

“Who Is Watching a Protest Rally” by John Morris

February 5, 2017

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany



The information desk at Terminal B at National Airport was surrounded by police officers. No one else, really – you would have thought they were preparing a law enforcement rally rather than providing security for a protest against Trump’s anti-refugee and -immigration orders. But this was at 5:30, a half hour before the scheduled start time of the rally. Since we were early, Katie and I walked a few hundred yards down the concourse to get a vegan hot dog at Ben’s Chili Bowl.

Ben’s was crowded with police too. They seemed to be from a variety of jurisdictions: state, TSA, county. All of them were large, bulked up with weapons. Katie found their presence deeply upsetting. It was the country we now lived in, she said: authority mobilized against the people. I couldn’t disagree, but to me the individual cops seemed as puzzled as we were about exactly why all of us were here. What is supposed to be the point of a “protest rally”? What is the danger? Who is watching?

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe

him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn.

To provide the poor wanderer with shelter. That, of course, is what Trump and his cronies wish to refuse, on the grounds of national security, as if refugees were notorious for their acts of terrorism. Well, they're Muslims; say no more.

It's six o'clock now, and when we return to the gathering place, the exiguous portion of the concourse given over for the rally is now jammed with people. A couple of hundred would be my guess; they're also hanging over the railing on the floor above us, waving signs and cheering. One sign reads: Diversity is what makes America great. Another says, simply, Love your neighbor.

Not to turn away from your own flesh and blood. The question now, as it was in Jesus' time, is: Who is "your own flesh and blood"? Who is "your neighbor"? We don't seem to have any more unanimity in answering such questions than did the people in Palestine so many centuries ago. Well, the group here at the airport is clear, anyway: Our neighbors are any who come to us asking for help. As the speeches begin, much is made of the American tradition of accepting refugees and immigrants, but I'm less impressed with that – consider the European Jewish refugees of the 1930s – than I am with the uncompromising nature of the Christian position on the subject. Helping the helpless is helping Jesus, and it's not going to do one bit of good to claim, Gee, I didn't understand that, these people didn't *look* like you. I would never turn *you* away. Oh but you have, you do, Jesus says.

I look around at the crowd who surround me. To call it "diverse" would hardly do it justice. There is absolutely no one majority group here. What we have in common is not visible, is not shown by the color of our skin or the languages we speak. It's a sad fact that some Americans just start to get creeped out when they're in the company of people who don't look like them. Other Americans feel like they can breathe more deeply, surrounded by a fresh rainbow of colors and styles; some of us feel, finally, truly safe in such an atmosphere.

More signs: Shut Out Hate, Not Refugees. Truth Matters. And then a chant,

coming in waves over the crowd: *No hate, no fear, refugees are welcome here.* There's a Buddhist in robes holding up two signs: one says Om mane padme hum, the other explains why Gorsuch is bad pick for SCOTUS. This is what you call spirituality in action. This Buddhist is also a really big guy – at least as tall and broad as any of the police. Katie says, Let's stand behind him, so we do. She is crying.

Thank You ACLU. No Ban, No Hate.

Sally Yates, American Hero. Donald Trump, American Zero.

The speeches begin. We're hearing the voices of Muslim Americans, for the most part, many of them refugees and immigrants. It soon becomes clear that there's a common thread to what they're saying, or maybe it's the way they're saying it.

When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Yes, Paul's words appear to be a little out of context here. The speakers at the airport on Wednesday evening did not preach Christ crucified. Or . . . did they? Let's think about that for a moment. What I heard in all their words was not eloquence or argument. They spoke from the heart, from their weakness and fear and anger, and could do no more than call upon their listeners to *hear them*, to *see them*. They reminded us that xenophobia and anti-Muslim bias are not new, they have merely reached a new level of acceptability – the “new normal,” if you will. They reminded us that white supremacy will always find ways to assert itself. Our speakers' words were indeed, not “wise and persuasive” in the sense of trying to explain why it is wrong to discriminate against the rights of certain people based on their nationality or religion; why it is wrong to deny a welcome to those who need it most. Our speakers assumed we already knew this; and if we were members of the Abrahamic faiths, perhaps of any faith at all, then indeed we already did. Their purpose in speaking was to light a fire, to fan a flame, to make the light brighter.

A Syrian-American woman tells us of the tons of bombs that have fallen on her country. "Shame!" she cries, and "Shame!" we cry back. Another Muslim American talks about the death of her father many years ago, and how she was able to fly back to her country of origin to attend the funeral – something that would not be possible today, thanks to the ban. Her voice is full of tears: "We've been targeted for a really long time. The pain is getting worse. We don't know how bad this is going to get." A long pause. "We really don't know." When she finishes speaking, a voice calls out "I see you!" The cheer that follows is long and loud.

I see you.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

The speakers and organizers of this rally are shining a light. In our own much more limited way, we who attend the rally are also shining. At the beginning of this sermon, I asked the question, "Who is watching a protest rally?" According to Jesus, the answer is, "Everyone in the house." I have never needed faith and hope as badly as I do today, in this dreadful new world that began last November 8th. Somehow, I have to believe that everyone, everyone, in the house is watching. *And then, our light will break forth like the dawn.*

A postscript: As I was finishing this sermon, a federal judge overturned the travel ban. It seems that Judge James Robart was watching, God bless him. This battle is far from over, but for right now, instead of the usual "Amen" to end a sermon, how about this? *Hallelujah!*