

Reading the News
Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 | Mark 1: 14-20
Rev. Cameron Barr
January 24, 2021

I can't tell you how many times I have heard that apocryphal phrase of the theologian Karl Barth - that a pastor should preach with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. I'm sure there are armchair Barth scholars at hand who could tell me whether Barth actually said this. Those who have quoted this old line to me have usually meant to encourage the pastor to speak bravely to the events of the day rather than attending strictly to private spiritual matters of the heart. To be honest, I tire of this old cliché - the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other - because it does not seem to me like a terribly hard charge to keep. We are by tradition and formation a congregation that reads the newspaper already and interprets our faith in light of our civic responsibilities. So a plea to remember the social and political as well as the spiritual and devotional just doesn't seem so urgent or corrective to us as it might be to other congregations. It's also uncanny to me how directly the Bible seems to speak to the events of the day. Some Sundays during the Trump era that has felt to me so obvious that it hardly merited mentioning. Does it really take that much imagination for the preacher to equate Pharaoh with the ruling powers of our experience, or to observe in Israel's decline the signs and symptoms of our nation's sins, or to see in Jesus the contempt of empire that many of us already feel. I've preached many of those sermons only to feel that the original text had said more powerfully and plainly what I had strained at length to make obvious. Or on other occasions the events related in the text correspond so vividly to the daily news that preaching about it made me feel lazy. Aren't there greater depths that I should be probing? Am I missing some deeper point?

It occurs to me that reading the news involved a bit more effort for Karl Barth, who died in 1968. The twilight of his life was the dawn of televised news. For Barth the biblical text was much easier to access than the daily news. So distant was the news to Barth's students, presumably, they needed to be reminded to go and get it. We, by contrast, don't have to go and get our news anywhere. The news comes to us. It's pushed to our mobile devices. It finds us on our social media platforms. It follows many people to bed and greets them first thing in the morning. The news isn't just accessible, it's smothering. It's not just available, it's alluring. It's presented to seduce us. It's engineered to shape our daily habits. So accessible is the news to us that consuming it so regularly can actually make us really anxious. We have the inverse problem to Barth, for whom the Bible was much closer than the churn of daily events.. For us the news is always at our fingertips and the Bible is a much longer reach. Sometimes I want to leave the news out of my sermon because I think the best thing we could do for our spiritual and mental health is take a break from it once in a while. In any event, I'm just not sure Barth would give us the same advice today. He wanted to prevent his students from getting so lost in their Bibles that they had nothing to say about the world. But to us I think he'd counsel something rather different. Maybe, in light of these new devices and all our anxiety, he might say - don't be so consumed by the news that you forget the promises of God.

Easier said than done, I know. And I know, too, that the daily news environment that we've lived in for the past four years has not made it easy to detach ourselves from the flurry of current events. I remember four years ago changing the settings on my phone so that I wouldn't

be harassed by breaking news several times a day. I've certainly been among those glued to the TV since November - first for the election, then for all the denials, finally for events at the Capitol in the past two weeks. So caught up in all this news and so worrisome all the possibilities that our own denomination issued a security notice that was then picked up by other denominations and resulted in some churches canceling their services. Maybe you saw this notice, first released on social media by the United Church of Christ. "We don't want to spread panic or alarm," the message began, forebodingly, set against a fire truck red background, warning of attacks against houses of worship on the Sunday before and after the inauguration. It seems it all started somewhere in Montana, where a Lutheran bishop was dealing with isolated threats against "liberal" churches. Although there was never any evidence that churches were being systematically targeted in the past two weeks, the memory of violence at churches in Charleston, Pittsburgh, and in rural southern locations in recent years has set a lot of religious leaders on edge. Elizabeth Eaton, the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, tried her best to calm everyone down. She took to Twitter explaining that a warning from one of her bishops had been shared without proper context. "Of course take care," she said, "but these vague threats are meant to spread fear." She said that her witness of faith would be to worship. I sincerely hope that the formation of a new government gives us all the break we need. I saw recently someone wearing a black t-shirt with white lettering: Make Politics Boring Again.

Maybe we should read the news a little less and the Bible a little more. When the news of the world occupies so much of our heads and our hearts we are liable to lose our ground of faith. These daily messages confuse the truth. They leave us contending with different versions of the truth; they leave us parsing whose facts and stories are authentic and trustworthy; and, always, they leave us thirsting for more, like drinking saltwater that never satisfies. That is our challenge in this news environment. When we read our Bible and reflect on the faithfulness of God, we remember what about our existence is authentic, trustworthy, and unchanging. "Once God has spoken," says the Psalmist, "and twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God."

Who's up and who's down. Who's got power today and lost it tomorrow. The image that comes to my mind is a storm tossed sea. The daily news is like the waves crashing at the surface. But just below, not more than a few feet - a much vaster depth, a much greater stillness, much more interesting stories waiting to be told. There is a certain faithlessness in obsessing over the news, faithless because it keeps us invested in the question of who has power currently and not who gives power eternally.

That power belongs to God, the Psalmist proclaims. God has spoken this truth once and forever. Do not let your hearts be troubled, but remember in the events that change by the day or by the hour that that God's steadfast love endures forever. Amen.