

SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

From an 8/13/16 column in the WSJ by Peggy Noonan.

“Recently I spoke with an acquaintance of Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, and the conversation quickly turned to her decisions on immigration. Last summer when Europe was engulfed with increasing waves of migrants and refugees from Muslim countries, Ms. Merkel, moving unilaterally, announced that Germany would take in an astounding 800,000 and more than a million came. The result has been widespread public furor over crime, cultural dissimulation and fears of terrorism. From such a sturdy, grounded character as Ms. Merkel the decision was puzzling—uncharacteristically romantic about people. Ms. Merkel’s acquaintance agreed but he believed the chancellor was operating in pursuit of ideals. As the daughter of a Lutheran minister, someone who grew up in East Germany, Ms. Merkel would have natural sympathy for those who feel marginalized and displaced. Moreover she is attempting to provide a kind of counter-statement, in the 21st century, to Germany’s great sin of the 20th. The historical stain of Nazism, the murder and abuse of the minority, will be followed by the moral triumph of open arms toward the dispossessed. That’s what’s driving her decision, said the acquaintance.”

Something is happening in our world. In a lot of parts of the world. The plates beneath the surface of the earth, plates on which all the continents rest, are called tectonic plates. Enormous. Hidden from our sight. And they are moving all the time. Sometimes very slowly and sometimes tumultuously. Well, politically there are also tectonic plates beneath the culture and realities of each nation and there seem to be some pretty tumultuous things going on there right now. My only other experience of such a phenomenon was in my 20’s, in the late 1960’s, when a similar worldwide cultural upheaval was underway. I just didn’t know then that that’s what was going on. Few really did until much later and looking back.

But these things happen throughout history. The first reading today from the prophet Jeremiah depicts such a time. The kingdom of Israel has been split in two. Assyria has attacked and defeated Israel. Judah, the southern portion of the kingdom, is all that is left. Then Assyria is defeated by Babylon. Babylon is coming after Judah and its capital Jerusalem. Judah had had a good king, Josiah, a faithful and fair king. He was killed in battle. There was no one his equal to become king. The man who did, Zedekiah, was indecisive and controlled by his nobles, the princes of Judah. Jeremiah had been a confidant of the former king but became critical of those in power and the people who had abandoned their Jewish religion and turned to false gods, the gods of military might. Jeremiah challenged the powerful and the people. He was not a popular man. Jeremiah had been given a message by the Lord to tell King Zedekiah to surrender to the King of Babylon and then the people of Judah would be spared. But what would happen to Zedekiah and his princes? No thanks. The king and his princes were not the least interested.

Zedekiah could not decide. The princes did. They got rid of Jeremiah and threw him into an empty cistern to die. Jeremiah is rescued. Eventually Zedekiah and his princes go to war with Babylon and are defeated. They are carried off anyway. The people are terribly destroyed instead of being saved and Jeremiah is left to console the wounded who remain. Who really spoke the truth? Who listened for God’s guiding words? It is not that God’s guidance was not available. It is that everyone claimed to be

speaking the truth. Everyone. But the reality was that many who claimed the truth were actually speaking self-serving lies while claiming to be caring about the people. Jeremiah, who really was speaking the truth, struggled to have his voice heard. Does any of this sound vaguely familiar? Jeremiah's whole world was going up in flames.

Fast forward seven hundred years to the first century AD. The time of Jesus. Not so much A prophet as THE Prophet. The One who is coming into the world. Jesus is God's Word. Jesus comes to renew the face of the earth. To restore order. To restore truth to our world. But in order to do that he had to challenge those who were in power, spiritually and politically. Jesus spoke with the power of God. Jesus acted with the power of God. Jesus spoke God's truth to all in power. He was accused of being possessed and a rebel. He was judged expendable and those in power made the decision to do away with him—but always with plausible deniability. In other words, lying about what was really going on.

Pick up the thread of this story in today's gospel reading. Jesus says: "I have a baptism to undergo and oh how I yearn for it to come to pass. I have come to light a fire on the earth." A fire. A fire? Like the forest fires that sweep through southern California and our National Parks which are destructive but then completely life giving with new life and growth. Yes, that kind of fire. It is not the destructive fire of hell. It is the transforming fire that is love. And Truth. And you and I have to pay attention and we have to decide who today really is speaking the truth because all claim to be. And we have to decide who speaks the voice of Our Lord because many claim to be.

I know this much. The Truth does not speak words that appeal to the baser desires of our hearts. The truth challenges our selfishness. The truth makes demands on us to change our ways. The truth burns away the dross from our lives. Those who speak the truth to us do not say things we want to hear. They speak the words we need to hear. Hard to accept words at times. Jesus' fire destroys the false and allows real growth. Jesus' word is about forgiveness and grace. But Jesus' word makes demands. We are in competition with the powers of selfishness and self-interest. So in the time of battle two will be set against three and three against two. Yes there will be division. For a time. But the power of love unleashed by Jesus Christ can never be extinguished. We have to align ourselves with him and with that power. We cannot hate the other but we must remain steadfast in the truth at all times. And we have to realize that the daily bread we need is because we are in a daily conflict. But remember this. The outcome is already assured and the victory has already been won. But the Lord needs our fidelity to spread his truth.