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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Exodus 19: 1-2, 16-19; Matthew 24: 23-27; John 1: 1-5

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“The World is Lit by Lightning”

*“Blow out your candles, Laura.
Nowadays the world is lit by lightning.”*

-Tennessee Williams
The Glass Menagerie

Years ago our family spent a summer in Vermont, in a town nestled against the Canadian border. I was newly ordained, and had agreed to fill in at a church whose minister was taking a sabbatical. For the first two weeks I was there alone, while Rachael finished up her teaching responsibilities in New Haven, and so I had more time on my hands than I was accustomed to. One Saturday, in the early evening, after the sermon for the next day was finished, I hopped on my bike, and set out for a ride that would take me across the border. It was two or three miles to a roadside checkpoint, where the guards just sort of waved me through. Then it was another twelve or so miles to a little town with a roadside burger stand that I had heard about. It was great. There were lots of people there, and the summer light was beautiful. I lingered for a while, just taking in the scene. But then I began to notice a few pertinent things. First, it had taken me longer to get there than I had anticipated, and the ride back would take some time. Second, there wasn't as much light left in the sky as I had thought, and some of my return ride would take place in the dark. And then third, were those storm clouds over there, and why did the temperature just drop?

I got back on my bike, and pedaled fast. But not fast enough. The clouds gathered, purple and ominous, like a dark bruise. The sun went down. And then rain began to fall like thick braids of rope. There were no street lights. I had no light of my own. So sparse was the population that there weren't even any houselights nearby by which to navigate. It wasn't long before I was in as thick a darkness as almost anything I can recall, and I was at times reduced to walking, blind and soaked, along the side of the road.

Occasionally, though, I could make out just enough road in front of me that it seemed possible to ride. And so I hugged the side of the road and pedaled, very slowly, through the driving rain, praying that no cars would come flying past. There were no cars - I think I was the only one foolish enough to be out. I could scarcely see a thing. Except for this: at the height of the storm, lightning would flash across the sky, illuminating the world around me - briefly, spectacularly. It

would have been great to watch from a porch. And then I would be cast into darkness again, for what felt like an impossibly long stretch. Then another sudden flash would come, revealing what was around me. Then darkness, then illumination again. It went on like that for miles, and after a while, instead of being apprehensive about the lightning, I became grateful - uncomfortable, but grateful all the same. It allowed me to find my way back to the house without falling into a ditch. I can tell you that I have rarely felt more glad after that ride to get indoors, to dry off, and to crawl into bed. Nor, I should add, have I felt quite so glad to show up at church the following morning, alive and unharmed.

I share that story because there are times in the course of our lives, and in the course of human history, when it seems as though the best we can do is to steer by lightning. These are the moments of crisis that descend upon us like a thick storm cloud, and when it seems as though much of humanity loses its way. But in such moments, there may also be flashes of lightning - of goodness, of decency, of prophetic clarity - that momentarily illuminate the world. And those flashes help to orient us, helping us to trust that we are not doomed, and that we can still find our way.

This is, admittedly, how I have been feeling over the past several weeks since witnessing the terrible inhumanity of what has been visited upon Palestine, and in witnessing a similar inhumanity being visited upon Minneapolis, but many other places in the US as well. It is not entirely new, perhaps, but a moral darkness has descended upon us, and it can feel both chilling and confusing.

Nobody comes to church, I know, to hear a rehearsal of all the bad things happening in the world. We come to church in order to be afforded some flash of light or insight to help us move through the darkness. I promise to do that this morning. But I also believe that it's necessary to name some of the contours of the moral blackout we're living through. And so bear with me for a few minutes. This will be the part of our ride together where it becomes difficult to see the road beneath us.

When our small group was in Palestine a few weeks ago, we never laid eyes on Gaza. No one is permitted to get close. One day, we passed through Tel Aviv, on our way to a meeting with a prominent Israeli journalist named Gideon Levy, who has been a lonely and prophetic voice denouncing the carnage. And we drove past beaches in Tel Aviv that you could have mistaken for Malibu, or Miami, where people were sunning themselves, exercising, and visiting in cafes. Luxury goods were everywhere being advertised. Meanwhile, a mere thirty miles away, the equivalent of six nuclear warheads have been detonated in the past two years. An entire population is starving there, and living in tents. That juxtaposition made me feel nauseous. How is it possible to live in such luxury, in such hedonism, when you are adjacent to a blast site greater than Hiroshima or Nagasaki? It is hard not to feel that we are living through a moral midnight when faced with such a reality. And yet, Gideon Levy told us, no one wishes to know.

So too, it felt like riding through a moral midnight when we visited Fakhri Abu Diop and his wife, whose home outside the Old City of Jerusalem had been demolished by the Israeli

military. He was being punished for being an outspoken community leader. But it's also true that Israeli settlers want his land, along with much of the other land in his neighborhood, for an archaeological theme park they're building called The City of David. Fakhri described how soldiers herded him and his family into an outer courtyard, and then forced them to watch as a bulldozer crushed their home and their belongings. There was a cold ruthlessness about the soldiers. "Put all your most valuable things into one room, and we'll leave that untouched," the soldiers said. The family did so. It was the very first room that they crushed. Human cruelty has always existed, and yet it is impossible not to wonder what went wrong for those young men and women on that assignment that evening, that they are willing to enact such destruction, while forcing a family to watch. It's hard not to feel as though we exist within a moral blackout when confronting such state legitimated crimes against humanity.

The same questions arise when considering the anonymous individuals now showing up on the streets of US cities. Who are all those people who flocked to ICE when it went on a hiring spree? Who are these men behind all those masks, behind all that armor? What makes them willing to participate in what amounts to a project of state terror? Do they not know that what they are doing is neither honorable nor patriotic, but morally depraved? Who are their mothers and fathers and grandparents? Do you think they're proud of their children? Who were their kindergarten teachers, their ministers, their guidance counselors, their high school teachers? Is this what they were taught to do - to terrify and to kill their neighbors? Is this how they imagined their lives in elementary school? I suspect that behind those masks, there is a long line of combat trauma, abuse, broken families, and psychic pain. These masked invaders are to be feared, and, we can hope, they are to be prosecuted. But they are also to be pitied, for they are but pawns who will be discarded when they are no longer useful - like Sean Penn's grotesque colonel in the film *One Battle After Another*. Whatever brought them to the point of donning all that armor and wearing those masks, they make clear that we are living in a moral midnight here within the United States.

"Nowadays, the world is lit by lightning." When Tennessee Williams wrote those words, he had in mind the darkness that had descended upon the world in the Second World War. I don't know that Williams spent time reading the Bible, but for those of us who have just covered the book of Exodus, those words recall the scene at the top of Mount Sinai, when Moses encounters God, and is given the law. It is the climax of the Exodus story, and it stands as one of the crucial turning points within the entire Bible. What are we to make of the fact that when the law is given, a thick darkness covers the mountain, and that the scene is lit solely by flashes of lightning? What does the darkness signify in the story, and what are those flashes of light meant to convey?

I believe the darkness symbolized the inhumanity those ancient Hebrews had escaped, the inhumanity in which they had been caught for hundreds of years, according to the story. I believe the darkness had something to do with the way the Hebrew people had been deemed less than human by their captors, which allowed for abuse, enslavement, and sometimes outright

killing. But I also believe the darkness represents all those times and places throughout history where inhumanity and cruelty govern human affairs.

But then what of the flashes of lightning in the story? I believe they represent the giving of the law, those legal codes that, when used well, stand as a bulwark against barbarism and inhumanity. Those terrible flashes of lightning represent a thunderous “No” to such inhumanity, a shaking of the very foundations of the earth for the sake of justice. But perhaps it also represents the moral and spiritual exemplars who must shake humanity from its torpor, from its moral slumber. So too, it might also suggest those teachers and keepers of wisdom found in all times and places who work to instill empathy and compassion within those entrusted to their care, light by which to navigate in dark times. What if the lightning was that moral center within each and every one of us that knows better than to simply obey the voice of authority, that knows better than to take up arms, that knows better than to degrade and destroy our fellow human beings? What if that lightning is what allows us to see in times of crisis?

When it is time for the people to depart from Sinai, they must sometimes travel through the wilderness by night. When they do, it is a pillar of fire - lightning - that guides their way. Perhaps it has been so down through the ages, including in our time.

If that is true, then we must be a people who look for the flashes of light across the night sky. We must be a people guided by those flashes of clarity. And so, to conclude, let me offer several examples of how the world is, today, lit by lightning. These are, I believe, pillars of human fire by whom we can be steered.

The first is an example drawn from our visit to Palestine. Here I wish to tell you about Daoud Nasser of the Tent of Nations. Daoud stands in stark contrast to the cold, calculated cruelty that I described earlier. Some of you have visited the Tent of Nations over the years, and so you know the story of Daoud and his family. I would love for more of you to know him. I would love for our young people to know him. The Nasser family live on a hilltop in the West Bank on ancestral land, where they have an olive farm. Over the years, Israeli settlements have crept closer and closer to Daoud’s land, and the settlers have been threatening, intent on taking that land. He is a person of deep spirituality, formed in the tradition of Christian non-violence. And he told us how he refuses to meet dehumanization with further dehumanization. He also refuses to be a victim, and so he must be inventive in his means of resistance. But he will not treat his antagonists as enemies. Sitting with Daoud, even for an hour, is to glimpse the radical possibility that does still exist within the Christian witness. I’ll share more about what we heard from Daoud in later weeks, but in this fraught time in the history of the world, visiting with him filled my heart near to bursting, for he represents precisely the kind of humanity the world so desperately needs right now. Daoud flashes a powerful kind of lightning across the night sky.

Next, and I think this will be obvious, I wish to lift up all of those in Minneapolis, and across Minnesota, who are braving frigid temperatures, and who are risking themselves by documenting the abuses of ICE officers. They do so in order to protect their immigrant neighbors. But they also do so for the sake of us all, in order to say that democracy and due process will not be held

captive by criminals and thugs. Friends, we don't know if ICE will show up in the same manner here in Connecticut (though of course, they are already here). But if our time comes, we must be ready. We too will need to be in the streets. That is the only kind of resistance that this administration recognizes, and it is one of the best ways to push back against the flagrant contempt for human life demonstrated by the administration. Ordinary people out in the streets, brought there by a vision of love, of justice, and of human rights - the world is lit by lightning such as that.

But finally, I feel compelled to lift up all the teachers - all those who nurture young people in schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, on sports fields, anywhere. I feel compelled to lift up the parents and the grandparents who take seriously what it means to instill decency and care within their children. I'm compelled to lift up all of those who help young people to grow into compassionate and empathetic adults, those who will ask critical questions, those who will not become self-absorbed or consumed by the pursuit of luxury, those who will shun a fascination with weapons, those who will be curious, and inquiring, and embracing of others. That happens here in this place, and it is worth celebrating. And so to that end, we can all be thankful for the remarkable labor of our Sunday School teachers and adult mentors here at FCCOL. Such things also happen in schools and homes and faith institutions everywhere, and for that too, we can be thankful. It's true that not everyone is open to receiving such guidance, for reasons we often cannot control. Even so, this is a countercultural form of resistance to the moral midnight which surrounds us. I believe the world is lit by lightning such as that.

If you are tempted toward despair or discouragement right now, I do not wish to say you are wrong. But if the Bible is right, to say nothing of Tennessee Williams, the world nowadays is lit by lightning. Which means that we can still see. Which means that we can still find our way. And so I wish to encourage you to focus upon the flashes of light that serve to orient and guide us like pillars of fire in the night. Those sources are many. Some of them are right here. And I am confident that come what may, they will illumine our pathway and guide us toward mercy, a grace which leads us home.