

Messages, Meditations and Marketplaces
Third Sunday of Lent
Psalm 19:1-14

When you've got a story to tell; when you've got a story to tell; when you've really got a story to tell... Ain't nothing gonna hold you back! In fact, the Bible says there are times when you hold back, when you shrink back and keep quiet, and feel threatened and intimidated to find your voice and speak your truth, "the very stones will cry out." And, that's exactly what happened in Psalm 19!

19:1-4. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world."

The heavens shout and sing the glory of God! A symphony of celestial and creation sounds. All creation, heavens and earth, telling, singing, crying out, proclaiming, bursting forth with God's amazing magnificence and unspeakable goodness. UCC minister Kathryn Matthews, says, "There may be no words as such, but the "voice" of the heavens, of all creation, goes forth, "through all the earth" and "to the end of the world and... far beyond, telling of God's majesty and glory." Episcopal priest Susan Marie Smith claims that "nothing will stop nature from praising God, ... even if humanity forgets the source of life and God's good gifts, creation itself will never forget," and nothing we do, or forget to do, or refuse to do, nothing, nothing can stop that unending, galactic symphony of praise. And, verse 14 invites

us all to add our voices to the “voice of the heavens, “Let the words of my mouth (OUR) and the meditation of my heart (OUR) be acceptable to you, O Lord, OUR rock and OUR redeemer.”

The words of your mouth, and the meditations of your heart make a difference for God and for Good. You’ve got a story to tell. I’ve got a story to tell! And, I want to share it with you in a moment.

The Marketplace

But, actually, there’s another story I want to tell you first. It’s not really my story. It’s John’s story – the one we heard read this morning from the Gospel of John. It’s a story about toxic religion, counterfeit religion, or to use an overused term, it’s a story about “fake” religion. It’s about religion gone bad! In fact, Dr. Mel White wrote an entire book about it 12 years ago. And, true to his prophetic and signature style of speaking and writing, Mel envisioned a title that’s even more relevant today than the day he wrote it. *Religion Gone Bad!* Mel’s book was really 12 years ahead of its time, in my humble opinion, because bad religion is being acted out on a global stage, in churches and places of worship, around the world as never before.

But, I’m getting ahead of myself -- back to John’s story. Like other Jewish men, Jesus had traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover in the Temple, a requirement for all Jewish men of faith at the time. Passover was the special occasion when the Jewish people recalled their liberation from Egyptian slavery, and their long trek through the wilderness to the Promised Land. It derived the name from the ancient story of the Death

Angel "passing over" homes where the doors were marked with the blood of a sacrificial lamb, but where in all the other homes, the firstborn children, and the first born of the cattle were all killed.

So, animal sacrifices and offerings were an essential part of the Passover rituals and celebrations in the Temple. People were expected to bring animals and doves to be sacrificed, and offerings to support the mission and ministry of the Temple. But, when Jesus arrived, that 30 something, idealistic and zealous young Nazarene, he saw that something was terribly wrong. The Temple had been turned into a loud and unruly marketplace, a virtual menagerie of Temple approved cattle, and sheep and doves were being sold for profit, and cashiers were on hand like ATM's to exchange foreign currency into Temple approved cash. All at a shameful and profitable price! In short, some were getting rich and feathering their nest at the expense of God's Good Name and on the backs of the poor.

And, the Bible says Jesus (made) a whip of cords, (and) he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. (And), he told those who were selling the doves, "Take these birds out of here! And, stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

Picture this. Jesus didn't just happen to have a whip, nor did he simply pick one up. He found a few cords of twine or rope, maybe sat on the floor, to watch the spectacle that was happening and began to slowly and intentionally braid a whip. And, the more he braided, the more incensed and enraged he became. And, when he finished, seething with anger, he

took his handmade whip and drove the whole bunch out of the Temple. Because, as the Gospel of Matthew says, they had made God's Holy Temple into "a den of thieves."

Well, to be sure, this unusual story is as controversial as it is convicting. Not even the Gospel writers could agree about the details – John places the account at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, setting the stage and claiming the authority for his all-too-brief, three-year ministry. Matthew, Mark and Luke place this story near the end of his ministry, the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back and led directly to the crucifixion. But, it's also controversial because it catches Jesus in an uncharacteristic mood, in a confrontational, intolerant and angry mood, so unlike his usual forgiving, compassionate and understanding manner.

And, that's the whole point of including this story of an angry Jesus in all four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Not only were these greedy and dishonest merchants tainting the Temple, they were spoiling God's Good Name; they were misrepresenting the faith; they were sending the wrong message; and, they were propagating a false narrative.

I believe we should all be concerned and deeply troubled whenever the integrity, grace and goodness of the Gospel message is compromised. I believe we should be alarmed when the church buys into the glamour and glitz of cultural religion and political expediency. If the history of religion has taught us anything at all, we just know that the false narrative of bad religion only becomes more convoluted with the passing of time ... until the simple truth and goodness of the Gospel is unrecognizable.

We should be alarmed...

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*When a far-flung international Christian ministry calls for a “military takeover and martial law” to restore Christian supremacy in America...

(Rick Joyner, Morningstar Ministries);

We should be alarmed...

*When a Christian Academy fund raiser in Idaho sends out 8 and 9-year-old students to sell raffle tickets for an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle at \$50 a pop... (Classic Christian Academy);

We should be alarmed...

*When the popular pastor of an evangelical mega-church says he would “absolutely not” want the president to embody the Sermon on the Mount, but instead would empower the government with unbridled “authority to do ‘*whatever*,’ whether assassination... or some other unspeakable punishment...” (Robert Jeffress, First Baptist Church, Dallas)

We should be alarmed...

*When a preacher turned politician calls corporations “cowardly” because they’ve tried to do the right thing and restrict the sale of assault weapons to teen agers... (Mike Huckabee, Twitter, 2/23/18). We should be alarmed...

We should be alarmed... Because, something is terribly, terribly wrong with that message and those messengers! And, if we don't speak out, the rocks just might cry out"

The Message and the Meditation

But, how will we know, and more importantly, how will others know that here at UBC we are the real thing? We have long taken pride that here at UBC we are a bit different. In fact, in the 1990's this church had a billboard campaign with the slogan, "Be Different – for God's Sake!" We have always sought to make our mission and message clear and unmistakable: "Rooted in Faith – Progressive in Action." And, before that, "Austin's Progressive Voice of Faith Since 1908." We are committed to be a "Justice Church," because as William Sloan Coffin loved to say, "To know God is to do justice." And, we believe that. We believe that with every bone in our bodies, with every fiber of our being, and with every breath that we take!

But, how will others know. I just believe that simple pulpit prayer says it all – that simple prayer that has been offered from this very pulpit almost every Sunday for many years: *"May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."* You see, it's all about the words of our mouth, and the meditations of our heart. It's all about the integrity and consistency of our message, and the content and character of our hearts. What we are saying with our mouths, and what we are thinking in our hearts—that makes all the difference in the world. And, as long as we do that, and we back up our talk with our walk, justice and mercy, we've got a story to tell that will never be obsolete, and never out of fashion, or insufficient. It's a story that simply must be told.

Now, back to the story I promised to tell you. In 1998, shortly before I retired from the Army, I received a call from my daughter Jeanna, who remained in Washington D.C. after we moved to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. Jeanna grew up in DC for the most part, and always thought of that as home. She had had a good job, though Mom and Dad were always there to help make ends meet. But, on this occasion, Jeanna had lost her job, and was embarrassed to call home and ask for help. So, she and a friend went to the local food bank and volunteered to unload trucks in exchange for a sack of groceries. Days later, Jeanna reached into her pantry for a can of Campbell's Cream of Asparagus Soup, but try as she might, she simply could not open it. Until, finally the lid popped off, and out fell a pouch filled with gold jewelry, diamonds, and a Rolex watch. The can was actually a tiny safe, masquerading as a can of soup to fool would-be thieves. And, apparently, it fooled someone into donating it to the Food Bank. Well, Jeanna was ecstatic, and called to say, "Dad, what should I do?" At first, she thought it was an answer to prayer, because she had just prayed to God for enough money to pay her rent. And, after a most unusual and intense conversation, we agreed the only Christian thing to do was to find the rightful owners. Which, with the help of the Food Bank, a newspaper reporter, and the local Sheriff, she managed to do. The grateful couple gave her a \$1000 and a pair of diamond earrings. And, that's when the fun really started! Jeanna was on the front page of the Washington Post, interviewed by Joan Lunden on "Good Morning America," made the top 50 stories of the year in *Parade Magazine*, and featured in *Readers Digest* "Heroes for Today." My phone would not stop ringing, and some of my friends were saying, "Paul, why don't you feed your own daughter!" I

was glad to get away from all the hubbub for a few days when the Army sent me to Germany on a military mission, but I got off the plane in Frankfurt and picked up a *Stars and Stripes Newspaper*, only to find Jeanna's picture along with her story on the front page. As many of you know, Jeanna died in 2014, but her story will live on in the lives of the people she touched.

So, don't you see! When you've got a story to tell; when you've got a story to tell; when you've really got a story to tell... Ain't nothing gonna stop it!

We've got a story to tell. We've got a message to proclaim. From Austin, TX to the ends of the earth. From the far reaches of outer space to the intimacy of our own hearts, this story must be told in all of its truth and all of its simplicity even, as the Apostle Paul wrote, even when the world thinks it's all foolishness. Even though some say it's foolish, we can still join with all creation in telling of the majestic wonders of our awesome God. Even though some say it's foolish, we can still join in the chorus, the rhythm, the harmony, the symphony of the stars with wonder and awe. So, here we are, inhabitants of two far flung universes, one with stars, and black holes and unknown, unnumbered galaxies, and the other within the intimacy of our own hearts, singing in perfect harmony the wonderful works and amazing grace of our awesome God.

And, so, I invite you to join me, as together we pray those words once again. Let this be a renewal of our covenant to remain true to Our Mission, and to God's Message:

“Let the words of (our) mouths, and the meditation of (our) hearts be acceptable to you, O LORD, (our) rock and (our) redeemer.” AMEN
(Psalm 19:14, NRSV)

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