

Sermon for Sunday 14 March 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore 21214

Fourth Sunday in Lent/UMCOR Sunday

Scriptures: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

“What can you say...?”

Five years before I was born, there was a lynching in my hometown. The courthouse was burned down, the black business district destroyed. A beautiful new courthouse was built, in classical modern style, with quotations around the top story of all four sides. I remember one, from the Bible: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

When my brother, ten years older than I, died in 2000, I talked with his former high school classmate, who was the daughter of the pastor of First Baptist Church, Sherman. She told me that in April, 1946 my brother and she were supposed to meet @ the Naval Academy, where he was a senior, she coming up from Randolph-Macon Women’s College ... but that was cancelled by President Roosevelt’s death in Warm Springs, Georgia ... She said her father condemned the lynching from the pulpit the Sunday after it happened, and the news of his sermon made it all the way back to his seminary in North Carolina. “Some of the ring-leaders were probably sitting behind him in the choir as he spoke,” she said.

We’re returning to the Gospel of John this Sunday, as Jesus predicts his death, in words that swing between quotes of his own words and reflections by the Gospel author. They include those almost as familiar as the Lord’s Prayer John 3:16. Would you repeat it with me ... some of you memorized it in Sunday School, as did I. “For God...

We are now deep into our Lenten retreat, and all the brightness and shadow of our central Christian expression of religious faith are coming into focus. The verse we just quoted goes on to insist, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

This is the point we must never leave out. Sin, darkness, division, disease ... however closely connected, however resulting from our actions and attitudes, are simply secondary to the main message: God’s love, the world God’s good creation, and the vision of that coloring everything for all of us. Our letter from the earliest years of the church, written by the Apostle Paul to a little band of believers gathered in house church worship in the city of Ephesus, says “we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

Dr. Ellis had that vision when he told his congregation the awful difference between what had just happened to a Negro man in our town, and the word of God in Jesus Christ. He had a vision of justice worthy of the pulpit of First Baptist Church, and he spoke it. We know the 1920’s and 1930’s were some of the worst in racist community action, mingled as they became with the horror and poverty of the Great Depression. We know we are being asked to face, and work to heal, the scars of those times that linger now among us all.

What we do not yet demonstrate, in relief and justice, in commitment and new habits of fairness and equality, weighs heavy on us, on our nation, and on our government. It is not punishment, but redemption, that we are seeking every day from now on. It is not a vision of terror we want for our life together, but of equality and generosity. There is no point to prayer that does not say this, no matter how many prayers avoided mentioning it in the past, in settings both high and low.

What makes us move in this direction? I'm at a loss for words, no matter how long I've been walking this path, as have so many among us in this church. How do I trust? It comes in new ways every day. I face darkness around me, and within me, again and again ... and I see in my country grave challenges ahead even as I give thanks for the better angels that seem so much closer than just a short while ago. That is the Lenten center we have come to today. There is more to tell, just as there will be more for us to do as we go forward together. The story will get lonelier and more shadowy in these coming weeks ... but like Dr. Ellis in 1930 Sherman, Texas, we have a vision of what is right and true, and the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ is among us, not by our own doing, but by the central truth of our living and dying and rising again, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.