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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Luke 22: 39-46; “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,” by William Stafford

October 22, 2023

“The Darkness Around Us Is Deep”¹

I speak to those who feel, this morning, as though they are groping about in the dark. I speak to those for whom the lights have gone out, those who are having difficulty discerning where to step without falling into a ditch, or worse, a bottomless pit. I speak to those for whom the constellations no longer disclose a fixed star by which to navigate. I speak as one who is also straining in the night to hear well the voices around me, while putting out my hands, trying to touch - to hold onto - voices, lives, that I trust. Let us, then, in the midst of our blindness, strive to give clear signals to one another, for the darkness around us is deep.

Those words belong to William Stafford, a poet who died in 1993. Stafford was a naturalist, concerned about what human beings had unleashed upon the natural world. But he was also a pacifist, concerned about the penchant for aggression in human life. During World War II, he registered as a conscientious objector, and for four years he worked in the Civilian Public Service corps. He lived in camps. He endured the taunts of his countrymen. He remained silent when they called him a coward, or a yellowbelly, or a slacker. Writing about it later, he said, “In camps like that, if I should go again, I’d still study the gospel, and play accordion.” In those years, he learned to measure his words carefully. “Let us be reasonable and gentle with each other,” is what he said. “Let us be honest with one another.” We can sense Stafford enjoining us toward an ever more nuanced form of thought, speech, and action alike, for as he well understood, the darkness around us is deep.

“I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy, a remote important region in all who talk,”² Stafford later wrote. What is that voice? What is that remote important region? Was it that region that Stafford accessed when he made his fateful decision in 1942 to enroll as a conscientious objector? Was it that remote important region that he accessed when encountering the taunts and insults of the public during the Second World War? Were music, and the study of the gospel, the portals through which Stafford entered that shadowy domain of the soul, allowing him to endure charges of disloyalty? What is that remote important region that one can find when the darkness grows deep?

Was it that precise region of the soul that Jesus was searching for on that terrible night in Gethsemane? The Scriptures tell us that he enters the garden in order to pray, and it is clear that he is searching for courage. But I believe he is also searching for the place from which he will be enabled to withstand the taunts of the crowd. I have come to think that he is searching for the inner domain in which he will be empowered to answer Pilate’s uncomprehending questions not with recriminations or further arguments, but with the force of silence. When Jesus kneels and prays in Gethsemane, when he casts about in search of his Father’s voice, it is as though he too is seeking a trapdoor in his soul, a space he can enter, from which to navigate the crisis ahead. Stay awake, he tells his disciples, for the darkness around us is deep.

¹ The title of this sermon quotes the title of a volume of William Stafford’s poetry, *The Darkness Around Us is Deep*, edited by Robert Bly. Information about Stafford’s nonviolence is drawn from Bly’s introduction. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

² Ibid, pg. 135.

It's a practice that Jesus had deployed throughout his ministry, seeking that remote interior space. After his baptism, he withdraws to the wilderness to undergo an intense preparation for the work ahead. When the crowds seek him out in Galilee, he rises early in the morning, to spend time alone. When they press against him on the shores of the lake, he pushes out in a boat, and teaches from within that protective enclosure. One senses, when studying the Gospels, that the words Jesus spoke, the miracles that he performed, and the healing that he provided, emerged from those lonely, shadowy places. One suspects, too, that the voice Jesus came to call his Father, was somehow located in that remote and important space within him. It was only by visiting that space, and heeding that voice, that Jesus was empowered to live as he lived, to die as he died, and to rise again, as he did on Easter morning. The darkness around him was deep, and so Jesus found a way into the shadowy region of the soul, from which difficult truths could be learned, and spoken.

Since the afternoon of October 7, I have thought often about William Stafford's poem, and about Jesus in Gethsemene. There were the first awful moments, when Hamas unleashed its horrific slaughter, and when the scope of it all became clear. But after that came the rhetoric, the solemnly repeated words and phrases, spoken as if they represented hard won wisdom: the right of a nation to defend itself; the refusal to bow to terror; the pledges of unwavering and unconditional support for a nation at war. It is a rhetoric forged in the aftermath of 9/11, recycled like threadbare and ill-fitting garments to be worn again in a different time and place. Words are strung together, like elephants joined trunk to tail, leading into an unfathomable darkness.

So too I have listened as our President promised \$14 billion in arms to Israel, while a mere \$100 million has been allocated to Palestinians for humanitarian aid. Paul Verryn, our mission partner in South Africa, pointed out that it's akin to handing somebody a gun, telling them who to shoot, and then reassuring the victim that there are bandages available. Adding to the rhetorical confusion is the likening of Palestine to Russia, and the likening of Israel to Ukraine. That is as confused and backwards an analogy as any I can imagine. Far better to see in Palestine a reflection of Native Americans here in the United States. Far better to see Israel's aggression as akin to that practiced in this country against Indigenous populations. And yet such perspectives gain little traction. So it is that the old phrases are trotted out. So it is that critical thought is exchanged for cliches. So it is that the players all read from the same tired old script. And so it is that an old pattern of aggression and vengeance is played out once again.

Like the elephants in Stafford's poem, each holding the other's tail, we must consider, lest the parade of our mutual life gets lost in the dark. Like the disciples asked to stay awake in the garden, we must quicken ourselves, lest the non-thought of received opinion should put us to sleep. "It is important that those who are awake remain awake," is how Stafford puts it. "Stay awake, and pray with me," is how Jesus makes the same point to his disciples.

For twenty two years in this congregation, we have attempted to shake the slumber from our eyes concerning the roots of this terrible conflict. For twenty two years, we have traveled back and forth to the Middle East, seeking to understand the depths of this tragedy. For twenty two years, our friend and our minister emeritus, David Good, has been helping us all to see the enormous consequences of this struggle. Yes, we must grapple with the legacy of the Holocaust, and no, we can never ignore the very real and growing threat of antisemitism in the world. But neither can we ignore 75 years of settler colonial violence that have been visited upon Palestinians. For twenty two years, we have listened for the voices in Israel and Palestine alike that have, against all the odds, accessed the remote shadowy region of the soul. And for twenty

two years, we have learned from those who speak lonely and sometimes painful truths in the name of reducing violence, in the name of interrupting the chain of elephants wandering off into the night. We have listened for those with a vision for creating a reality in the Middle East, and ultimately everywhere, where mass killings will no longer happen, but also where blockades, bombardments, and what many now fear will be the genocide of Palestinians, will cease.

I'd like to remind you of several of those individuals now. For many of you, these will be familiar voices that you have been hearing from for many years now. But we need to hear them again now, for the darkness around us is deep. For many others of you, these voices will be new and perhaps unfamiliar. I merely ask that you be open to their difficult wisdom, for they speak and act from that remote and important region of the soul disclosed by William Stafford, and disclosed by the Gospels. I believe that by listening to such voices, we might begin to find our way through the darkness, rather than following the wrong god home.

The first voice I would have us hear is that of Daoud Nasser. Daoud and his extended family live on an olive farm in the West Bank, one they call The Tent of Nations. Daoud has visited Old Lyme several times, and our groups have often made it a point to visit the Tent of Nations when we are in Palestine. The Tent of Nations is located on a hilltop, situated between Bethlehem and Hebron. As you drive up the hill, you pass a stone that says, "We Refuse to Be Enemies." It's a fitting welcome to Daoud's family land, but to his own bearing in the world as well. Daoud's family has farmed that land for more than a hundred years, and fortunately, they have documentation dating from the Ottoman Empire to prove it. Most Palestinians are not so lucky. Like Indigenous cultures in the US, documentation of land ownership was rare. But even with documentation, the Nasser's land is coveted by settlers. It is now surrounded by five separate settlements. Several years ago, someone set nearly 1000 of the Nasser's olive trees on fire. And then in 2022, Daoud and his brother were brutally attacked and beaten by a group of settlers, who believe they have a divine claim upon the land. The Nassers, like so many others throughout Palestine, have refused to yield to the campaign of intimidation and terror they have been subjected to. But they have also refused to exact vengeance for the violence visited upon them. Theirs is a nearly unfathomable spiritual discipline, enabled by their Christian faith, but also enabled by their ability to locate that remote, interior space of the soul. From that space, from that ground, they seek to break the causal chain of violence and aggression. Rooted in their faith like the olive trees that surround them, they adhere to the maxim that greets every visitor to the Tree of Nations: we refuse to be enemies.

If Daoud Nasser represents one way of operating from that remote and shadowy region of the soul, an Israeli rabbi on the opposite side of the Separation Wall represents another possibility. Arik Ascherman is a Reform rabbi who was educated at Harvard. He now heads an organization called Rabbis for Human Rights. I recall meeting Ascherman some years ago in Jerusalem, and he talked about the rabbinic concept of *tikkun olum*, which means repairing the world. That's exactly what Ascherman attempts to do, using his body as a shield to protect Palestinians from violence. Ascherman will stand in front of bulldozers attempting to destroy Palestinian homes. Sometimes, he and a group of volunteers will form a protective ring around Palestinian farms during olive harvests, to prevent attacks from settlers. Last week in *The New Yorker*, Ascherman appeared in an article written by Masha Gessen, one of the few journalists in the US who has been crystal clear in her analysis of both the Russia-Ukraine war, and now the war on Gaza.³ Ascherman had been in prison, placed there for standing in the way of settlers,

³ See Masha Gessen, "The Tangled Grief of Israel's Anti-Occupation Activists," published on *The New Yorker* website on October 13, 2023.

who were attacking the residents of a Bedouin village in the south of Israel. The settlers were being protected by the Israeli military, and Ascherman got in the way. As you can imagine, his is a lonely voice. Few people in his society comprehend his stance, and he reports that there are fewer and fewer people willing to stand with him, especially after October 7. But Ascherman's practice of tikkun olum represents precisely the kind of moral vision the world needs right now. It is a break in the march of elephants, a voice crying in the wilderness, a conscience formed by listening to the voice in the remote shadowy region of the soul. We do well to listen.

Finally, I wish to remind you of two individuals that we always find time to visit, George Saadeh and Rami Elhanen. George is Palestinian. Rami is Israeli. Both of them had their lives shattered when their young daughters were murdered, George's by the Israeli military, and Rami's by a suicide bomber. For nearly two decades now, they have sat side by side, telling their stories. They call each other brothers. Through excruciating remembrances, they remind their listeners of the terrible price both Israelis and Palestinians are forced to pay to maintain the status quo. They remind us that until full human and civil rights are granted to Palestinians, there will always be those desperate enough, and hopeless enough, to commit horrifying acts. So too, they remind us that until Palestinians are treated as full human beings, Israel will be forced to maintain a system of control that amounts to its own form of terror. George and Rami sit with one another in a kind of furnace, and they plead, on behalf of their daughters, on behalf of themselves, on behalf of each and every one of us, to change course, and to choose a different way.

I don't know that their voices will prevail. I don't know that our voices will prevail. But now more than ever, I wish to remind you of the presence of those like Daoud Nassar, and Erik Ascherman, of those like George Saadeh and Rami Elhanen. Each of their voices, and many others like them, speaks from out of the darkness. If we can but quiet the noise around us, if we can but cut through the cliches and received opinions that swirl about us and that sometimes speaks through us, if we can but hear such voices, we may yet stand a chance of finding our own. In such a way, we stand a chance of breaking that long train of elephants, wandering off into an endless night of destruction.

But I think too of William Stafford, and of Jesus in Gethsemane. Neither could be said to have prevailed, not in the usual sense of that word. But in a very real way they did prevail. They demonstrated what it is to think, what it is to speak and what it is to act from that shadowy hidden region of the soul. They show us what it is to retain our humanity in an inhuman world. That is why we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus every year on Easter. Because he keeps alive the assurance that the chain of aggression can indeed be broken. He keeps alive the hope that humanity can be restored.

Thus it is that I appeal to you: find that remote shadowy region within yourself. Find the place that Jesus found, that Stafford found, and that each of the voices I have named has somehow discovered. Find it for yourself. Awake people must remain awake and the signals we give must be clear, especially now. For the darkness around us is deep.