



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 26, 2025  
NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31a; PSALM 19; LUKE 4:14-21

## RESISTANCE AS CHRISTIAN VOCATION

*Luke 4:14-21 [Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."]*

It's been a hard week, hasn't it? How do we render to Caesar what is due Caesar, and also render to God the things that are God's? And who gets "rendered" in the process?

It is my customary habit on the occasion of the Annual Parish Meeting to offer something of a "State of the Parish" homiletical reflection. But I must conclude that this is no ordinary Sunday, no run-of-the-mill Annual Meeting, no worship service of normalized mundanity.

The great 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian Karl Barth famously counseled: preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. He said so in the 1930s as the rise of fascism swept across his native Europe, and in specific response to the Nazi regime's redefinition of marriage and gender rooted in nationalism and racial purity.

How do we render to Caesar what is due Caesar, and to God the things that are God's?

Or another way to ask the question: We must hold true to the gospel mandates of love,

hope, and peaceful work of reconciliation, but in this moment, we are also looking for ways to resist. Two halves of our Christian obligation: reconciliation and resistance. A Janusian challenge, to be sure.

How do we resist when evil turns its head toward us. Paul exhorts us: render to no one evil for evil. So, are we to be disobedient citizens or obedient rebels, or both, and what does that look like?

For starters, truth-telling is a form of resistance. Jesus models this for us at every turn. It got him killed. To the imperial authorities and their co-conspirators, his death on a cross looked like shameful defeat, ignominious failure, but from that perch of pain and his outreached arms of love, he breathed a revolutionary hope into the world that lands on your shoulders and mine today.

How shall we wear the mantle? How shall we pick up the cross and follow Jesus?

The first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, is attributed as the author of the famous Puritan sermon entitled “A Model of Christian Charity,” in which he implored our early forebears to deal justly with one another, admonishing the rich to not oppress the poor, exhorting all in the new society to work for the common good, and to

mete out justice tempered with mercy. If the colony would do that, he said, “we shall be as a city upon a hill,” drawing reference from Matthew’s gospel. That is the sound byte used to lay claim to America’s exceptionalism event today, and all that derives from it.

But the next line of the sermon goes like this: if we fail to be a good and merciful people, we shall be “a story and by-word” among the nations—that is, a cautionary tale to humanity of what goes wrong when we become self-serving, usurious, and despotic.<sup>1</sup>

I don’t know if America has ever been a “city on the hill,” but I do know that we are on the precipice of chaos, and taking moral potshots at our foes will not get us to safer ground. In some ways, I think the Church was created to do its most faithful work of ministry precisely on the precipices of human-brokered injustice and oppression.

Former Duke Divinity School professor Richard Lischer suggests that we Christians, who see the injustices of this week for what they are should not call our current situation a predicament. But neither is it a golden opportunity. It is our new field for ministry.<sup>2</sup>

He reminds us that we are the religious descendants of refugees and immigrants (Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Naomi and Ruth, to

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/colliding-cultures/john-winthrop-dreams-of-a-city-on-a-hill-1630/>

<sup>2</sup> Much of the exegetical content of this sermon is drawn from Lischer’s essay in the [Christian Century](#), January 2025..

name only a few), and we should not forget this truth. Lischer says, “We have been working from the margins for longer than we care to admit...” We orient [our work of] ministry always in relation to God and to God’s good news, and always with reference to the political and social calamities of our day. It has always been thus.

We hear once more in today’s gospel Jesus’ fiery rendering of the prophet’s words, read from the scroll in his little hometown synagogue before he was known as anything but a simple carpenter’s boy. With courage he proclaims that good news comes once more to the poor, deliverance to the captives, freedom for the oppressed. He said this against the backdrop of tyrannical oppression, as one who had no illusions of control or the need of it.

These are the same words that other prophets have spoken boldly in their time, among them Martin Luther King, Jr., who drew on this passage from Luke’s gospel time again to make his point, which was to preach good news into the crucible of injustice.<sup>3</sup>

These are the words inscribed on the mantle we must wear now.

So, what does rendering and resisting look like?

I suppose some will follow the lead of Quakers and Mennonites who have long held to the practice of rendering to Caesar taxes reduced by that which is spent on war, or perhaps on border control in all its hateful machinations yet to unfold.

Some will provide sanctuary for immigrants and refugees facing deportation, or if that is not possible, some may choose to take their place in this century’s version of an Underground Railroad.

Some may protest human roundups reminiscent of the Japanese internment camps of the 1940s.

Some may find novel ways of protecting gay and trans kids from the cruelties of a regressive government, and from the emotional sequelae of such abusive policies.

If the dystopian empire goes in extremis, some will see fit to protect girls from legal obligation to bear children for the perverse “common good.”

<sup>3</sup> See also the work of William Barber and the Poor People’s Campaign of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Some will just continually be about the slow ferment of ministry that holds fast to that which is good and shares it with any in need. Jesus said the Reign of God is like a bit of yeast, mixed into a full measure of flour, to feed the masses. You bring the yeast; let God use it for good. The hungry will be fed.

Let your micro-vocation make a difference. Reconciliation and resistance.

And above all, the ancients who have trod this path before remind us: whatever you do,

whatever this community determines are the most faithful ways forward, let it be our spiritual worship, which is to say, let us offer it all in service to God, with courage to take up our cross with outstretched arms of love.

And have these words to share at every turn: God loves you dearly, and wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here.

Let this be known from the precipice to the valley, from sea to shining sea.



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