

Inauguration Day

Acts 19:1-7

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Many times, before I read the scripture that provides the focus for my sermon,
I try to provide its context --
what has happened or what is being addressed
just before the verses that I'm about to read.

Today, though, I'm going to do the opposite.

I'm going to work backwards.

I will still read Acts 19:1-7,

but, given the violent uprising at the Capitol this past week,

I'm going to start with what happened after the story that is told in those verses.

The apostle Paul had spent several months in Ephesus.

Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor, located in modern-day Turkey.

At that time, it was the most important trading center in Mediterranean region,
a cosmopolitan center of commerce and culture.

It had an enormous amphitheater, the third-largest library in the Roman Empire,

and a large public plaza surrounded by colonnades --

that is where matters of government and trade were argued, negotiated and settled.

Just as Paul was getting ready to leave Ephesus,

a great disturbance broke out.

People were upset that Paul and other disciples had persuaded many people

by what they were saying and doing in the name of Jesus.

You see, they were artisans and they sold shrines to the goddess Artemis.

People throughout the region and beyond

came to Ephesus to worship at the temple of Artemis.

And as they did so, they purchased what those artisans made.

Our wealth, our reputations, our very way of life is threatened, they said,

and if this outrage were allowed to continue,

our goddess, our city, and ourselves --

we will all be disgraced!

People began shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

"Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

A mob rushed to the theater, dragging with them companions of Paul,

people who they considered to be traitors.

The city was filled with confusion,

some were shouting one thing, some another,

and most of them did not even know why they had come together.

This went on for hours.

The city clerk tried to quiet the crowd by appealing to their patriotism --

everyone knows the greatness of Ephesus and its goddess, he said.

He urged them to bring their charges to the courts.
He reminded them of the rules for lawful assembly.
And he warned them that they were in danger of being charged with rioting,
that this was not the way to settle disputes.
Finally, the crowd dispersed.

You know, I've got to give that crowd some credit.
At least they heard Paul's message correctly.
At least they recognized that the call to follow Jesus
was one that would threaten their way of life, their money, and their reputations.
At least they clearly identified themselves as against the Way, the way of Jesus.

I give the angry mob in Ephesus some credit,
because, in the midst of the angry mob at our nation's capital,
in the midst of people waving confederate flags,
carrying racist and antisemitic messages,
yelling threats of violence and wielding the weapons to carry them out,
there were some who carried the cross and marched in the name of Jesus,
even as they pledged their unwavering allegiance to an idol.

When I saw the photos and video from Wednesday,
I was filled with anger, sadness, and worry.
To be clear, I don't know the motivations of any particular person in those photos,
but this I do know: people who proclaim "Jesus saves"
while walking arm in arm with racist and violent insurrectionists
to support President Trump have completely abandoned the Way of Jesus.
They communicate a message *about* Jesus that is far from the message *of* Jesus.
They use the sign of the light of the world
as their words and actions spread darkness.
They corrupt the message of salvation in the name of Jesus,
by striving and scheming to wield the powers that crucified him.

Jesus saves.
Indeed.
But this is not the Way.
The Way, that's how the earliest Christians referred to themselves,
meaning that they centered their lives on the way of Jesus.

But let's go back to Ephesus.
I'm going to read the story of what happened
before the riot in Ephesus,
when Paul first arrived for his second visit.
Acts, chapter 19, verses 1 to 10, from the Contemporary English Version.

*While Apollos was in Corinth,
Paul traveled across the hill country to Ephesus,*

*where he met some of the Lord's followers.
He asked them, "When you put your faith in Jesus, were you given the Holy Spirit?"
"No!" they answered. "We have never even heard of the Holy Spirit."
"Then why were you baptized?" Paul asked.
They answered, "Because of what John taught."
Paul replied, "John baptized people so that they would turn to God.
But he also told them that someone else was coming,
and that they should put their faith in him.
Jesus is the one that John was talking about."
After the people heard Paul say this,
they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.
Then Paul placed his hands on them.
The Holy Spirit was given to them,
and they spoke unknown languages and prophesied.
There were about twelve men in this group.
For three months, Paul went to the Jewish meeting place
and talked bravely with the people about God's kingdom.
He tried to win them over,
but some of them were stubborn and refused to believe.
In front of everyone they said terrible things about The Way.
Paul left and took the followers with him to the lecture hall of Tyrannus.
He spoke there every day for two years,
until every Jew and Gentile in Asia had heard the Lord's message. (Acts 19:1-10)*

If you read on, you'll find that when these people heard what Paul preached,
when they witnessed the miracles he performed,
when they saw the power he possessed over evil spirits,
they were awestruck, and the name of Jesus was praised.

Many of them became believers in Jesus,
and, when they did so,
they left behind their old way of life, their idols, and their practices.
Some of them even left their jobs.

And right before the story of the riot in Ephesus,
we find this verse -- Acts 19, verse 20:
"So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed."

"So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed," Luke writes,
just before he tells the story of its apparent rejection by riot.

Could it be made any clearer that the Way of Jesus,
the life of Jesus, the truth of Jesus, the way of Jesus, the victory of Jesus,
will not be won, lost, or even threatened
by those who gather to violently protect their idol god and to make her great again?

On Wednesday and the days that followed,

I was struck by how people talked about what happened.

Many said that the Capitol building was desecrated.

Others said that democracy itself was desecrated.

The flag, the Constitution, the House, the Senate, desecrated.

It was a direct attack on the sanctity of the American democratic process, said one senator.

President-elect Biden described it as “an assault on the most sacred of American undertakings.”

President Trump wrote, “These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory” is stripped away from great patriots.

Desecration. Sanctity. Sacred. I understand why these words were used.

It seemed that something fundamental had been stained

about how we understand ourselves, our country, and our place in the world.

Yet, when you think about it more deeply,

perhaps it’s not such a surprise that people will rise up in violence for war or insurrection

when our country and its Constitution are described so readily with terms invoking the holy.

“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!,” they shouted over and over in Ephesus

as they rose up to defend their god.

“I believe the crisis in the U.S. church has almost nothing to do with being liberal or conservative;”

Walter Brueggemann writes,

“it has everything to do with giving up on the faith and discipline of our Christian baptism

and settling for a common, generic [American] identity

that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence, and part affluence.”¹

What is sacred?

What is holy?

When Paul first arrived in Ephesus and came upon those twelve disciples,

he asked them whether they had received the Holy Spirit.

They had repented of their sins and submitted to John’s baptism of repentance,

but they knew nothing of the Holy Spirit.

When Paul talked to them about Jesus and baptized them in Jesus’ name,

the Holy Spirit descended upon them, and they immediately began prophesying,

proclaiming the Way, the Truth and the Life of Jesus in tongues for all to hear.

What is sacred? What is holy?

It is those in whom the Spirit dwells.

It wasn’t lost on a lot of people that last Wednesday was Epiphany.

An epiphany means an unveiling, a revealing,

and a lot of truths about our country was on full display on Wednesday.

For Christians, though, when we talk about Epiphany,

we’re referring to the revelation of Jesus as the Christ.

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9711757-for-i-believe-the-crisis-in-the-u-s-church-has>

When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River
when the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove,
and when a voice came from heaven, saying to Jesus,
“You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased”
it marked an inauguration of a new era,
the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry,
the reign of God made manifest in our world.

Led by the Spirit, fed by the Word,
Jesus resisted the way of self-sufficiency, fame, and political power.
Instead, he proclaimed the nearness, the fulfillment of the kingdom of God,
by teaching and preaching with authority,
by healing and casting out evil spirits,
and by bringing good news to the poor, the captives, and the oppressed

You know, the more that I thought about the scripture before us this morning,
the more that I reflected on photos from Wednesday that showed
people in the mob carrying crosses and “Jesus saves” signs,
the more that I became convinced that those same photos
could communicate a deeper truth if we let them.

If we think about them metaphorically, perhaps they communicate
a truth about Jesus that his followers can faithfully embrace,
a truth that I doubt was even considered by the people who were a part of that mob.

Jesus was no stranger to political upheaval.

He was born into it.

Herod was a desperate despot that would do and command anything to maintain his power.

Rulers and leaders rose up against Jesus.

And when it came time, when given the choice,

an angry crowd condemned Jesus by choosing Barabbas.

They chose Barabbas, the insurrectionist, instead of the prince of peace.

But we know something those crowds did not.

We know that the life of Jesus, the truth of Jesus, the way of Jesus, the victory of Jesus,

will not be won, lost, or even threatened

by those who appeal to and seize the power of the state to serve their ends.

We know Jesus saves, and Jesus saves, and Jesus saves

from our sins and its consequences, from our trivial pursuits, from ourselves.

We know Jesus comes into our chaos,

and frees us to follow him to bring peace with justice.

And so what does this all mean for us?

What are we to do in this place and time of great division and upheaval?

I ran across a blog post by Benjamin Jay Yoder, a Mennonite farmer from Pennsylvania.

He writes, “Christians must express their resistance

by leaning radically on the side of love, inclusiveness, patience, temperance,

a willingness to defer, a willingness to sacrifice, a willingness to be persecuted in the short term
for the long-term work of the Spirit.
American political institutions are not, have never been, and never will be
the method by which we achieve the full blossoming of the mustard seed.”²

And so, my friends, in the name of Christ and the church,
by the power that raised Christ from the dead,
I bid you to rise and to walk in newness of life.

We don't know what the next few days, months, years, or any point in the future will bring.
But today is inauguration day.
It is inauguration day because it is lived by people filled with the spirit of Jesus.
Every sunrise marks the dawn of a new era.

May the Word of the Lord grow mightily.
It will prevail. Amen.

² <https://harvyoder.blogspot.com/2021/01/guest-reflections-on-weeks-events.html?fbclid=IwAR0FzCN48iAM4I3G6rYURmac6YuUIH91WRz1bhw19M1hm61TGBOEly2deHU>