

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager

January 18, 2026 Sermon

Text: Psalm 46: 1-7 (NRSVUE), Isaiah 58:1-4, 5-8, Matthew 19:14

“Stars in a Dark Sky: Teach Your Children Well”

*“Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet....”* Is 58:1

Many of us are trying to figure out just how loud to shout out these days against all the injustices that abound.

What is the best way to raise a child in this harsh climate?

For many of us, it's almost become normal to feel overwhelmed and even numb to the onslaught of retribution and cruelty that has become a daily staple of our federal government. We ask each other, “what now?” The heartbreaking name of mother and poet, Renee Nicole Good, so freshly on our tongues and in our hearts.

In the spirit of Isaiah (from our scripture today), we might say,

*How LOUD shall we shout, Lord?*

This passage from Isaiah gives us a clue: it is one of those prophetic gems to live by; a compass of wisdom to follow. One Jesus clearly must have known well in his time. The prophetic conversation Isaiah gives us between God and God’s people (Is 58:1-9a) is worthy of a re-read. Isaiah is critiquing (as all prophets do) his community in a time of great uncertainty, not unlike ours.

After the fall of Babylon, and the return of exiles to Israel, the community is floundering.

“Is this the fast that I choose?” (v.6) What are the deeds of love called for at this moment? Peering closely at the text, we hear a familiar litany of the prophetic verbs of justice are at work here: loosen the bonds of injustice, untie the cords of the yoke, set the oppressed free, break every yoke, feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. (v.6-7)

Loosen, set, break, feed, clothe...

*How loud shall we shout Oh God?*

The photos on the front of our bulletin today remind me of our purpose and joy as a mentoring faith community teaching and learning from one another.

The four-year-old twins pictured here are part of our church and apparently learning early how to use their outdoor voices! The youth group in the photo below this one is on their way to feed breakfast to those on the street in New York City this fall.

They are our teachers...

As I struggle with my own parenting concerns, I found myself humming a favorite folksong this week, *Teach Your Children* by Graham Nash of Crosby, Stills and Nash fame. Some of the best advice I know of about raising a child is found in these lyrics. After doing a little digging, I learned the song has quite a history, inspired as it was by an iconic and haunting photograph taken by Diane Arbus, called “*Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park*.” Photo credit: 1962.

The singer-songwriter was so perturbed by the photo (which I invite you to google) that he wrote a song about it- which we will hear shortly. Nash explained in his memoir that the image in the photo is of a 9- or 10-year-old boy playing with this plastic weapon of war, a grenade, held in his clenched fist. The child’s expression to the camera bristled with intense anger. “It seemed to me, said Nash, ‘*If we don’t start teaching our kids a better way of dealing with each other, humanity will never succeed.*’

As a new adoptive parent of a very wise teenager: “*Teach Your Children*,” is a song that brings me to tears every time:

*You who are on the road Must have a code that you can live by And so become yourself Because the past is just a good-bye. Teach your children well....*

Nash wrote the song in 1968; a tumultuous and explosive year in our country of colliding movements for civil and human rights; there was the ongoing wars in Vietnam and the Cold War, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and several months later the assassination of presidential hopeful, Robert F Kennedy. College students were rising up against racism, segregation and Jim Crow. Tear gas and extreme force sanctioned by the government was used recklessly against students and protestors. As scholars of that period in the 60’s note, the stability of American democracy was on the rocks. And When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis in April of that year, civil unrest erupted. Allies and friends around the world feared the disintegration of our democracy, too.

Reviewing the timeline of that one year, I shuddered as I compared it to our current moment; the parallels are eerie. At the same time, it also can lead us to consider the enormity of what has been weathered before. The resilient shoulders we stand on- and the strength that represents.

As the late civil rights activist and Congressperson John Lewis wrote, “Ours is not the struggle of one day, one week, or one year. Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appointment or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part.” — From *Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change*

John Lewis’ mentor, Dr Martin Luther King, delivered his speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” in Memphis in April of 1968. Dr. King had joined a group of sanitation workers fighting for economic and racial justice... I remember reading his words a few years ago from the framed handwritten version of his speech hanging on the wall at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery Alabama.

King declared, “Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, “Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?” I would take my mental flight by Egypt, and I would watch

God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt... across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there..."

In his speech Dr. King travels through history and each time says, "I wouldn't stop there..." King goes on, to say he "*I would turn to the Almighty, and say, he'd be happy "to stay right where he was...*

King admitted, "Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars.... Something is happening in our world...masses of people are rising up...I have seen the promised land."<sup>1</sup>

*"Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars."*

The very next day, after Dr. King delivered those immortal words, he was assassinated.

Nonetheless, Dr. King continues to speak into this moment. As do all of those "shouting out loud" prophetic voices from Fannie Lou Hamer, to Bayard Rustin to Congressman John Lewis, the list is wide and long. They are those stars in the dark sky and remind us to keep going, to remember that something IS happening and we are a part of it in the countless ways of our choosing. (Dr King called it a "*human rights revolution*")

Here at FCCOL for decades, we 've been trying to do just that.

Being part of a congregation like ours (however imperfectly) that seeks to embrace the humanity and dignity of ALL people, to face injustice and learn from it. We, too, form a constellation in the night sky guiding one another to light our way.

As a predominantly white faith community, we have much to wrestle with and be accountable in ourselves and our world (as my teenager reminds me). We have much to wrestle with and a long way to go as we seek to dismantle racism and do our own personal and communal work around that painful legacy and our present-day realities.

Just this week, the Council on Foreign Relations reported that the current administration will indefinitely freeze visa processing for people coming from seventy-five countries, including Afghanistan, Brazil, Egypt, Iran, Russia, and Somalia.<sup>2</sup>

Now, there are roughly 195 countries in the world right now. So, I'm not a math wizard but doesn't that mean the US is banning nearly 40% of the world?

Some of you may know I have a rather large blended family with 8 nieces and nephews. We're a bit of a starry constellation ourselves made up of Indian American and African Americans with roots in India, Tanzania, Namibia, Congo and Nigeria. The countries many of their forebears are from are on that banned list. Maybe yours are, too. We are in good company!

I shared with my own teenager and some of our nieces and nephews what I was working on for today's sermon. I told them that they and all children are the dream Dr King preached about. They are the hope

and the stars and the promised land reminding us of what's possible in our world. What *can* be if we teach them well!

When Jesus said, "bring the children to me for they are the Kin-dom of God" (Matthew 19:14), We want our young people to know that Jesus was talking about them-all of them! The ones who just left for Sunday school and the ones across the globe. "In spite of the daily threats to their own child's play, well being and dreams, Jesus was talking about you."

When I was going off to college my freshman year, my mother wrote me a letter I packed in my suitcase and treasure to this day:

*"Wait for me dear, I'm learning each day*

*how to parent and what to say...*

*Wait for me dear and let me grow into the person you want to know.*

*God bless you as you race through life and grant that whenever in need or strife. You'll turn, and reach out, and always find me here—Waiting. "*

We who are on the road together, may we teach our children well and be blessed and energized by their dreams. May they know they will always find us here, waiting.

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager January 18th, 2026

<sup>1</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/ive-been-mountaintop>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/media/news-releases>