

Matthew 23: 1-12

Joshua 3: 7-17

Growing up, one of my favorite films was Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Harrison Ford stars as Indiana Jones, an adventurous archeologist out to save ancient relics from falling into the wrong hands. I loved all of the action and adventure set in various locales around the world against the backdrop of some of the biggest historical mysteries, like whatever happened to this fabled Ark of the Covenant?

Judaism is known for not making images of God to worship. Yet the one notable exception appears to be the Ark of the Covenant, where the two tablets of the 10 commandments were held, and the very essence and power of God was believed to reside.

Here in our story from the book of Joshua today, we find the Hebrews at the doorstep of the Promised Land, yet a raging river blocks their final steps. The ark, their most prized possession, is carried to the River Jordan, and a wall of water stacks up to allow the Hebrews to pass into the land of Canaan. It's a bookend of sorts - the Hebrews' journey begins in Exodus, in escaping Egypt, with a wall of water, a passage through the impossible, a way made in the wilderness. Now it's 40 years later, they now enter a new land also aided by a wall of water and a passage through to the Promised Land, finally. But they have some upgrades as well, including replacing Moses' staff with a golden box carried by the priests, and they have also changed leaders, as Moses has died and Joshua has taken over.

It's poetic in the way their journey ends how it began, and yet there's also a feeling of reversal. Instead of exiting the land they are now entering. And instead of being driven out, they are now the ones driving out denizens living there...

All the while emboldened by the power of this ancient relic, the Ark of the Covenant. As long as they had the Ark, there was a feeling they would be unstoppable. Not even the floodwaters of the mighty River Jordan would stand in their way.

Is this the sign of the living God, with upcoming scenes of death and destruction in the land of Canaan?

Are we to drive out all those who disagree with us or who are not part of our tribe?

Are we assured victory with God on our side?

There is a danger in worshipping ancient relics. I would argue that for Americans, the relic we most worship is the Constitution, which begins with this famous preamble: “*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*”

Justice William J. Brennan asserted that “*the Constitution will endure as a vital charter of human liberty as long as there are those with the courage to defend it, the vision to interpret it, and the fidelity to live by it.*”

I wonder: Where is that courage to defend the Constitution today? Who has the vision to interpret it? And will we as a nation live by it? Or will we use this ancient relic to drive out all those who disagree?

As Abraham Lincoln stepped into the office of the President, with the nation on the brink of war, he made a bold stance that we cannot let a state leave the union, for if we do, we are no longer the United States. We must pursue a more perfect union not by jettisoning those who disagree with us, but by maintaining connection and civility wherever possible.

If we are to establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, promote the general welfare of all and pass on the blessing of liberty... we are going to have to do it, together.

After 9/11, I remember the slogans, plastered on t-shirts and billboards: *United We Stand. Divided We Fall.* We are now nine months into an ongoing 9/11 that just won't stop. Nearly a quarter-million Americans dead. Ten million infected. For every one person who has died, there is an estimated average of nine others who are grieving. We are a world divided. Disease has sewn division and we now live in The Divided States of America.

When living in a pandemic, we are all living under a constant threat: of illness, job loss, of conflict. It's a constant feeling of “I am not safe here.” In fact, I don't know of anywhere that does feel safe. Each of us is feeling some sort of this anxiety, and we start to act less rational as our inner demons lead us to insidious deeds.

And amidst all of this, we have an election. Our current president received about 10 million more votes than he did in 2016, the most votes any candidate has ever received; except one man, President-Elect Joe Biden, who has received 77 million votes and counting, 5 million more than the current president. Biden is now on course to receive 306 electoral votes, the same as Trump in 2016.

Perhaps this can be perceived as a poetic reversal. Just as the Hebrews exited the promised land through the creational waters of the Red Sea, now they enter the promised land through the baptismal waters of the Jordan. It's a new birth of sorts, yet as they march into the land of Canaan, there are those living there who are now fearful of their own livelihoods. In this reversal, we as Americans would do well to remember that for all those celebrating victory, there is almost an equal number of people fearful and mistrustful of what happens next.

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As Americans turned out to vote, we also turned up the volume. Yet still we remain divided, a split electorate mirroring a split government. And if our leaders do not learn to cooperate, the seeds of discord will continue to be sewn.

In this time, we heard these words from Matthew as Jesus speaks of the leaders in his time. If our leaders continue to “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others,” we are not in this together. If our leaders are not “willing to lift a finger” to help those who are burdened, then we are not in this together.

I fear we as a people are both helpless and hopeless. We are too powerful to hurt each other too easily, yet also we are not powerful enough to heal effectively.

Individuals may separate or divorce, for each is mobile and can go his or her own way. But when it comes to a nation - to a people - it comes to livelihood. You cannot divorce from that which sustains you. You can be driven out, as the Hebrews did to all the other tribes, yet our pursuit of purity will not lead to perfection. Purity is not to be confused with perfection. If we are to live together we cannot divorce each other. We must find common ground on which we can both stake our livelihoods.

As the song goes, *This land is your land, this land is my land*. We cannot fall back on the noble lie that we were here first. We were not. We only occupy this land. We can see the land as an inheritance from our ancestors, or as a gift on loan from our future children and all those who come after us.

Above all, we must not return to the divisive language of recent memory:

Go back to where you came from... but I am from here.

Well, if you hate America so much... but I love America, so very much.

You have no right... Oh, but I do have a right, just as much as you.

If we are ever going to feel safe again, we are going to need to do this together.

The Hebrews made the mistake of putting away their Holy Scriptures, of idolizing them in the Ark that literally had superpowers. Yet did they use that power for good or ill? There they stood on dry ground in the

River Jordan, allowing their people to pass unscathed, yet they ultimately failed to find the common ground with their brothers and sisters they found on the other side. We see a modern form of this ancient conflict in the ongoing apartheid in Israel-Palestine today.

But it's not just there, it's here as well. As we hear in the Gospel of Matthew today, Jesus implores his followers to listen to the Holy teachings and do what is said from the seat of Moses, but do not do what those who sit in that seat are doing. Rather than exalt anyone to Teacher or Father, we are called to exalt only God the Parent and Christ the Child. For as children of God, we are called to serve each other as humble servants. When things fall apart, we must come together.

In her TED Talk, *The Radical Act of Choosing Common Ground*, Nisha Anand tells the story of her family at the time the British pulled out of India after World War II. Upon their departure, the British drew a line that partitioned what is now Pakistan and India, and said all Muslims must go north and all Hindus must go south. 15 million people were forced to uproot their lives and cross this arbitrary border, one way or another, and 2 million died. To this day, it is the largest forced migration in human history.

Her father was the youngest, a baby in a Hindu family, and they went into hiding on the “wrong” side of the border with a Muslim family. One day, soldiers entered the home, looking for these families in hiding, these people who didn't belong, and her dad, as a baby, started crying. As her grandmother tried to console the baby, her grandfather made the decision to sacrifice his grandson in order to save the family.

In that moment, her dad stopped crying. Yet the soldiers still held the Muslim family at gunpoint, demanding they turn over anyone they might be hiding. The father of that family chose to sacrifice his family in that moment, swearing on the Q'uran that there was no one hiding in their household.

In that moment, this Muslim man chose his shared humanity over the politics or religion of the day. He chose love over that religion. In that moment, he followed what Jesus asserts - to follow the teachings of a radical hope in a never-ending love... rather than the politics of the day.

We no longer live in the same world, but we still have choices to make, to choose humanity over our tribe. The internet is a great tool to connect us yet it's been siloed into echo chambers that divide us. We are now forced to choose between the commons and that which divides us.

We all have borders we face and rivers to cross. What is that raging river you are afraid to cross? Where might you find the courage to step into that river, to go to the other side, to find common ground with those whom you may vehemently disagree? May you step into that river and find your courage. As Winston Churchill notes, “*Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision.*”

When we choose common ground, we choose love. We choose the high road and the hard work, the path less traveled yet all the others lead to death and mutual destruction.

A More Perfect Union

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A more perfect union doesn't come by keeping out the immigrant or ignoring the poor. It doesn't mean keeping in only those like you or demonizing others. In fact, it means including them, even inviting them in.

As we await a decision from our leaders, let us not give into division amongst ourselves. The church, at its best, can be model of this love to heal our divisions, to look beyond the raging rivers and find that peace and the radical hope that God is doing something, here and now, binding us together as one people, to form a more perfect Union and establish Justice, Peace, and the general Welfare of all... and secure the Blessings of Liberty for all.

No one knows what happened to the Ark. It has disappeared from history yet remains active in movie lore and our imaginations. Yet here and now, we have the opportunity to become Raiders of the Lost Ark of Love.

Allow me to close as Lincoln did in his first inaugural address to his fellow countrymen and women: *"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."*

God help us find those better angels of our nature. I believe with God's help, and having a little faith in each other, and a little courage to step out and step in, I believe we will. To God be all the Glory, Forever, Amen.

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