

By Noble Things the Noble Stand

Isaiah 32:1-8

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

January 17, 2021

Our scripture reading is Isaiah 32:1-8. The prophet wrote about a future ideal kingdom. But he had some interesting things to say about fools and villains.

*A king will reign in righteousness,
and princes will rule with justice.
Each will be like a hiding-place from the wind,
a covert from the tempest,
like streams of water in a dry place,
like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.
Then the eyes of those who have sight will not be closed,
and the ears of those who have hearing will listen.
The minds of the rash will have good judgement,
and the tongues of stammerers will speak readily and distinctly.
A fool will no longer be called noble,
nor a villain be said to be honorable.
For fools speak folly,
and their minds plot iniquity:
to practice ungodliness,
to utter error concerning the Lord,
to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied,
and to deprive the thirsty of drink.
The villainies of villains are evil;
they devise wicked devices
to ruin the poor with lying words,
even when the plea of the needy is right.
But those who are noble plan noble things,
and by noble things they stand.*

Last week I read to you parts of a statement titled, “A Response to the Insurrection at the Capitol,” that was issued by the First Baptist Church of Washington, DC, which has been the church home not only of political leaders, like presidents Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter, but also of staff members and other people employed by the federal government. Which is to say, the attack on the Capitol was an attack that congregation took personally.

In the statement the congregation expressed its shock and dismay at the “breach of the very seat of our democracy to ransack historic property and violently attack our nation’s elected leaders.” But the statement said, “Sadly, (we are not) surprised.” “The seeds (of this violence) have lain deep in the soil of American history for more than 400 years: systemic racism, and the twin heresies of White supremacy and Christian nationalism.”

I have no doubt that the national humiliation that took place in our nation's Capitol on January 6 was about a lot of things. But was it about White supremacy?

If you think not, I invite you to conduct an experiment. Watch the videos of the assault on the Capitol, especially videos taken inside the Capitol. Watch with an eye for detail. When you have watched for as long as you can stomach, tell me how many people of color did you see? I'm told there were some, but I didn't see any.

I didn't see many women either. The assault on the Capitol was an assault by white men. Angry white men. In many cases, violent, angry white men.

Why do you think that was? Do you think it was a coincidence that the violent attempt to change the results of a presidential election followed by just one day an election in Georgia in which a Jewish son of immigrants and a Black pastor were elected to the United States Senate, yet another indication that the face of America is changing, a change not all of us welcome?

What do you make of the appearance of Confederate flags in the Capitol of the United States or the noose that was strung up just outside? Do you think those despicable images from a dark place in our past might suggest a racial component to the insurrection?

How do you respond to the Black Capitol police officer who said, "I was called the N- word 15 times today?"

The assault on the Capitol was indeed about many things. But deep in the dark recesses of its motivations, it was also about White supremacy, America's original and seemingly ineradicable sin. Six days after the attack on the Capitol, the page one, above the fold headline in our local newspaper was, "Report Confirms Racism" in the Winston-Salem Fire Department. A noose left on a table. A gorilla suit in a locker.

If there is anything even remotely redemptive about the horrific assault on our democracy, it is that there is something clarifying about coming face to face with unvarnished evil. There can be no nuanced arguments; no "oh yeah, what about;" no "but on the other hand." "The villainies of villains are evil," the prophet Isaiah said in redundancy on top of redundancy. "They devise wicked devices."

A year or so ago I wrote an article in which I reflected on a disturbing event that took place in the late 1990s. I had recently watched a video of that event. Here is what I said.

"I don't ever want to do that again," I said.

I had run into Maya Angelou in, of all places, a supermarket. It was 1997. I would not be so prideful as to say we were friends; we were acquaintances on the campus of Wake Forest University where I was pastor, and she was the Reynolds Professor of American Studies.

Standing beside our grocery carts in the produce department, we talked about an event that had taken place in downtown Winston-Salem the previous week. I told her the effect it had on me, how deeply unsettling it had been to be in the presence of evil, to hear its voice, to look into its face. That's what I didn't want ever to do again.

An organization with which I was associated had hurriedly call for a counterdemonstration when we heard that the Ku Klux Klan had been granted permission to hold a rally downtown.

An impromptu interracial, interreligious congregation gathered in front of the Federal Building in united defiance of bigotry and hatred. We sang, "Just like a tree planted by the water, I shall not be moved," and "Woke up this morning with my mind

stayed on freedom.” We read Scripture and prayed and tried to ignore the venom that was being spewed from the steps of the Hall of Justice around the corner.

When our gathering broke up, I crossed the street, took a right on Second and walked into what the (local newspaper) described as “a cacophony of screaming threats. . . .”

Loosely arranged on the steps were 20 to 30 Klansmen, some wearing white robes, others wearing black.

I am a child of the Deep South. I had heard of the KKK all of my life. But even in a culture that was drenched in racism, the Klan was associated with darkness, bitter racial hatred and violence. . . .

But I had never actually seen a Klansman. I had never heard, from scarcely 50 feet away, such a deluge of racial epithets, sexually explicit obscenities and barely veiled threats of violence.

I was unprepared for the wave of fear that swept over me.

Memories of that day . . . were refreshed by images in a recently viewed YouTube video of the event:

A girl, maybe 10 years old, wearing a child-sized robe and hood, holding the symbol of the Ku Klux Klan that seemed to be as large as she was. I recalled Graham Nash’s lyrics, “Teach your children well, their father’s hell did slowly go by”

A young woman, possibly a teenager, responding enthusiastically to the call, “White power,” with a stiff-armed salute that to me was indistinguishable from a Nazi salute.

A coarse-voiced woman preaching white supremacy and racial purity in the style of a fire-and-brimstone revival preacher.

The N-word, spelling censure if uttered a single time today, being shouted, reverberating off brick and glass in the town I called home.

Vile verbal attacks on white women in the crowd who were with black men.

I walked away . . . shaken and troubled.

“I don’t ever want to do that again,” I told Maya Angelou.

Her eyes turned on me in a penetrating gaze, and she said in that familiar mellow commanding voice, “But you must — again and again.”

“I know I will,” I said, “but I won’t want to.”

“That’s it,” she said as she turned to leave. “You won’t want to, but you will.”

It was a charge to speak out against bigotry in all its vile forms, and in defense of the bigots’ targets, ancient and recent, and those who have yet to be reviled.

We won’t want to, but we will. Because, in the name of goodness and charity and every value we hold dear, we must.

“Those who are noble plan noble things,” Isaiah said, “and by noble things they stand.”

On this day when we celebrate the life and prophetic ministry of one of the greatest of all Americans, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., let our benediction be:

We shall not be, we shall not be, we shall not be moved

Just like a tree that’s planted by the water

We shall not be moved. Amen.