

Light 'Em Up and Push It Back

One of the greatest things about living in Los Alamos was how clearly you could see the stars. But not only stars. You could make out nebulas, you could see the galaxial dust of the Milky Way, you could see everything! That city ranks as one of the top 10 best cities to see the stars in the whole of the US because of how little light pollution there was. When you looked up into the sky, you never felt like the darkness was winning. The darkest and bleakest night sky was peppered with the brilliance of the stars and the planets, and it always gave me hope.

But, there were nights when thick clouds would come over the mountains and rest over the city and all of that brilliance was stripped away. And suddenly, *suddenly* you felt held hostage by the abyss above. It was such a stark contrast, and sometimes, it really was jarring and destabilizing because all you could see was the darkness. All you saw when you looked up was a blanket of gloomy emptiness.

That's how I feel right now. That's how I feel after a week of horror taking place in the land where Jesus walked. It feels a little bit like the darkness is winning, and we can no longer see the light. That same blanket of gloomy emptiness, that shroud of horror, descending upon the whole world as we bear witness to human rights violations and terrorism, and the wholesale slaughter of innocent men, women, and children caught up in a conflict that has been going on longer than any of us have been alive.

Perhaps you have come here this morning to find hope, to see the light, to have the fog of war cut through by good news, by better news than what we are seeing on our televisions and our phones. And maybe you've come here this morning hoping that I might bring a word of hope. I've come this morning looking for hope too, because right about now it just feels like there isn't

much hope to go around. I've seen and experienced just a fraction of the conflict and the pain of both Palestinians and Israelis. I've spent time at the wall blockading Bethlehem and the rest of Palestine from the lush and verdant valleys of Israel. I've met people whose lives have been destroyed by Hamas, and have met people whose lives have been destroyed simply because they call God by an Arabic name and find wisdom in the Koran. And I've sat at the table of Palestinian Bedouin Christians who themselves are victimized by both sides of this conflict.

But before we go any further, I think something needs to be said and recognized. None of us are experts when it comes to this geopolitical crisis. All of us are experiencing the shock and trauma of this violence from thousands of miles away living lives of relative comfort. But that does not mean we are powerless. That does not mean that we simply sit back and watch, and go about our lives as if what's happening over there has no consequences for us, or the whole world for that matter. So, then, what do we do?

We come here today as citizens of the world to intercede for those who taste the gunpowder and the blood, and feel on their skin the concussive force of bombs being dropped on their homes. We come interceding for those being held hostage and terrorized by the brutality of Hamas, and we come interceding for all those family members who are left crying into the night because the last message they got from one of their beloved family members was a final goodbye and a cry of dereliction. But we come not only as citizens of the world, but also as disciples of Jesus Christ who come before this altar and cry aloud ourselves, and plead that God would give us the hope and comfort we need to figure out how to navigate through all the pain we are witnessing.

It has always been a struggle for me when, in times of great pain and horror, we are given Scriptures to preach from that, well, almost ring falsely. That's been my experience this week

with Paul's words in Philippians. Would he be able to say to a Palestinian or Israeli mother holding the body of her child, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice?" Would he tell the shell-shocked child looking for his family, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God?" No, of course not, for to do so would be adding to the trauma and the pain. Reducing faithfulness in the face of horror to simply not worrying does not honor the complexity in the chaos of this crisis.

And these words have also come to us this morning, but we too are caught up in this complex web in ways that make these words initially ring falsely. But can there be a truth in them? Can there be good news in these words for us this morning? And it's here that I'll admit that I ask this question with a certain kind of desperation, because my God do I need to find the truth in these words for myself so I can know how to move through this crisis in the most faithful way that I can.

And then it dawned on me. The gloomy clouds blocking my way into this text parted ever so slightly and I saw a ray of something like hope. Hope is a funny thing. We hope as an action, but what exactly is hope other than a lie in the present that we make come true in the future? In this way then, hope becomes its own act of resistance. If it is ridiculous to hope for an end to a conflict like this, then we will choose to be ridiculous right here, right now, in this very moment and cleave to the words of Jesus who once said "the Kingdom of God has come among you." We will cleave to the one who said my Kingdom is not of this world. We will cleave to the one who, even when he was on a cross, found hope enough to forgive his enemies and welcome the thief next to him into the realms of glory.

I think this is the kind of hope that is at the foundation of Paul's words. Not a naive, idealistic hope that is ultimately worthless, but a hope that recognizes how dire the world's pain is and yet still chooses to believe that pain and death will not have the final word. There is nothing that we can do within our power other than trying to make peace right where we are. I might not be able to join Paul right now in his command to rejoice, but I can join him in his call to dwell on what is true, and honorable, and just, and pure, and pleasing, and commendable. I can join him in his call to resist the order of death and destruction in the world with every fiber of our being. What is there to do except make peace and prosperity right where we are, not because we believe that we ourselves can do anything to bring an end to this horror, but because we believe it is better to light one candle than curse the darkness. It's better to shine like stars in a darkened sky rather than imagining that the darkness is all there is. The stars push back against the gloom with all their power, and so shall we.

Push back against the darkness, beloved. Light one candle. Celebrate the beauty around you, and cling to that which gives you hope and joy. Pray for the peace of the Holy Land, and work for peace, justice, and hope right here in Washington, with a faithfulness that refuses to let the world's horror win. And if you feel yourself falter, if you feel like the darkness is winning, go outside tonight. Stare into the sky. See the stars peppering the darkness, and trust that the darkness will not have the final word!