

Sometimes things just have to be said. The title of this message is “Hell is Truth Seen Too Late.” The quote actually originated with Thomas Hobbes, an English Philosopher of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and used by William Sloane Coffin in one of his sermons. The readings of the day were Ezekiel 17:22-24 and Mark 4:26-34. **June 17 2018** **Rev. Dr. Kate Winters**

There is always something that stops me in my tracks as I prepare to preach. This time it was a reference to a great American prophetic voice that I was privileged to hear in the 1970’s. Yes, I do remember that far back! The late William Sloane Coffin was a Presbyterian minister with standing in the United Church of Christ (so we can claim him too!) when he was a chaplain at Yale. A fiery preacher with a gentle soul, one of his memorable comments was, of all things, about hell. “**Hell**,” he said, “**is truth seen too late.**”

The author who referenced the Rev. Coffin was writing about different ways of bringing prophetic or hard truths to people who **cannot** or **do not** want to hear them. Many people of every era make the choice to stay blithely and purposefully **ignorant**, so prophetic preachers, like Jesus or Bill Coffin or the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, would use metaphor so that people would listen while the meaning would sneak up on them slowly. By the time they realized what was being said, it was too late to close their ears and lock their hearts against the inconvenient truth.

But even with these preaching methods, people don’t always see what we need to see and know what we need to know. By then, as the phrase implies, we may already be **in hell**. Here’s a basic example: In my first marriage, when I started to feel that something was wrong, I denied it for a long time. I refused to attend to the verbal cues. I would not listen to warnings of my friends. I told myself I was being paranoid. By the time I finally broached the subject directly, things were already irreparable. My biggest fears were realized in an instant and the suffering was great. Hell is truth – seen and dealt with – too late.

Now, I invite us into the metaphors of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was living in a tumultuous time of exile. He himself was deported to Babylon from Judah when the Babylonians invaded. God’s words coming from Ezekiel are gentle: “I myself

will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar...I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; On the mountain height of Israel, I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs, and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird shall live...” The words are also edgy: “I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.”

Why does he use this language? Ezekiel expected that the Babylonians would not immediately catch his metaphorical drift. His bet was that his fellow exiles would and hear the hope in his message to them – the low tree that would be made high, the dry tree that would flourish. His metaphor was meant to **bypass** the Babylonian superpower, while it reached the hearts of the suffering and oppressed. By the time the captors caught on, an indestructible **hope** was **already planted** in the soul of his people. And if I could boldly move on to the gospel, that planted seed of hope would grow under God’s care and become the greatest of all shrubs so that all the birds of the air would take shelter in its shade.

It is a  
comforting  
message,  
isn’t it?  
Well...  
it shouldn’t be.  
These words  
are not  
meant for us.

It is a comforting message, isn’t it? Well...it shouldn’t be. These words are not meant for us. They are for a group of exiles who have lost everything. Their home is no more as it is a place

of violence. Under the threat of death, they have found themselves in a new land, simply trying to survive. Ezekiel speaks to those displaced to plant the hope that will give them strength to carry on, to offer to them a vision that one day everyone, every kind of bird, will find **sanctuary**. God will come through...**for them**.

Ezekiel's words are not meant to comfort us, and if we think they are, we are as much in denial as I was when my relationship fell apart. **We are the superpower** this time that the prophet would bypass to reach those who have been laid low by the circumstances of their terror-filled lives. And by the time we broach what is going on directly, take off our blinders, and realize that every single one of us is implicated in the suffering of these people, we will know hell. For hell is truth seen too late.

At this moment there is a toddler living behind a fence in an old Walmart, longing for his mother who longs for him. At this very moment, there are plans being made for a tent city in the desert outside El Paso, Texas, to house the exiles who have escaped violence and found a very hard heart in the land they believed would rescue them. On this Father's Day, a dad is being deported for being in the wrong place at the wrong time while his babies cry. While we sit here, there are hundreds of black fathers sitting in jail who had the nerve to walk the streets of their own neighborhoods and show some anger when questioned by authorities about their right to be there. Snatched from the heart of their families, they miss their children and their children are learning that none of them are safe. Right now, there are refugees living in wretched squalor, barely surviving in camps, floating in over-crowded boats, desperately **looking for safety somewhere** in the world that regards them as throwaways. If we are not outraged, or think this has nothing to do with us, then we are refusing to see and hear what is being done, or not done, in our name.

We need to remove the blinders of indifference and tear off the bandaid we have placed over our infected hearts. All this ugliness is

going to fester and spread unless we acknowledge our complicity here. What makes us complicit? Our silence. Our denial. Our belief that **we** are the powerless ones. Our hearing the scriptures today and not recognizing God taking the side of the poorest of the poor, the most marginal of the marginal, the **exiles of our time**.

Hell is truth seen too late. As the noble values of our country and institutions – our dedication to freedom, honesty, dignity, human rights, hospitality, justice, equality, our reverence for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all – as these are being dismantled one by one; as the Bible is being used to support cruelty, not only in some little corner of the world, but in the most visible posts of our government; as whitesupremacy and bigotry goes unchallenged and even voted into office; as money reigns as God and God is given only lip-service, and as democracy is being undone and dictatorship praised, we are creating our own hell right under our noses. But will we see and acknowledge it, will we address it in time **before it is irreparable**, before our biggest fears are realized, and it all falls apart?

Hell is truth seen too late. I have experienced this in my personal life. I fear we will experience it as a people, as a nation, even as a church in the not too distant future. It is already here in an abandoned Walmart in Texas. And yes, this message is political...and profoundly biblical, spiritual, and faithful to the God of the prophets. We no longer have the luxury to pretend that we can keep faith separate from politics because a living faith will not allow us to sit still while hell comes to reign on earth.

So, let us pray...

God help us. Amen.

Yes, this message is political...  
and profoundly biblical, spiritual, and faithful  
to the God of the prophets.