

Psalm 1
John 17:6-19

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Midway Presbyterian Church
May 13, 2018

Not of the World

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm for this Seventh Sunday of Easter functions as an introduction to the whole Psalter—all 150 psalms. A door is opened into the world of Jewish devotion to the Torah, God's Teaching. However, the emphasis is not on do's and don't's, but on meditation and reflection on God's ways. Listen to these words from Psalm 1...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson is part of the so-called High Priestly Prayer of John 17. With his mission in a hostile world nearly complete, Jesus is preparing to return to his pre-incarnate glory. Having taught his disciples many things regarding their life in his absence, Jesus turns now to the Father in fervent prayer on their behalf. Though centuries removed from the scene, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we can hear Jesus speak to us today. Listen to these words from John 17:6-19...

Sermon

Best known for *The Bourne Trilogy*, Robert Ludlum has written 27 thriller novels. His estimated number of books in print is between 300 and 500 million. *The Holcroft Covenant* and *The Matarese Circle* reflect the theory that terrorists, rather than being merely isolated groups of ideologically motivated extremists, are actually tools of government or private organizations which are using terrorists to establish authoritarian rule.

Written in 1978 and made into a film in 1985, *The Holcroft Covenant* raises the possibility of Germany's Third Reich rising again from the ashes of World War II. In the book

the leaders of the Nazi regime knew that they were in trouble in 1945, so they began hiding their best and brightest children in homes around the world. They would be adopted by Nazi sympathizers in the United States, Britain, Switzerland, and elsewhere, all over the world. While they would be raised as children of their adoptive families, they would also be raised as children of the Third Reich. They would know the power of their mother country and would someday give everything to serve that country.

The name of the book, *The Holcroft Covenant*, refers to a document that will release \$780 million from a Swiss bank to be used by these unusual children in the future, to reassert the power of the Third Reich. Should the document be signed and the money released, an elaborate plan would be unleashed with a supposedly unstoppable chain of events. And these children would rule the world through the foresight of the fathers of the Third Reich.

The children of the Holcroft Covenant were in the world, but they were not of the world. They were children in most every way, growing up to be young adults, but they were also nurtured in a special way so that they could be of service to a secret plan—*Projekt Sonnenkinder*. In the end they would not declare their adopted nationality, but they would declare themselves to be of the Third Reich. Though they lived ordinary lives, they were something far out of the ordinary.

Our Gospel Lesson from John 17 is part of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" (chapters 14-17) to his disciples, before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. The previous four chapters include exhortation and encouragement for the disciples who would be left behind after Jesus' crucifixion. Here, Jesus prays to the Father for them.

In his prayer, Jesus said that he was not of this world. It was out of God's love that Jesus came into the world. The Eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. He experienced the joy and sorrow of a human being. He was crucified on a cross, died, and was buried. But he was not of this world.

Many different words are used in the Bible that are translated "world." And even the same Greek word will often have different shades of meaning. The "world" is a favorite theme of John. And the Greek word in our text today is *kosmos* (with a *k*), from which we get our word, *cosmos* (with a *c*). But the world referred to here in John is the fallen race of human kind. And it will be a hostile place to followers of Christ. The world in this case doesn't mean creation, or the universe, or the planet on which we live, or the scene of human activity. It means the rebellious element of human beings who rail against the truth of God.

Obviously, Jesus was not of that world, and he said that his disciples were not of that world either. In fact, Jesus said that his disciples would be hated by the world because they were not of the world that was hostile toward God. Their values were different from the values of the world. They marched to the beat of a different drummer. And these disciples were now to be sent into the world when Jesus died, subject to a higher power—just as the children of the Holcroft Covenant were sent out by a greater power—in their case, an evil power.

Though the disciples were not of the world, they were in the world, surrounded by evil enemies and bad influences. And what does Jesus ask for them concerning that? He has no fear for them, given the aid and grace of God; nor does he propose that they should shrink back into a secluded corner of life.

John Milton had little admiration for “a cloistered virtue.” He said in his *Areopagitica* (air' e o pa jit' i ca):

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.

Neither did Jesus want his followers to live the life of a religious recluse. He wants his them to live in the world. Jesus prays to the Father:

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. (17:15)

It is not a waiver from life in the world that Christ asks for us. The Lord means for us to live in the world, although not of the world. He means for us to take life in its fullness as a gift from God, to be good stewards of this precious gift, and to use it for his glory. Jesus wants us not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our hearts and minds. (Rm. 12:2a) As the Psalmist declared in that very first Psalm:

Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
 or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
 but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law they meditate day and night. (Ps. 1:1-2)

In her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn has a chapter on “Ceasing our Enculturation” in which she says:

...our observation of the Sabbath is a special time of recognizing that, ideally, as members of the Christian community we are part of an alternative society, standing in contrast to the values of the world and able to offer to those outside the community the opportunity to choose another way.

And that's what we try to do here at Midway to offer people an alternative way of life to that of the world, with all its divisiveness, immorality and hatred. We seek to offer people the way of life that Jesus taught and lived.

We know that there are good gifts of God in the world. Art, music, literature, drama, business, and work, the ordinary round of things. We should not be afraid of these, nor neglect them, but use them in God's service. Salvation Army founder William Booth is credited with asking the question, "Why should all the best tunes be left to the devil?" Martin Luther once said that he would be content for others to write the church's theology, if he could write the church's music. What a loss it would be for us to have no hymns to sing, no art to enjoy, no literature to inspire. As British Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery wrote of the purposeful and striking saintliness of the great Scottish minister Thomas Chalmers:

Again, it should be said that this saintliness was not that of an anchorite brooding in religious solitude. Here was a man, bustling, striving, organizing, speaking and preaching with the dust and fire of the world on his clothes, but carrying his shrine with him everywhere.

Our Lord's plan for this little group of followers was not merely for itself, but for the world, to go to it, to care for it, to influence it, changing it from what it is into what it is meant to be. To be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. For God so loves the world. What these people were to do was to carry on Christ's mission to tell his story to the nations.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. (Jn. 14:12)

When the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, they were to be Christ's witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

By the way, the children of the Third Reich did not succeed in Ludlum's novel. Truth was not on their side. I am reminded of the late Clarence Darrow, who once defended an author in one of those trumped-up plagiarism cases and had occasion to challenge the truth of a dubious witness. "But," protested the witness, "I am wedded to the truth." "Oh," nodded Darrow, "and how long have you been a widower?" The children of the Holcroft Covenant were people of the lie; while the children of the gospel are wedded to the truth—to the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus prays to the Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." While we are not of this world, we have something much better—we have a word of truth that the world needs to hear. In Baptism we are set apart, consecrated, and dedicated to Christ's service. Jesus is praying for us to succeed, as children of the new covenant that was sealed in blood. And fortunately, we are not left on our own. For he will be with us, even to the end of the age.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20-21)