

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, 21 April 2019

Easter Sunday

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25

Christian Scripture: John 20:1-9

“Resurrection Lesson from Notre Dame”

The Rev. Dr. Scott Everett Couper



On Monday afternoon, I was working quietly in my church office.

Bruce, our Administrator, and John, our Sexton, departed after finishing their morning responsibilities. I was relieved to have some time for peaceful study and meditation and thus prepare for the four services this past weekend. Then, my phone buzzed. “What now!?” I asked. It was my best friend in South Africa, Paul Venter. He usually texts lots of irreverent nonsense to me, so I thought about ignoring it. But, using my peripheral vision, I glanced over. “Breaking News: Notre Dame cathedral in Paris on fire, live stream.” My heart sank.

Any of you who have been in my office know, I have two monitors. I watched the fire rage in real time all afternoon, and all afternoon I felt like vomiting. In the late afternoon, I read a communication from my daughter in Arizona. She too was distraught. She was grieving.

So, I asked this question as I prepared for Easter morning. ‘What makes a young, seventeen year old, Black, South African girl living in north America grieve about a medieval church catching fire’? Such a teenage girl might only be concerned about whether Beyonce’s concert tour is coming to Phoenix, or if Macy’s has her preferred color of eyeliner in stock, or if she will find the right shoes to wear to the upcoming prom. But none of these were her concerns. This breaking news caused her great distress and anguish. Friends, what was happening there? What does it mean when a young, Black, South African, teenage girl in north America trembles at the sight of a fire half way across the world?

It is true, she had been to Notre Dame before. As a young child, she stood in the iconic cathedral with me (her father), her brother, and mother looking at the Eifel Tower in the distance, mesmerized by the Paris landscape. She beheld the steeple. She stared at the gargoyles perched at a height that rivalled skyscrapers. She had heard the

carillon bells as they echoed throughout the twelfth century cathedral. But she had been to many places around the world before - including Dubai, to the top of the tallest building in the world. She had walked through palaces in England. She had even seen the Colosseum in Rome. But, Notre Dame was different. What was it that caused a young, Black, South African teenage girl at school in north America to become heartsick and gutted for Notre Dame?

I believe my daughter grieved with millions of other people around the world because they understood that Notre Dame pointed to God. And God is transcendent, that is, beyond ourselves, eternal. This has been the case throughout human history. Whatever points to God is often termed 'sacred'. It can be music. It can be a place of worship: a mosque, a church, a cathedral, a synagogue. It can be dance, or a painting. It can be poetry or literature.

During Moses' time, our ancestors in faith understood the Ark of the Covenant to have contained the very presence of God - it was sacred to the core. During Solomon's time, our faith ancestors built the Temple. At the Temple's center was the 'Holy of Holies' which contained the Glory of God - it was sacred to the core. The Ark was lost to, and the Temple was destroyed by, the Babylonians and our ancestors in faith wept bitterly.

Notre Dame is just bricks and mortar. That is true. However, like the Ark and the Temple, Notre Dame points to God - she is sacred to the core. The damage to her is to be deeply lamented. However, we must not place our faith in an Ark, nor in a Temple, nor in a church, nor in a cathedral, though beautiful they all may be. Never must we place our faith and trust in those things that *only* point to God. For us, we must be wary not to worship our church steeple, our traditional hymns, our beautiful sanctuary, even our traditional forms of worship - for all of those things only point to God, though they are sacred.

Close to two thousand years ago, there were dozens, hundreds, perhaps thousands of people who sensed in a man from Galilee something sacred, transcendent, something eternal and thus divine. This man named 'Jesus' pointed them to God so perfectly that they pledged their lives to him. They knew the commandment against idolatry. Therefore, they were hesitant to worship someone who *only* pointed to God. Nonetheless, they came to the realization that Jesus represented and acted on behalf of God. Jesus made them feel so connected to God that they understood themselves to actually be in God's very presence. They experienced euphoria, bliss, peace, and unfathomable love in God's presence through Jesus.

Then, their world came crashing down. Jesus was crucified. Everything imploded. He who pointed to God was killed. He who was sacred was mocked. He who had divine qualities was mortal. He who represented eternity was dead. A source of the transcendent was now, what? Putrid? Rotting? Decaying? When something that points you to God dies, well, a part of you dies. And we grieve. That was what my daughter experienced on Monday - grief. That was what I experienced. That's what many of you experienced. That is what millions around the world experienced - grief. But the Marys and the disciples believed that this Jesus more than just pointed to God. They believed that Jesus *the Christ* died; thus they grieved as if God had died on the cross.

On Tuesday morning, firefighters in Paris worked their way through the smouldering debris of a cathedral to assess and discover that over which the world would grieve. In a similar fashion, our scripture narrates that while it was still dark on the third day, Mary went to the tomb, to the place of death, to assess and to grieve. Mary arrived to discover that the stone no longer blocked the entrance to the tomb. Mary gathered the other disciples who also ran to the tomb. They discovered that the tomb did not contain the death and destruction of that which was sacred, eternal, and divine. No. Jesus defied death. Jesus had risen! He had risen indeed!

By the time I left work on Monday, I watched footage of Notre Dame's steeple collapse, her roof cave-in, and the fire racing towards the two towers. I became resigned to the prospect that the cathedral that pointed to God was going to be destroyed forever. Yet, as I arrived home, I received a message from Paul, with this image:



accompanied by a caption that read: “When they opened the doors of the Notre Dame cathedral...they met this scene: the sun striking the cross over the high altar...resilient in the face of great destruction and hellish inferno. The cross rises from the ashes. *Laudate Dominum.* Praise the Lord!”

This image of Notre Dame saved reminds us to place our faith in only that which is incorruptible and that which is incapable of dying - that is, God, as known in Jesus Christ whose death and resurrection offers us the same transcendent and perfect attributes. For it is only God, through the prophet Isaiah, who declares: “Behold, I will create new heaven and a new earth. The former things will not be

remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard no more”.

Towards the end of this week, millions of Euros and dollars were offered to rebuild Notre Dame. A case can and has been made that if our trust is in Jesus Christ, then we ought to instead invest those millions in human beings who are ravaged by war, disease and displacement for Jesus was in fact, well, human. And if Christ existed with, in and through God before the world existed, then perhaps those millions should be invested in preserving Christ’s Creation - the environment.

It seems clear that Notre Dame will be rebuilt. Yet, it is that shaft of light shining through utter destruction and loss that provides us our Easter lesson. That beam of light through the midst of Notre Dame’s destruction, and not her impending re-construction, that truly points us to God and gives us faith. Christ is our Saviour and Christ lives!

Laudate Dominum [Praise the Lord]!

This was the Word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”!