

13th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermon 8.3.17

Scripture: Genesis 3:1-15
Matthew 16:21-28

Two weeks ago, talk of current politics included talk of Nazis, an ugly throwback to a different time and place. This week, talk of politics includes talk of antifa, or *the* antifa, another movement that seems out of time and place, if less so. For all the struggles that we've long had at the heart of our American politics, it's disorienting (not to mention dismaying) to witness the struggles of 1930s Europe take root here.

I imagine you know what Nazis are—both the kind on the march last century across Europe and the kind on the march last month across Charlottesville. I don't know if you know what antifa is. I didn't until a couple weeks ago, and now it dominates all the news I take in.

Antifa is short for anti-fascist, and it can be pronounced *an-ti-fa*, or *an-ti-fa*, or *an-ti-fa*. I tend to pronounce it *an-ti-fa* (though I've only recently begun pronouncing it at all). The antifa first were energized in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 30s, in response to the rise of fascism. Their tactics were confrontational, and often violent—as with, according to Natasha Lennard writing in *The Nation*, “the international militant brigades fighting Franco in Spain, the Red Front Fighters' League in Germany who were fighting Nazis since the party's formation in the 1920s, the print workers who fought ultra-nationalists in Austria, and the 43 Group in England fighting Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. In every iteration,” she notes, “these mobilizations entailed physical combat.”

As fascism withered, though, so did antifa.

But it resurged in the 80s and 90s, particularly in the wake of the Berlin Wall coming down and the collapse of Communism. Then neo-Nazis and skinheads began infiltrating the anarchist punk scene, co-opting the aesthetic of punks and their reactive way in the world. But for however many punks were won to fascism, there were more given to antifascism, antifa.

It was at this time that Black Bloc came into practice, a tactic that has groups of protesters wear all black—clothing and boots and scarves or other face-concealing and face-protecting items. This obscures their individual identities and presents an intimidating front, while also safeguarding them from pepper-spray as the police might use.

It's this tactic we've seen deployed over the last few decades—at the IMF and World Bank gathering in Berlin in 1988, at the World Trade Organization gathering in Seattle in 1999, and at the G8 summit in Hamburg in 2007. We've also seen it more recently—on and off over the last year in Portland, Oregon; on Inauguration Day last winter in DC; and just last Sunday in Berkeley, California.

Their numbers are few—those of the antifa; and it's important to note that, relative to the harm done by right-wing extremist groups, the antifa is a minor concern. But they do appear to be growing, and growing bolder.

Where *my* objection to antifa gets footing, though, is in their use of concealing clothing. This, of course, mimics the Klan's use of white robes, and to similar ends—and this indicates to me that the conflict between white supremacists and antifa is collapsing into a mimetic crisis, which is a danger in human relations that's as old as human relations. What's more, war studies commonly understand mimesis to be at the root of human warfare.

When enemies begin to mimic one another, they are both revolted by yet attracted to one another. They are, it's said, scandalized by one another—a fundamental problem that seeks expression, as old as Cain and Abel, as old as Jacob and Esau. It's actually a quite basic biblical principal, the Greek word for it being *skandalon*, sometimes translated “stumbling block.” But don't let that folksy image fool you. The social result of such stumbling blocks, such scandals, is as dangerous as a wildfire. Such scandals spread fast, and consume everyone and everything in their midst, ever drawing more fuel into their burning—especially in the age of social media. How easy it is to become enflamed by every little thing, and every big thing, until you really can't tell the difference between the little things and the big things.

Melania's shoes: big deal or little deal? Trump's hat: he's selling it on his website and he modeled it first in Houston: big deal or little deal? An orphaned toddler clinging to her mother's floating body. The 4th biggest city in the country built on a flood plain whose mapping the administration just cut in terms of funding. Climate change and warming seas and Houston built up and out to be an affordable city for settle into and succeed in. There's too much.

Incidentally, one of the memes touching down on social media of the antifa features a picture of an open flame above which read the words, “Sometimes you gotta fight fire with fire.”

But do you?

The bush that was ablaze though never consumed is one of my favorite biblical images—and for its being to my thinking most enduringly true. As a theophany, as a revelation of the nature and aim of God, the so-called burning bush most frequently springs to mind as utterly true, utterly relevant—most frequently except for the cross. That one still wins. The picture of pure being, though; the manifestation of the name God would moments later speak to Moses, “I Am,” or “I Am that I Am,” or “I Am that Is,” or “I Am that I Will Be”: this being whose being isn’t contingent on the existence of any other thing but is the thing upon which all that have being have their being: I find this true and compelling.

It’s also true that fire shows up a lot in the Bible, and is used in reference a lot to God—God’s way and nature, God’s will and aim. God is said to be a devouring fire, a consuming fire. God is said to be as a refiner’s fire, something that burns not to destroy but to purify or create. God is said to have used fire as a vanguard and a rearguard for the people as they made their way through the wilderness once they’d been liberated from Egypt, and is said to have instituted fire as a crucial part of many religious rites and sacrifices. But none of these images and uses of fire, while they might recall the bush ablaze though not consumed, come close to the wonder at the heart of it.

Which is this: in this bush we witness the promise and challenge of life that is perfectly sustainable and sustained, of life that doesn’t depend upon the exploitation or death of other things in order to energize or generate itself, of life that is instead drawn from pure being. It’s aspirational, to be certain: this theophany is aspirational insofar as it is to be lived out by those who aim to be people of God. I, for one, haven’t figured out how to live a deathless life, how to eat without having harvested some other creature, how to establish a home without altering the environment and displacing other creatures. When it comes to actual, physical sustenance, the bush ablaze though unconsumed remains a promise yet to be fulfilled, and likely an eschatological one at that, one that will be fulfilled once time has come to an end and the creation is complete. But as for spiritual and social sustenance, I think it’s a different story. I think we should aim for this—a generation of living that doesn’t consume and doesn’t destroy; a sustaining of social and spiritual being that doesn’t create waste or cast-offs or scapegoats

For what it’s worth, this relates to what I think Jesus was talking about whenever he referred to “this generation.” Usually in harsh, even condemning terms, he often spoke of “this

generation,” which we likely hear as some certain group of people, those born between some certain years. But I hear “generation,” in the context of the Bible and most specifically of the gospels, as a dynamic, as a mode or way of being. What’s more, as commonly practiced, “this generation” isn’t a satisfying mode of being, at least not when considered in the light of promises and truth claims of the gospel. After all, to generate a social group most frequently benefits those who are considered “in,” but costs, sometimes considerably, those who are cast out or laid to waste, those who are used as scapegoats to establish the group’s being, to *generate* the group’s being. Sadly, groups are established by those who aren’t included, or by what the group is against. That’s the ugly fact of “this generation” that Jesus seemed mindful of, preoccupied by. Really, our human way of generating ourselves and our societies is nearly without exception deeply flawed, even sinful, wasteful

But the church. But the church—for we’ve already got our scapegoat, right? We gather around our crucified Lord already having cast out the one who will prove to have generated us. So we’re not to do that anymore. We *need* not do that anymore. Truly, truly, all are welcome here because we proceed with a new sort of generation: pure being, a bush ablaze tough unconsumed.

Of course, what follows this theophany naturally flows from this theophany. After all, a God whose being is pure being, which comes at the cost of no one (no exploitation, no death), would naturally call forth people to embody that pure being, people who once exploited and enslaved had simply now to be free—without rank, without class, without station, without hierarchy.

The Israelites, having crossed the sea, might now be free.

It would prove a challenge, though, a great challenge, even impossible.

The people would find it all overwhelming, even frightening.

They’d fashion for themselves a golden calf, which was much more manageable than the raw presence of the Living God.

They would exalt for themselves Moses who would do the deed of encountering God, and on their behalf.

Eventually, of course, God would reveal to them a priesthood, a socio-religious system, and a set of cultic rites to give frame to social order. And it all would involve fire, lots of fire. Purifying fire, refining fire, sacrificial fire for burnt offerings and sin offerings, even the threat

of consuming fire and punishing fire: these were all ways of keeping under control the beguiling power of fire and the sorts of social ills that spread like wildfire. But they were none, to my mind, as enduringly true as that original and originating fire, a bush ablaze though never consumed.

But how could they be? That call to be generative of nothing but being is such an impossible thing: how can anyone emulate that?

So, eventually there came the cross, though I don't suppose that's much easier to emulate. At least it involves a human, though, the cross, one who managed to live by its shape while also by its threat. Yes, he was not just a human, was also the Christ, the anointed one of God. But he was nonetheless a human being—and he knew from midway into his itinerant ministry that he'd have to go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed; and on the third day, he'd be raised. He knew this, and yet he continued his ministry.

Peter, of course, would have none of it. "God forbid it, Lord!" he rebuked Jesus. "This must never happen to you!" But this was in effect to say that, rather than suffer the powers and principalities, which will do what they do, Jesus should seek his own survival, he should fight back and perhaps by any means necessary, perhaps even the means of the powers and principalities themselves. Sometimes you gotta fight fire with fire.

But, no. "Get behind me, Satan! Get behind me, adversary. You are a stumbling block to me, a scandal."

It seems important to note that, just prior to this exchange, Jesus and Peter had had another conversation, this one remembering Jesus to have asked what people were saying as to who Jesus was and then what each of the disciples would say as to who Jesus was. And of all the disciples and all their suppositions, Peter is the one who got it most right: "You are the Messiah, the anointed one of God." It seems important to note this because Jesus followed that confession—which was an exaltation of his status, to be sure—with clarification that being the Messiah wasn't just about being glorious or powerful or majestic; it was also, and perhaps most of all, about showing the way to peace, which is a way that necessarily involves his suffering the cross and that also (incidentally) involves for us suffering the cross.

Now, if ours is not to suffer literally the cross, it is at least to suffer the cross of self-giving love, the setting aside of your own agenda in service of others, in service of the least

among us, in service of justice or righteousness, in service of love. To pick up that cross and to follow Jesus in the way of surrender when scandal tempts us to fight back and of grace when everyone else all around is suiting up and arming up; to pick up that cross and to follow Jesus in the way of forgiveness when what wrong we've suffered leaves us bitter, resentful and of humility and perhaps even shame when confronted with wrongs we ourselves have committed.

As it happens, the boys asked me over breakfast one morning earlier this week, "Do you think you should join the antifa, Mom?" We'd been listening to the news, and as is often the case these recent days, the antifa movement was the subject of the story. And they know how I responded to the Klan in Charlottesville, how disgusted I was, not to mention worn down. They know where my heart is. But they also seem to understand where my life is. So, watching me wash the egg-poaching pan as I do every morning, Tobias corrected their questioning me. "I mean, do you wish you could?"

"No," I said. "I mean, if I had to choose a side, either pro-fascism or anti-fascism, I'd choose anti-fascism. I'm anti-fascism. But for that I have the church. I'm in the church. That's an anti-fascist movement too." We all agreed: it sort of is.

Not always, I realize. Many in the church have been won to fascism, either fascism proper in Europe in the early decades of last century, or at least to leadership these days that has authoritarian strains to it—not to mention racist strains to it, and nationalistic and xenophobic strains to it. White evangelicals have a disturbing tendency to line up behind a strong man, even one whose rhetoric is violent and whose effect is to stir up violence. But the church as it's properly understood and lived out: this should be defiant, even shockingly defiant, of any such uses and abuses of power, or of authority, or even of words. The church is to be resistant of any such deception or cruelty or exploitation, really of any joining in on, and imitating, the ways of the world. Actually, we're to be a manifestation of the impossible—that our being isn't in opposition to any other being, but is a testimony to that by which each and all have their being.

This way of being, of *human* being, is itself the resistance this ideological age demands.

Fights will continue; fuel for the fires of "for" or "against" will be drawn in, exploited. We might even find ourselves serving as such fuel. Through it all, though, the hope will

endure that we're to come upon more gracious way of generation, that we're to come upon the way of love.

Thanks be to God.