

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.¹

I speak to you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

OPENING:

We do a lot of our grocery shopping at *Trader Joe's*, or rather we did before the pandemic hit. One of my favorite parts of the *Trader Joe's* shopping experience are the colorful murals painted on the walls. These mural are an attempt to place the particular store in its local context, to highlight cultural and historical landmarks specific to the surrounding area.

When we were at Seminary, we used to do a lot of our *Trader Joe's* shopping at the one in Bailey's Crossroads. The murals at that store, of course, depict the famous circus that would eventually lend its name to the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus Company.

There's also a mural at that store of a review of the Union Army in November 1861, during the Civil War, which was attended by none other than President Abraham Lincoln.²

Also in attendance at that review was the poet and activist Julia Ward Howe. So inspired by the sight of the Union troops was Julia Ward Howe that, that night, she woke from a deep sleep that night to pen the words for the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

The first verse is probably familiar to you:

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.³*

¹ Matthew 10.34.

² "Lincoln Reviews Troops at Bailey's Crossroads." *The Historical Marker Database*. <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=180> (Accessed June 19, 2020).

³ Julia Ward Howe. "Battle Hymn of the Republic." *Library of Congress*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihms.200000003>. (Accessed June 19, 2020)

HYMN:

What caught my eye is that image of God's "terrible swift sword" reaching out to cut the "grapes of wrath."

A word of personal biography:

I grew up in small-town Virginia, steeped in the history of the Confederacy. So, I heard and sang those words with some degree of confusion, given that they referenced my region of the country, and my ancestors fought for the Confederate army and who owned slaves. That's perhaps a sermon for another day, or maybe, for the rest of my life.

GOSPEL

Jesus again said: *I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

I have been thinking about that hymn, about our common connection to it, in order to try, in some way, to place ourselves into Matthew's Gospel's context, and to wonder what we are supposed to take from them, given our own context, in our own moment of division and injustice.

Lincoln spoke of "mystic chords of memory" and so Julia Ward Howe had images from the prophets Isaiah and Amos in her mind when she came up with the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*.⁴

Jesus had similar images, from the prophets Ezekiel and Micah, when he was delivering his speech to the disciples. So Jesus cites the Old Testament lines about splitting one's family up with prophetic righteousness.⁵

INCARNATION:

But this is a strange and difficult text to hear, on any day, but especially today, on Father's Day.

My first reaction to this passage was something like: "How dare Jesus suggest we

⁴ Snyder, Edward D. "The Biblical Background of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic"." *The New England Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1951): 231-38.

⁵ Micah 7.6; Sim, David. "The Sword Motif in Matthew 10:34" *HTS Theologise Studies / Theological Studies*, 56 no. 1 (14 December 2000). 97.

break up families? How dare he suggest that we turn son against father, and daughter against mother?”

I need to remind myself that Jesus knew these passages at the heart of his self, so he is not using these words casually, or rhetorically.

This idea of getting one’s family cut in half by a sword, was not a misty callback to another era but, rather something that he knew deep in his bones.

Jesus knew about the sword from listening to his mother talking about one piercing her heart, with that terrible prophecy which greeted his birth.⁶

Jesus knew about the sword, because Jesus’ ministry had cut his family off from himself, with all those agonizing verses about how his biological family is not his real one.⁷

Finally, Jesus would know about the sword when he would ultimately be separated from the Father by the Cross, and he would know the pain of that separation.⁸

SHIFT

So it’s deeper than a hypothetical or a philosophical pronouncement for Jesus. The Good News is that it shows Jesus is willing to go where he tells us to go, that he has already gone there before, that he is willing to go where we have not.

Always, in these types of passage, it’s descriptive, not prescriptive, it’s the indicative mood, not the imperative.

Jesus is describing reality for himself, and for us who look to follow him as disciples. He is providing clarity about what our spiritual journey’s will look like, not engaging in scare tactics.⁹

TODAY:

And so, for Christ’s sake, know that Jesus is being metaphorical here, when he is talking about a sword.¹⁰ If there is anything constant in the New Testament about Jesus’ ministry, it’s non-violence.

⁶ Luke 2.35

⁷ Mark 3.21, 3.33-35

⁸ Matthew 27.46.

⁹ Willard, Dallas. “How to be a Disciple.” *Christian Century* (April 22-28, 1998). 434.

¹⁰ Hays, Richard B. 2004. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 332-3.

The question is: how do we wield that metaphoric sword? How do we recognize it? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that: “The Cross is God’s sword on earth.”¹¹ That’s what Jesus is talking—a weapon that comes out of vulnerability, out of servanthood, out of telling the truth, out of openness and self-giving.

Now it might still hurt, that sword, like a surgery that excises and cauterizes a wound. Maybe even more than physical pain, that type of pain that divides families. Perhaps we are facing something like that now: with families divided, deep animosities exposed over the racial and political tensions that we face.

CONCLUSION:

I am going to end as I started by talking about Julia Ward Howe and her song: After spending that day in November 1861 watching a review of Union Troops in Bailey’s Crossroads, near the Trader Joe’s, about 10 miles from here, Howe then travelled back to her hotel, the famous Willard Hotel in DC, where she would be awakened to write her famous hymn.

100 years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. would spend the night in the same hotel, the Willard, as he prepared and worked on his “I Have a Dream Speech” for the March on Washington.¹²

Both of them clearly had the images from Scriptures in their head, and so their creative output was merely the last step in a lifetime of discipleship, activism, and study of the Bible.

I wonder about the songs and speeches that are being created today. I wonder who the ‘Julia Ward Howe’s’ and the ‘Martin Luther King, Jr.s’ are being informed by today’s context, and by our common “mystic chords of memory.”

I hope and pray that they are informed by Jesus’ words, even the difficult ones like we read today. I pray that we all might recognize God’s sword on earth as the Cross, and learn to pick it up daily. **AMEN.**

¹¹ Quoted in Stanley Hauerwas. 2015. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos. 108-109.

¹² “The Willard Hotel is Subject of Display in American Treasures Exhibition” (March 30, 2006). *Library of Congress*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-06-072/the-willard-hotel-is-subject-of-display-in-american-treasures-exhibition/2006-03-30/>. (Accessed on June 19, 2020).