

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Holy Days: Meet the New Boss”

Dr. Jay Howell

January 10, 2021

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

Exodus 1:6-14

Will you pray with me? Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

The passage we just read from the Book of Exodus concerns a leadership transition in the land of Egypt. It was chosen about eight months ago. The title of the sermon, “Meet the New Boss,” comes from a song by The Who, and was chosen about four months ago. I mention that because upon hearing the passage and seeing the title, one might get the impression that it’s all a snarky commentary on some of the events of the past week. They are not; they were chosen months ago.

But before we get to this passage and to this new series we’re starting today, I do want to take a minute concerning the events of last Wednesday and their aftermath, as no doubt some of you have been as troubled by it as I have. Perhaps you, like me, have wondered what a people of faith are to do or say to such things.

Obviously, I am speaking of the mob that stormed the Capitol building while Congress was gathered to certify the presidential election. Shortly before forcing through barricades, doors, and windows and pushing through the Capitol police, the mob had come from a rally gathered on the National Mall, at which the President spoke. The degree to which the President is or should be held responsible for the mob’s actions is something I will leave for you to judge for yourself.

But of particular concern, especially insofar as I am and your pastor and one who tries to follow Jesus, was something else.

Scattered within the crowd gathered on the Mall were handfuls of people carrying signs or flags bearing not the name of the President or an American flag, but the name of Jesus. “Jesus Saves” or “Jesus 2020” or

something like that. That was just at the rally beforehand where, from what I understand, people had gathered peacefully in protest.

But then shortly after, after the crowd had walked to the Capitol and after the mob had stormed through the barricades—and I do differentiate between the larger crowd that had gathered and the mob that acted in violence—but after they had gone to the Capitol, there on the Capitol steps among the mob stood someone with a sign raised overhead saying “Jesus Saves.” Now I have no idea who that was. No idea who any of the people were that carried these signs and flags or what their motivation was. What I do know is that also within the mob on the Capital steps were conspiracists, anarchists, white supremacists, or any combination of the above. And to the casual onlooker, one might wonder what connection, what association there was between them.

Apparently, a number of folks had brought their own portable PA systems and were speaking out amplified over the mob on the Capital steps. Out rang one voice, “He that killeth with the sword must be killed by the sword.” If you don’t recognize it, it’s Scripture, from the Book of Revelation, and according to that translation (there are different approaches to the Greek), it speaks of violent retribution and persecution connected with a figure known as the beast from the sea, who is most commonly referred to by another name: the antichrist. The antichrist. But here those words of Scripture are, declared among a mob gathered on the Capitol steps, seemingly threatening execution.

Shortly after that another voice rang out, “Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation.”

Like the signs, I have no idea who the speakers were, nor do I know their motivation. For all I know, they saw a dark and tumultuous situation and sought to speak caution and hope into it. The Revelation bit maybe could have used a bit of context, but for all I know it was meant to caution *against* violence, against insurrection.

But to the casual onlooker, it could be hard to separate the message of “Jesus saves” from the message being sent by those breaking down windows and doors to the Capitol, spraying police with mace, ransacking the Capitol building, and seeking to disrupt and deter Congress from performing a constitutional duty; it could be hard to differentiate the message of “Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation” from the messages of conspiracy, anarchy, or white supremacy that were also present there that day.

A continual lament and point of repentance for the church has been the atrocious things that have been done over the centuries under a banner bearing the name of Jesus or the sign of his cross. Sadly, such sins aren’t just limited to centuries past but are alive and well today. I can’t read the minds of those who proclaimed the name of Jesus on the Capitol steps, nor can I read the minds of those who broke down the doors; I can’t say whether their beliefs were shared, mingled, overlapped, or completely disagreed with each other. I can’t say.

But lest there be any confusion, insofar as what will be taught at this church from this pulpit, the gospel of Jesus Christ our Savior is antithetical to the voices of conspiracy, anarchy, or white supremacy at work at the Capitol last week.

To those who would seek to justify violence to achieve a political end, Christ says, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” And insofar as how we as a church bear witness to that gospel in our city, among our friends, among our families, Paul writes, “Insofar as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” To those who are troubled, Christ says, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

And the way he overcame the world was not by conquest or scheme or conspiracy but by the cross, not by might, but by mercy. For when a mob came for him, when a mob condemned him to death, faced with the

weight of the world, the weight of the world's sinfulness, brokenness, all of our cruelty, all of our vengeance, he overcame it not with a swing of a sword but with a cry from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Back on the National Mall where the crowd had gathered earlier that day, these words were spoken: "You will never take back our country with weakness." Our Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Let us never confuse which we follow first. Thanks be to God.

The series we are starting today—and don't worry you're not gonna get a whole second sermon, it's more of a primer—deals a great deal with the sufficiency of the Lord's grace for us, in our work and in our rest. In this series "Holy Days," we'll be jumping in at some pivotal points of the Book of Exodus in particular. Some of the story of Exodus may be familiar to you already: Moses and the burning bush, the ten plagues, crossing the Red Sea, the Ten Commandments, all of which are some of the more well-known chapters of this powerful book. But at its core is a story of a people, a people and their relationship with the God who delivers them from bondage, and in their deliverance, they are called not to rely upon their own might or their own strength, but upon the strength of the Lord God Almighty to rescue them.

There are a bunch of ways, a bunch of lenses through which one could explore the Book of Exodus. The lens of deliverance and liberation is a big one, as in God's people being freed and delivered from Egypt. The lens of covenant is another big one, as in much of the substance of Exodus is the covenant God makes with his people, a covenant meant to shape them as a holy people.

But the lens through which we'll be looking at Exodus is one of work and rest in the Lord. Both of them. It's kind of sneaky, actually, but themes of work and rest are all over Exodus. In fact, it's been pointed out that the people of Israel begin and end the Book of Exodus at work. It's just on one end, the work is a gross, oppressive distortion of what work should be, and on the other, it is work serving the Lord, constructing the tabernacle. We'll get to all that.

But why work and rest? Why focus on that? Why look at Exodus that way?

Because work, like money, whether we admit it or not, can be one of the largest factors in how we spend our daily lives, and if we say that the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks only to what we do at church on Sundays or maybe to a short prayer time in the morning, but not to what we do the rest of the week, then we're saying that there's a huge part of our lives into which Jesus speaks no good news, no hope, and that's just not true.

Connected to that is, work is different. Work is changing. And understand me right, by "work," I don't mean "only folks who get a W-2 during tax season." I mean your labor, your daily labor, and that could be in an office, at a store, in a shop, at a school, at your home, on the road, you name it.

But work is changing, that's for sure. It's hard to flip through a business magazine these days without some article about the "future of the office space" or how "working remotely is here to stay" or something like that.

Work is surely challenging these days. It's hard to find a field that hasn't been deeply affected by the pandemic. Jobs have changed fundamentally. Jobs have been lost; some industries decimated; and with them millions of lives have been thrown into upheaval and uncertainty.

Work can too easily be distorted. We see a prime example of this in Exodus 1, in the passage we read. The people of Israel are living in Egypt. Joseph, one of the sons of a man named Jacob, through a long, long story,

came to a place of great influence in the land of Egypt and invited his father Jacob and all his brothers to join him there for safety during a famine, so they do, and they prosper and flourish.

A long time goes by. Their descendants multiply; they had found livelihoods in Egypt; probably felt like they had a home there.

But then a new king, a new Pharaoh came to power, one who didn't know Joseph and all the good things he had done in Egypt. Instead he saw the Israelites as a threat, and so he enslaves them. Puts them to forced labor. Sees them only for what they can produce, only for what he can get out of them and for how he can subdue them. Meet the new boss.

This is the gross, oppressive distortion of work. The king sees an entire people only in terms of what they can produce, what work they can do.

Sadly, too often we view work through that lens: through what we can get out of it. Could be others' work, like those that may report to you or those that work for you, or it could be your own. We can view our own work just in terms of what it can get for us, what it can produce.

Doing one's work well is important, and that's something we'll get to in coming weeks, but seeing work only for what it can produce for you distorts what work can and should be.

Out of their oppression, God hears and remembers his people and initiates a series of events that would rescue them, redeem them, and bring them to himself, not only for freedom's sake, for Israel would not be freed in order to do whatever they wanted, but for glory's sake, for Israel would be charged with the work of witness to this Lord who saved them.

The need for that witness continues to this day, and lest we feel like the task is too great, the good news is that there are still those who go to that work every day.

Rear Adm. Margaret Kibben, a Presbyterian minister, is the chaplain to the House of Representatives. On Wednesday when Congress was moved to secure locations, when emotions were running high, she offered the words of the 46th Psalm in prayer to the gathered representatives, aides, and Capitol police: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea."

She later shared, "Our daily lives are not separate from God's involvement in them, God is very much present and very much has come alongside each and every one of us as we labor in the vineyard. And if that labor is tedious, God understands the tedium. If the labor is under siege, God understands the crisis and walks beside us in still waters—as well as in the shadows of danger."

It was her first week on the job.

Meet the new boss.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.