

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on December 27, 2020.

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him. Matthew 2:13

One of the most entertaining historians on PBS is Lucy Worsley. She has done many programs on historic buildings and customs with a focus on Tudor England. Early this month we watched one of her programs called “12 Days of Tudor Christmas.”

In this program she talked about the customs and foods shared by both Royalty and peasant during the Christmas Season. In Tudor England Advent and Christmas were very different. Advent was a solemn season of penance. Christmas started on Christmas Eve and lasted until Epiphany on January 6. So, December 24 to January 6 were twelve days of eating and drinking, games and gift giving, and all kinds of Church services. Most of the days had a focus or theme. For example, on December 26 the life of St. Stephan was celebrated. This still echoes today in the carol that begins:

**Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen
When the snow lay 'round about
Deep and crisp and even**

Most of the twelve days of Christmas were full of joy and merrymaking. But December 28 was different. December 28 was Holy Innocents' Day or Childermas (Children's Mass). It was part of the Twelve Days of Christmas in Tudor times and commemorated the massacre of the baby boys which King Herod ordered in Bethlehem, in an attempt to kill the infant Jesus Christ. In 1534 Robert Croo wrote what has come to be called the Coventry Carol. It includes these words:

**Herod the king in his raging
Set forth upon this day
By his decree, no life spare thee
All children young to slay
All children young to slay**

This story from the Gospel of Matthew reminds us that from the very beginning those who sought to serve Jesus have paid a price. In almost every age men and women have been persecuted for their faith. Today I would like us to focus on our Christian brothers and sisters who are suffering for the faith in 2020.

At first hearing this sounds like a strange request to be making at the beginning of the 21st century. I believe that most of us think of the persecution of Christians only happening in Roman times. We think of rulers such as Nero who forced Christians to be eaten by lions. We think the mistreatment of Christians was centered on the coliseum in Rome.

When Constantine became a Christian and proclaimed the Edict of Milan which allowed the free practice of Christianity, we may tend to think that was the end of the story. We so often believe that being persecuted for one's faith only happened to Christians wearing togas.

This is not reality. Several years ago, on Christmas Day, The New York Times published a column by A.M. Rosenthal that contained these words.

Millions of American Christians pray in their churches each week, oblivious to the fact that Christians in many parts of the world suffer brutal torture, arrest, imprisonment and even death... for no other reason than that they are Christians... They have been persecuted and martyred before an unknowing, indifferent world and a largely silent Christian community.

Unknowing, indifferent-only a few months ago at a dinner, one of America's richest and pleasantest men and the headmaster of a noted private school, a minister, both said they knew nothing about the persecution of their fellow Christians.

Governments know. They are silent for 30 billion pieces of trade silver.

We know today that followers of Jesus continue to be persecuted for their faith. Several years ago, an article in the Wall Street Journal began:

John Eibner, the CEO of Christian Solidarity International USA, has seen the bodies that many of his coreligionists in the West might prefer not to think about. "I don't like to loosely use the term "genocide," he says, "but there's no question about it-extensive religious cleansing threatens the entire Middle Eastern Christian community." There is "a huge swath of territory," he notes. From "northwestern Syria all the way to Baghdad that is religiously cleansed."

We know that Christian communities in Iraq and Syria have been attacked and forced to flee their homes. The Coptic Christians who have lived in Egypt for nearly two thousand years have been under increasing pressure. Christians in Africa and China have lost property and their lives because of their obedience to Christ. In the recent weeks many of us have complained because we have had to forgo many of the normal joys of Christmas. We need to be reminded that fellow Christians are being abused for seeking to worship while we pray comfortably at home.

When we take the time to hear the pain of our brothers and sisters in faith, what can we do?

First, we can pray. Several years ago our General Assembly asked Presbyterians, in their private and corporate prayer, to continue to lift up the needs of those who are persecuted and suffer because of the practice of their faith.

In worship here and in our private devotions we can ask the Lord to stand with those who suffer because of their faith in Christ. Remember them, ask God to give them courage and strength.

Secondly, we can write letters to the President and our Congress asking them to monitor religious freedom around the world and request that the State Department give special attention to provide relief in cases of religious persecution around the world. We know that in the last several years, Chinese authorities have been oppressing religions of all kinds. Millions of Moslem Uighurs have been forced into camps. The Vatican has submitted to pressure that allows more control of the Catholic Church in the hands of the state. Many Protestant Churches have been closed in recent years.

The United States has the ability to apply influence through political, moral and economic pressure. We can ask our government to use the tools at its disposal to bring about a cessation of religious persecution and grant refuge. As Thomas Paine once said:

The United States should be an asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious Liberty.

As Mary, Joseph and Jesus found refuge from Herod's forces in Egypt, may our country always be open to receiving and protecting refugees fleeing religious persecution.

Thirdly, and maybe most importantly, we can listen to the witness of those who suffer for our faith. The Risen Christ told his disciples to go to the ends of the earth witnessing to his resurrection. As we explored earlier this fall, the Greek word for witness is martyr. This term took on a special meaning in the last half of the first century and the beginning of the second century. In those days larger numbers of Christians began to be tortured and killed because of their faith. They were called martyrs, because they were willing to die rather than renounce their faith in Jesus.

We most respect those who suffer for their faith when we listen to their witness. I would like to share with you the witness of three people from different parts of the world.

We explored the life of Oscar Romero on November 1. Remember his words spoken shortly before he was shot dead:

I have been threatened with death. Nevertheless, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I shall arise in the people. Martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be the sign that hope will soon be a reality. Would that they might be convinced that they will waste their time. I will die, but the church of God, which is the people, will never perish.

Listen to the witness of Ben Weir. Weir was an American Presbyterian missionary in Lebanon who was held hostage during the early 80's. He recalls his experience of the Lord's Supper:

Sunday morning in captivity I awoke. In my mind's eye I could see Christians all awaking and proceeding to places of worship. They gathered at the Lord's Table. My mind moved westward with the sun. I envisioned people of various cultural backgrounds gathering. I was part of this far-flung family, the very body of Christ. I unwrapped my piece of bread held back from my previous meager meal and began the Presbyterian order of worship. When it came to sharing the cup I had no visible wine, but this didn't seem to matter. I knew that others were taking the cup for me elsewhere at this universal table. As others prayed for me, so I prayed for them.

Finally, listen to the witness from China. A Chinese pastor and his wife were imprisoned in China. After a passage of years he learned that his wife had died in prison. Hear his reflection:

To evaluate the life of a dead person

Some people

As a yardstick use social effect

(ie., what and how much that person contributed to society)

Some people

To evaluate the life of a dead person

As a yardstick use the beauty of a garland

(ie., the magnificent but spurious things associated with the dead person)

She alone used her own blood

Explained without words that

To evaluate the life of a dead person

As a yardstick use the dead person's blood

Her body was abandoned at an unmarked burial ground

Her corpse bore witness to the Lord

She followed the Lord...

Left her family and home....

To spread the message of the Cross

and the Lord who died for us

She went to that ancient city...

One of the early leaders of the Church said the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church. This meant that the courage and love demonstrated by those who died for the faith inspired others to follow Jesus. The same can be true today. May we be so humbled by hearing their witness that we might become more faithful in our own walk with Christ.

Friends, in this New Year may we gain inspiration from our brothers and sisters who remain faithful in difficult and hostile environments. May they motivate us to be more faithful in our walk with God.