forgiveness, generosity, acceptance, and at-one-ment, all flowing from his own disposition, they would act in kind toward the flawed beings around them.

In short, by these means—by focusing on *Him* and *His* righteousness and goodness rather than on our unrighteousness and our badness—justification and sanctification would enter the lives of those whom I taught and to whom I preached.

Now, if I am completely honest, there is another, perhaps less honorable reason that I have been so single minded: cowardice.

I am, as Paul confesses for himself, “chief” amongst sinners.¹⁰ How does one with a beam in their own eye, address the mote that is in another’s? I have marveled more times than I can count at the chutzpa of church leaders and members alike who speak of sin and the sinner as if they did not, themselves, feed continually and continuously from the same filthy trough; as

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 1.¹⁵

if they were not members of the same notorious club!

“There is none righteous, no not one.”

“There is none that doeth good.”¹¹

So, fearful of being a hypocrite, I remained, more often than not, silent about the ever-present sin that seeps from our every pore. It may be, I suspected, that someone needed to say something once in a while. But I chose to have it not be me.

There was another kind of fear that kept me from naming the sin that is in and among us. I was afraid that my audience would hate and reject me.

“The guilty,” laments Nephi, “taketh the truth to be hard.”¹² This means that since “none is righteous, no, not one,” and with the saints’ mega-guilt complex firmly entrenched, one was bound to pain and/or irritate just about everyone if one began naming the sin too clearly and consistently. Jeremiah lamented the fact that he was “a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth”¹³ for his near single-minded focus on Israel’s sins. I did not want to be so named.

With such fears rumbling about, I convinced myself that by speaking only of Him, I could draw others to Him. He would show unto them their weakness much more effectively and compassionately than I could. This revelation, granted in the light of the Savior, would cleanse the sin without my having to name it.

On those rare occasions when I did venture into those dangerous waters of addressing the sins that are in and among us, I did so ever so gingerly. After carefully dipping one toe into the water, I very, very quickly withdrew it. I usually spoke in parables so as to leave myself an escape route.

But, that was then.

¹¹ See Psalm 14.¹ and Romans 3.¹⁰

¹² 1 Nephi 16.²

¹³ Jeremiah 15.¹⁰

All of that is by way of introduction. If, in the course of my “confession,” you detected a “HOWEVER” coming, you were prescient. A new world has been thrust upon me.

There are moments in all of our lives when we come to a crossroads. What we decide in those moments shapes the immediate, and sometimes the distant future. I stood at a crossroads all those years ago, and made a decision concerning the ministerial focus I would adopt. I have recently stood at another crossroads.

The title to this homily—A Post-2016 Election Homily—reveals something concerning the nature of that latest crossroads, and represents the impetus for adding this page to my website.

In the months leading up to the U.S. general election, and then in the weeks following, it became undeniably clear that something had gone terribly wrong.¹⁴ An unruly mob, with a self-styled “conservative” bent, had rallied around a vile and vulgar man. Even worse, and much to my horror, I watched sizable portions of professed Christians, predominately white, join the mob to promote and then vote for “that man.” It seemed obvious to me that American Christians of all stripes had been ill-served by those who were called to be “watchmen on the tower.”¹⁵ More pointedly, *I* had ill-serve those whom I had taught and to whom I had preached. We, nay *I* had left them defenseless. I had not taught and preached in such a way as to assist them in discerning the evil that lurked in “that vile man.” I had left them prey to his blasphemy.

While one may have low expectations of “Babylon” and its ability to perceive, we expect more from those who profess to be Christian.

So, the 2016 election has been a veritable cornucopia of distressing revelations—I shall have much more to say about this in the future. The election has shined a light on the huge array of sin that is in and among us—pagans and Christians alike. It has revealed a dark underbelly of

¹⁴ November has not been good to me the past two years. Amazingly, I found myself feeling the same way almost exactly one year ago as word leaked out concerning my church’s distressing policy concerning gays who legally marry and their children—I am still counting to ten on that one, trying to decide how to respond constructively.

¹⁵ D.C. 101.⁴⁵

the United States—an underbelly which American Christianity has in no small part adopted, endorsed, sustained—fed.

That sin and dark underbelly has, of course, been there for a while—perhaps always. It has been evident to me for some time. But still I held true to my ministerial focus, choosing not to address or confront the darkness.

But now, the whole sordid mess that was the 2016 election has me second guessing that ministerial decision made so long ago. Did I take the wrong path? Were all my highfaluting ministerial hopes, theories, and justifications just so much foolishness and vanity? Were all my fears—fears I had already identified as possible indicators of cowardice—contributory in some way to the darkness into which so many have willingly descended. Has my silence left my students and congregants without an alternative voice, defenseless against blasphemy? Do I now have blood on my hands?

More importantly, what do I do now with the revelations that flowed out of the 2016 election? Do I continue on the path in which I maintain my previous ministerial focus, and ignore the dark underbelly? Or, do I abandon my long accustomed path, and embark on a new and uncharted path in which I confront the sin that has been evident for quite some time and has been highlighted by the 2016 election?

The answer that has come to me is somewhat frightening. It lies far outside my comfort zone. It is rife with difficulties, and will almost certainly be unwelcome and controversial.

I simply cannot continue with business as usual. The stakes are too high. The revelations of the election are too clear and too important to be ignored. A sense of responsibility unfulfilled rests upon me.

However difficult the task of achieving what seems like a near impossible balance between a Christ centered message and a “me” centered message, I must attempt it. Without abandoning a focus on the perfect and good character of Christ, I must also name and confront the clear and present sin that is in and among us. However difficult and unwelcome it may be, I must be far more faithful and bold in proclaiming, without obfuscation or compromise, against the flawed, depraved, and blasphemous character of much of America. In doing so, I must not resort to my accustomed muted and cowardly, weak-kneed, and too-

subtle use of parable. The day of parables is over. It just goes right over the head, allowing the listener to hide in uncertainty. Today is a day for straight-talk.

As you can, no doubt, already see, in doing this we will resort to what will sometimes be uncomfortably strident and intense language. This is another of the past election's revelations. In addition to revealing just how depraved much of our American culture has become, and just how deeply debased sizable portions of American Christianity has become, "that man" revealed how one must speak to such a debased and depraved society if one wishes to be heard. In order to be heard and understood by such a people one must, apparently, resort to loud, extreme, and even profane speech—indeed, the man America has placed in the White house has been cheered for it. It seems that this is the language of the people.

In adopting the strategy of direct and extreme speech, I do not so much follow the example of "that man," false prophet that he is, as I do the true prophets of the Old Testament. In their desire to be heard by an increasingly hardened people, the Old Testament prophets resorted to vivid, extreme, and, often, graphic and offensive language and imagery. Ezekiel resorted to pornography, for heaven sake, to get his message across to a hardened people!

Again, this will take me well outside my comfort zone. But such is the disturbance that this election has set off in me, and such is my need to avoid being an "uncertain sound"¹⁶ that I will make the attempt.

So, while not entirely abandoning the Pauline voice of "Christ and him crucified," I will take up and repeat the strident voice and cadence of Jeremiah's "broken cisterns."

One final note. I have spoken of the difficulties that I anticipate as I embark on this new path. There are many. I would here say a word or two about a couple of them.

First, as I mentioned earlier, one of the things that has kept me from being more forthright about the obvious sin that is in and among us is the fear of hypocrisy. I am not without sin. So who am I to throw stones? I have a beam in my eye, who am I to point out slivers in other's eyes? I have always been one to praise the good that is present in others in hopes that

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 14.⁸

this would drive out whatever evil remained, and lead to greater good and virtue.

But the current environment seems to call for a new voice. I will have to name the sin. In doing so, I will generally operate at the group, rather than individual level. Even at the individual level, I will not make a habit of calling out the individual by name (At this point, “that man” might be an exception. How can I say this? I do not feel the hypocrite in pointing out his abominations—so deep, and wide, and high, and broad as they are).

The second challenge has to do with the central and greatest Christian virtue: Charity.

This one is most difficult. They say that one of the stages of grief is anger. I confess that, at times, I raged with anger during the months leading up to the election, and again in the weeks that followed. I did not trust myself to express my thoughts and feelings for fear that nothing but a long string of profanities would escape my tongue; for this is the only language that could adequately describe the feelings I have about “that man” and those who elected him. I had the good sense to bite my tongue, and count to ten—over and over and over again.

Now, I cannot say that the anger has entirely dissipated. It is, for the most part, now at a low simmer, having been replaced with a deep pain and sadness (though the warning signs have been present for some time, I still simply cannot believe what has become of my country). I have not arrived at the acceptance stage. I am not, I suspect, likely to.

I know... I repeat, I know that the gospel is not to be taught in anger and reprisal, but in love and patience and long-suffering. I am not a big believer in “righteous indignation.” It seems a little too convenient. So, I will strive to avoid speaking out of frustration and anger.

But my language will be strident and uncompromising. It will not always feel “charitable.” But I hope that I will be following in the footsteps of loving ministers of God, who, in love, nevertheless spoke forthrightly and, at times, uncomfortably. More than this, I hope I can be led and inspired by Him who rebukes and chastens those whom he loves.¹⁷

Again, this is fraught with difficulties, not least of which is self-deception. But, notwithstanding the dangers, it must be done.

¹⁷ Revelation 3.¹⁹

I will not do this perfectly. No doubt, I will need to repent often. But it is no longer appropriate to remain quite due to the fear of personal shortcomings.

If and when I err, Lord, forgive me.

I can only hope that it is not too late—too late for me and too late for a nation that seems intent on its own destruction.

But I don't know. I am unsure and unnerved.