



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON WALTER B.A. BROWNRIDGE, THEOLOGIAN-IN-RESIDENCE  
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, YEAR B, JANUARY 17, 2021  
1 SAMUEL 3:1-20; PSALM 139:1-5,12-17; JOHN 1:43-51

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

May I speak in the name of our ever-living, ever-loving, and ever-leading God. Amen.

Hello, St. Mark's Cathedral in Seattle. I am indeed Walter Brownridge, and I am honored to be joining you today in worship, even if it is remotely or virtually. My sermon, of course, is just part of my work that I will be doing with you in 2021 as your theologian-in-residence, and I'm excited to begin this journey, as you explore what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in 2021 and beyond in your context. It is also a pleasure to reconnect with your Dean, Steve Thomason. Steve and I met when I was Dean of the Cathedral of Saint Andrew in Honolulu for several years before coming back to the mainland. So, it is a joy to be with you, and I thank you for this invitation.

I am preaching to you today from Christ Church in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, where I have served for the past little over two and a half to three years as an associate. And next month, my wife, Tina and I will embark to

New England to serve as Canon to the Ordinary to the Bishop of Vermont.

So, let's begin with the sermon. As it was said in a movie once, what a week I am having. What a week all of us have had. By all of us, I mean by our nation. The drama that has unfolded since January sixth, and as I preach to you today, just yesterday, that drama continues with the House of Representatives voting to an article of impeachment of the 45th President, the second time he has thus been impeached. It is a traumatizing and challenging period. And when you think about that, this week comes after 10 months of pandemic, racial reckoning, an election campaign. Wow.

So, what happened? If I could get into this a little bit. Yes, on January 6th, a violent and nearly all white, and dare I say, mostly Christian, if the flags and the signs are any indication, Christian nationalist insurrection, a coup attempted to overthrow our legislative and electoral process for president. This crowd was incited by the

words of several speakers, including the 45th President. Now, it is to say that we were all saddened, I think, and many were shocked, though not necessarily surprised, but 1/6 has now earned a moniker similar to 9/11, and because of the impeachment vote, and as it moves now to the Senate, even when we inaugurate Joseph Robinette Biden as the 46th President, our struggles are far from over.

But for me, this quote, political moment is not really the subject of my sermon. It is only the context, the background of which I think the word of God's spoken in scripture and tradition and in reason we need to confront.

There's a popular television show called This is Us. And I have thought about that a lot this week, as many commentators and even politicians have said, what happened on 1/6 is not us. It is not who we are. And in fact, it is true that Americans are innovative and inventive and industrious and prosperous. We are often kind to one another as individuals. You in Seattle, live in one of the hubs that have really created, if you will, the 21st century with technology, like Cupertino, California. And yet at the same time that we have all these positive attributes, humanity capable of great goodness is also capable of great cruelty, often in ignorance and in the frenzy of a mob, can commit acts of great atrocity. **This is us.**

And for me today, the word that I hope to sustain you with are really four brief points about what we as the church need to be about.

The first is to confront our problem as a non-prophet institution. And when I say non-prophet, I mean, P-R-O-P-H-E-T and not P-R-O-F-I-T. We'll talk a bit about what it is to be a prophet.

Second, to look at Samuel as a faithful judge, pre-seer, and most particularly a prophet to illustrate this example, and that really prophecy and being a prophet is about telling the truth. Even if it is uncomfortable and upset people, the truth must be shared.

Third, filling in from prophecy is this idea that one of the things America needs is to listen to prophets and historians who will give us our real story, our real history versus the mythology that so many of us have been fed.

Fourth and finally, so where then is our hope?

So, first, the challenge of prophecy. When I was in seminary and over my 20 years as an ordained person, I have often heard it said by people, frankly, people that I might not consider as Desmond Tutu would say, "They're preaching hope like the Thames river on fire," but they often warn us or warn preachers, "Don't be so quote unquote, prophetic. Be humble about that. Be a bit more subtle, be pastoral, be sensitive, avoid hard and controversial issues and subjects."

But I am fortunate that I serve actually here in Michigan and have known other clergy who have been taught by preachers, that when you have a difficult text and you have a difficult context, you must preach on it. You shouldn't run away from it. And so, that's

when I say, for example, that black folk, the black church has been prophetic that we recognize evil when we see it. Our antenna are up and sharp and attuned. So when we would hear a man years ago claim that the 44th President was not born in America, and that that slurred birtherism grew, we knew where it came from. From the same bowels of racism that my parents and grandparents in Mississippi taught me about as they would drive me around the rural areas and point out trees where lynchings had occurred.

And so now when we hear about the attacks on votes and states that quote unquote flipped, they're not actually talking about Arizona or Pennsylvania or Michigan or Wisconsin or Georgia. They are wanting to disenfranchise and take away the votes of Latinos in Arizona, black people in Philadelphia, of African-American voters in Detroit and in Milwaukee and in Atlanta and in the fast-moving and fast-changing suburbs of Atlanta, and even in the rural black belt of Georgia.

We've heard this song before. You see, a prophet, if you will, as we are gathered together on the weekend, as we celebrate the birthday of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That to be prophetic simply means to speak the truth in love. Although sometimes, and I think this year, it is important to know sometimes, that truth in love may have a little bit stronger tonic to get our attention.

One of those that helped shape my theology and preaching on this was the Reverend Dr.

James Hal Cone, who died two years ago, three, nearly three years ago, the age of 79. He was a Methodist minister, but mostly known as a great theologian who taught for nearly half a century at Union Theological Seminary in New York. And when I went to the Episcopal Seminary in New York, a little bit further down in Manhattan, I had the pleasure of taking one of his seminars up at Union. James Hal Cone is known as the father of black theology and his books such as Black Liberation Theology, Theology of Black Power, Martin and Malcolm, and The Cross and the Lynching Tree, I think, are required reading for Christians if they want to take serious issues that you want to grapple with.

One of his prized students, who earned both a master's of divinity and later a PhD, is the Reverend Dr. Raphael Warnock, who is currently Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist church in Atlanta, the church where Martin Luther King, Senior and Junior were pastor and co-pastor, where the great John Lewis, the Reverend John Lewis was a member. You may know Raphael Warnock now because he is also senator-elect from the State of Georgia.

During the campaign, he was often criticized because his sermons were depicted by his foes as being an American radical and out of touch. But really, he was simply digging deep into the waters, the wells of black theology, of the black church, which enabled black people for 401 years to survive, to survive in this land.

Now, James Hal Cone asked Dr. Warnock, said, "When I die, I want you to give my eulogy." And at that eulogy in Riverside Church in 2018, Dr. Warnock noted that Cone's first book was published a year after the uprisings in Detroit and other cities over racism, and particularly as it related to how the police in Detroit treated people. And at that time, Cone was teaching at a white Methodist college, newly-minted PhD, Alma College, not far from Detroit, and as James Cone said to my class, in fact, he could see the flames rise up from Detroit from where he was living. And all that he had been prepared as a PhD student, quite traditionally studying the great German, Swiss-German theologian, Karl Barth, had not prepared him fully enough to deal with the reality in front of him. In the eulogy, Dr. Warnock said, "In 1967, as Detroit burned, a Barthian theologian died, and the father of black theology was born."

This next quote from the eulogy may shock you. But I feel that it's important to tell the truth and speak plainly. Dr. Warnock talked about how Cone's writing, his words were difficult for many to digest, even at Union at the time, even within his fellow Christians, even people that considered themselves liberal, progressive and so on. He used the passage from Amos, the prophet Amos, who often in preaching, upset people. And the writer of the text in Amos said, "The land could not contain all his words." People were not ready to hear it, but Amos had to say it nonetheless.

And so, when Raphael Warnock in this eulogy a few years ago said that, "A nation is not ready to hear James Cone, but check this. This is the same nation that has continued to tell itself lies for decades and centuries, lies about itself, would one day elect as president a liar-in-chief." You see prophets like King and Cone and Warnock sometimes need to make people uncomfortable, to get them to grapple, to grapple with the truth. That is the tradition of black Christianity. That is a tradition in Latin America of liberation theology. They dig deep into the roots of those Old Testament prophets and see what can they glean, as they try to give a word of encouragement and sustenance to their people and to the larger nation.

That gets us to Samuel, the truth-teller, most unique because Samuel was not just one thing. He was just one of the last of the judges in the Old Testament period of judges before they had kings. And he, in fact, is the one as part-priest to anoint the first two Kings, Saul and then David. So he's judge and priest and seer, but most of all, Samuel was a truth-teller, a prophet.

When you begin in the Book of Samuel in the third chapter, it says, in fact, that the word of God was rare in those deep days and visions were not widespread, but then Samuel, in what we heard today, Samuel, when he finally understood that it was God speaking to him, Samuel listened, called out, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." God's voice proclaimed the message and it was not an easy or sweet message. God's voice is

amplified and Samuel is able to speak to yes, Eli, but also later, Saul and David. Later, another prophet, Nathan, comes along to counsel David and have the courage in David's sin of pointing out David's sin and saying, "You are the man. You are the one who has committed adultery and murder." Samuel is a role model for Nathan, for many of the other great major prophets of the Old Testament who come later, and dare I say, Samuel needs to be one of our role models today.

Thirdly, and this moves to this idea about what is the true American story versus the mythology. And I just simply want to just point out that, as one educated both in American public schools and American religious parochial schools in America, some of the finest institutions that Jesuits taught me and others, that the real story in history that I needed to know did not come from those history books, certainly in elementary school. The genocide of Native Americans, the real horror and brutality of slavery as the roots of the Civil War, not touched on. And I dare say most people my age, and even some younger, the same story exists.

Yes, history is complex and often there are two sides to stories. And yet, we don't even get that. Instead, we have the stories that we tell ourselves or believe about ourselves and other people. And we do have varied and different lived experiences, but we need to listen to one another and truly learn the history and stories of each other. It's what I've learned as a priest, and before that as a lawyer,

and certainly when I lived and worked in South Africa. Truth. Learning the real story is the prerequisite to true reconciliation.

And finally, that takes me to my final point to make. And that is, what is our hope? Simply put, it is to try to follow Jesus. The gospel today has this scene of Philip and Andrew being called, and then they're bringing along Nathanael. And Nathanael before this great quote that we have today, Nathanael had this sort of one-line quip. When Philip says, "We have found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth." And Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And Philip says, "Come and see." Now, Jesus happened to be a secretive, covert witness to that earlier conversation. And so when Jesus meets Nathanael later, he says about Nathanael, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Nathanael is a truth-teller." And then Nathanael asked, "How did you, or where did you get to know me?" And Jesus says, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." And Nathanael then replies, "Hi rabbi, teacher. You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel." And Jesus says, "Child, is that what you think this is about? If you follow me, you will experience and see things far greater. You will, in fact, see heaven open and angels, the angels of God, ascending and descending upon the son of man, me and by extension, all humanity."

Despite the difficulties of the past year, despite the great pain of the past week, beloved Jesus is our hope, and Nathanael, a

paragon of truth-telling, while he may lack tact and politeness, may help us.

Finally, let me finish with just three very basic things that practically you might can do. In times of pain and struggle like what we're going through as a nation, it is helpful, in fact, I would say essential to lament, to cry out to God, "Why?" You may get sad and angry and emotional and cry, or you may shout, but to lament, as the Old Testament prophets and poets did, is good.

It is essential to learn, to be curious, to go beyond our comfort zones and learn new

things, especially about others that we don't know anything about or who we think we know, but we're off in what we have assessed them.

Third, to listen, not only to each other, but to the voice of God, which can be found in each other as well as in scripture and in prayer and observing and discerning. If we do this, my friends, perhaps we can, like Jesus, open those heavens and angels ascend and descend upon us, those better angels to lead us into a better way of living. Amen.

**1 Samuel 3:1-20** *[Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.]*

*At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.*

*Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." [Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."]*

*Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."*

*As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.]*