

We Interrupt This Program

Numbers 21:4-9; Jeremiah 36:22-26; Luke 4:16-30

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, (March 10) 2024

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Tonight is Oscar night and one of the movies nominated for Best Picture is *The Zone of Interest*. Now, I have not seen it, but I'm interested in it. From what I've read it is the story of the commandant of the concentration and death camp at Auschwitz whose family lived right next to the camp in a beautiful family home with gardens and a swimming pool in which the children played.

It begs the question: how did they do that? How could anyone live next door to one of the largest and most egregiously evil places of the Holocaust and raise a family and live a so-called normal life?

Every review of the movie I've read refers to Hannah Arendt's term "the banality of evil," which is taken from her 1964 book about the trial of Adolf Eichmann and his role as a bureaucrat and logistics planner for the Holocaust. What struck Arendt during the trial was that Eichmann did not come across as a monster who woke up each morning asking, "What evil can I perpetrate today?" Instead, she saw an ordinary man who got up each day to do his job of coordinating train schedules and transportation plans with efficiency. The fact that the trains were transporting Jews to gas chambers and massive genocide seemed to be incidental.

Arendt asked, "How long does it take an average person to overcome his innate repugnance toward crime, and what exactly happens to him once he has reached that point? ... What makes them capable of acting in such ways?" Her

conclusion was that Eichmann was a prime example of the banality of evil – ordinary people doing their everyday jobs that perpetrated radical evil.

Arendt said the essence of the banality of evil is thoughtlessness. You don't have to intentionally commit evil; you only have to be thoughtless. You don't pay attention; you don't notice consequences and how those consequences effect other people. You don't think critically – connecting the dots of your actions with how they're effecting others. Arendt said thoughtlessness is a result of distraction and going along with groupthink. Often it is a result of denial. How else does one raise children in a nice house with a beautiful garden just outside the fence of Auschwitz where in five years over a million people were murdered and cremated and no one in the household seems to notice or care?

Karl Barth called thoughtlessness stupidity and said stupidity was related to sloth – a kind of lazy “I don't care” thinking. Stupidity has nothing to do with education or I.Q. but is a denial of reality. Bonhoeffer reflected at length on stupidity in his 1942 essay, *After Ten Years*. He called it “willful ignorance” and said it was “a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice.”

Pastor Andre Trocme in southern France was interrogated by Vichy French police officers in 1943 because they believed (rightly) that he was conspiring to rescue to Jews from the occupying Nazis. Trocme was released and stepped into the open air with a revised view of the human condition. “Before he entered that police station . . ., he thought the world was a scene where two forces were struggling for power: God and the Devil,” wrote Philip Hallie in *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. But Hallie goes on, “From then on, he knew that there was a third force seeking hegemony over this world: stupidity” (p.30).

Lately, I've been asking myself and a few of my friends, who we consider to be the stupidest person in the Bible? King Jehoiakim of Judah in Jeremiah 36 ranks pretty high on the biblical stupidity rankings. His short reign was near the end of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, whose capital was Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died in 598 BC and about 10 years later Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by Babylon.

One other bit of information that helps us understand what's going on in Jeremiah 36, is that Jehoiakim's father was King Josiah, one of Judah's great kings, and a religious reformer. Perhaps 50 years before what we're reading about this morning, there were repairs going on in the Temple, and the priests found a copy of what was probably Deuteronomy that was previously not known to exist. Josiah had it read publicly and when he heard what it said, he immediately ordered changes and reforms in the laws, how poor people were treated, and so on. Josiah was open to hearing the Word from God read "over-against" himself. As we'll see his son Jehoiakim was not.

By chapter 36, the prophet Jeremiah is persona non grata at the palace and around the Temple. So, he dictates what God tells him to his assistant Baruch who writes everything down, and Jeremiah says, "Look I can't go up to the Temple, but I want you to go up there and read this scroll to all the people. It's a fast day so there will be a crowd and I want everyone to hear these words from God. If they hear, perhaps they'll repent, turn from their evil ways. Because if they keep going the way they're going, judgment and disaster is coming."

Baruch does as he is told, and it creates quite a stir and word spreads. Some court officials heard Jeremiah's words, too, and they hurried back to the palace and told their higher ups, "Jeremiah is hiding out, but his words are being read in the Temple. He's calling the people back to the true worship of God and saying God

calls us to treat people in poverty with justice and mercy. If we do not change our ways, Jeremiah says disaster is coming.” So, the palace officials respond, “Get Baruch here to read to us. We need to hear this message from Jeremiah.” So, they do. Baruch comes and reads. And the officials ask, “Now these are the words of Jeremiah?” Baruch says, “Yes, he dictated everything, and I wrote down every word.” The officials say, “Okay, give the scroll to us and you go into hiding with Jeremiah. We’ve got to tell King Jehoiakim this because it is important and if he'll listen, maybe we can repent and avert a disaster. But just in case, he doesn’t like what he is hearing, you and Jeremiah had better keep out of sight.”

They take the scroll and start reading it to the king. But instead of responding like his father King Josiah did, Jehoiakim doesn’t want to hear it. It’s wintertime and the king is sitting next to his fire. His advisors start reading from Jeremiah’s scroll to him passages like this from chapter 22, “Woe to him who builds his house by injustice and who makes his neighbors work but then refuses to pay them. ... Did not your father do justice and righteousness and it went well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy then it was well. Isn’t this what it means to know me says the Lord? Instead, you only have eyes and heart for corruption and shedding of innocent blood and practicing oppression and violence” (Jer. 22:13-17).

Well, Jehoiakim certainly does not like the words of Jeremiah, and he cares even less being compared to his father. So, with great drama he takes a knife and as the court official reads, the king cuts off strips of the scroll and ostentatiously throws them in the fire until he has burned the entire book. Rather than hearing a message contrary to his own, he attempts to silence that message. He wants nothing that will upset the status quo. Practicing “willful ignorance,” denial, or

stupidity, the king thinks he can control the truth. Then, in great fury, he gives orders to find Baruch and Jeremiah and arrest them and throw them in prison.

Author Ray Bradbury wrote his 1953 novel *Fahrenheit 451*, about burning books not because the ideas contained within them were considered dangerous to people in power, but because the idea of books themselves – and reading, education, and free thinking – were considered subversive. As Bradbury said: “You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.”

Over a hundred years before, in 1823 German playwright Heinrich Hein said, “Wherever books are burned, men in the end will also burn.” Perhaps we can adapt his quote and say, “Wherever books are banned, people in the end will also be banned.”

The State of Texas passed a law last year that no book can be used in school that may evoke “discomfort, guilt, or anguish.” And many libraries, both public and school, have banned such books as Nobel Prize recipient Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. Good old *Catcher in the Rye* and *Catch 22* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are being banned – again. And anything or everything having to do with sex, especially LGBTQ relationships, especially gay parenting books. And of course, anything having to do with racism. Texas higher education is shutting down offices of diversity right and left, all because we don’t want to teach or read or hear anything that may evoke discomfort, guilt, or anguish. Teaching the truth seems to be unimportant. We would rather deny reality and stay comfortable instead of facing the truth and work toward change and perhaps even healing.

And of course, all this makes me wonder about the connection of banning books with banning people down at the border. I know that in this world of climate

change and political upheaval we have major challenges, but it seems that the way American political leaders respond is by building walls, stringing razor wire, criminalizing immigrants, and sending in the Texas State Guard. In other words, let's be stupid and just block it off and look the other way.

Over in Numbers 21 is a strange story from the days when the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Just when things couldn't get any worse, they get worse. Massive numbers of poisonous snakes invade the camp. And I mean these snakes are everywhere. People are being bitten and dying. They try running but can't get away because the snakes are everywhere.

They plead to Moses, and everyone prays to God for help.

"Here's what you do Moses," says God, "make a model of a poisonous snake out of bronze and put it on a pole and everyone who gets bitten should look at it and they will live."

And the people say, "What?! This is ridiculous! This is not what we asked! We want God to get rid of the snakes and Moses, you're going to put a bronze snake on a stick!"

But God said, "Make a snake of bronze. And when you are bitten – after you are bitten, if you will look at the bronze snake you will live. After you are bitten."

"We want the snakes gone. We don't want the poison. We're tired and sick and discouraged and near despair and now we're infested with poisonous snakes that are killing us."

God says, "You've got to face the snake." As my friend the Rev. Kevin Cosby in Louisville, KY says, "We can't fix what we don't face." In other words,

we must face the truth to find healing. Denial and willful ignorance lead to death by the slow poisoning of racism, of injustice, of fear, and hatred. If we don't face the truth, we die. Our conscience dies, our sense of morality dies, our ability to empathize with others dies, our humanity dies. Our relationship with God will die.

Facing the snake means that we must look at it squarely. Facing the snake is the opposite of denial and the opposite of thoughtlessness and stupidity.

The opposite of stupidity is not intelligence, much less knowledge or information. The opposite of stupidity is faith. In the Bible faith is something you live. Facing the snake is engaging reality with faith rather than denial.

My old friend author and editor Rodney Clapp was here leading us in a church-wide retreat years ago. I remember he told us that their family habit was that their teenaged daughter could see most any movie if she saw it with at least one of her parents and they went out after the movie to discuss it. He said they would talk about the strengths and weaknesses of the movie and its message and then they would get into questions like, "What does our faith say to us about this movie?" Not just do we agree with it or disagree with it, but why and how. In other words, they committed to engaging the movie with their faith.

Of course, the same could be done with books. The key components are parents willing to engage with their children, and that takes time and discipline. It's much easier and lazier to simply get books banned. It's much easier and lazier to simply ban and deport people than engage the real problems.

The Luke passage we read this morning of Jesus preaching truth in his hometown synagogue. He preached from Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor, releasing the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, delivering the oppressed

and proclaiming the Jubilee Year – which means all indebtedness is canceled.

Well, the people are getting uncomfortable and then Jesus adds some comments about God working in and through people outside of Israel. The widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian were used by God. If the Chosen People refuse to listen, live in denial and stupidity, then God will find someone else who will live and act in faith.

The people do not like what they're hearing so the congregation turns into a mob, and they try to take Jesus to the edge of town and throw him off a cliff. In the hubbub he escapes.

Once more, a story of people preferring to be stupid instead of facing and engaging truth and living faithfully.

I was reminded this week through a wonderful blog written by Pete Candler, a writer and photographer out of Asheville, NC. Pete travels the Deep South talking to people, taking pictures, and writing. He recently traveled through the Mississippi Delta to Ruleville and revisited the home of Fannie Lou Hamer.

Without going through her life story, just let me remind you, that she grew up in the Mississippi Delta in poverty and in what was considered the most racist place in America. She had been beaten and sexually assaulted in jail for attempting to register to vote. As a result, she suffered from permanent kidney damage and the loss of sight in one eye. Nevertheless, she kept on. She kept on registering others to vote and kept on organizing.

In Aug. 1964 SNCC formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to expand black voter registration and challenge the legitimacy of the state's all-white Democratic Party. MFDP members arrived at the 1964 Democratic

National Convention intent on unseating the official and all-White Mississippi delegation or, failing that, getting seated with them. On August 22, 1964, Hamer appeared before the convention's credentials committee and told her story about trying to register to vote in Mississippi.

In her powerful voice and presence, and on national television, Ms. Hamer began to tell the truth – the truth of what it was like to be a Black woman in a White sharecropping culture. And what it was like trying to register to vote. She told how ruthless and violent the culture was and she gave personal, firsthand testimony of her beating in jail. She was powerful and tears rolled down her face as she spoke. She concluded with, “All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. And if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?”

All this was on national television, and it made President Lyndon Johnson really nervous. He couldn't control this “illiterate woman” as he called her. At the time, everyone was wondering who LBJ was going to pick as his vice-presidential running mate. So suddenly he called an impromptu press conference to announce not who his VP will be, but that it had been nine months since Governor Connolly of Texas had been wounded in the Kennedy assassination in Dallas.

But Johnson knew this would be covered by live TV. All the networks suddenly announced, “we interrupt this program” for Johnson's impromptu press conference.

How many times have we seen the prompt, “We Interrupt This Program” to distract us from the truth? The people in Nazareth tried to interrupt Jesus and his

program by throwing him off a cliff. And King Jehoiakim practiced willful ignorance and was hoping to interrupt the truth of Jeremiah which was ultimately the truth of God. How many times do we interrupt the program of God with our own distractions or with our own denials?

But the God we know in Jesus Christ will not be interrupted.

Jesus was not thrown off that cliff and instead kept on with proclaiming the kingdom of God and bringing about healing and mercy and grace. And when the Powers of Sin and Death tried the ultimate interruption by killing Jesus on the cross, three days later he came back bringing us the hope of the resurrection. Christ will not be interrupted. Stupidity will not win.

You know that Johnson's interruption did not work. After the interrupting press conference, all the networks broadcast Ms. Hamer's testimony in full for all the world to hear. Seven months later in March 1965 America witnessed the savage beating of peaceful marchers on the bridge in Selma trying to bring attention to voting. One week later, President Johnson called for sweeping voting rights legislation and in August the Voting Rights Bill was signed by Johnson. Johnson changed. America changed.

Even now, are efforts to repress voting, ban books, deport people, deny change, buy elections, and intimidate and interrupt. But God in Christ will not be stopped. God in Christ will not be interrupted or silenced. God in Christ does not live in heaven in denial about this Earth and all creation.

This God we follow engages, participates, and gets involved. And Austin Heights, so do we. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.