

190811 Faith, Hope, and Realities Unseen: A Sermon in the Wake of the El Paso Shooting, and following the ELCA Churchwide Assembly

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We've had a week to grieve. Some of you saw the photos Pastor Wayne took in El Paso as he and members of Mt. Hope Lutheran took time to pray and honor the precious children of God whose lives were so brutally taken, just a couple of miles away from their church.

Kyrie eleison. Sometimes we just need to use the ancient prayer of the church. Lord have mercy.

And on Tuesday night some from *this* church went over to the Temple Beth-El here in Las Cruces, where, among other things, we prayed the prayer Rabbi Larry Karol had written on the very afternoon of the shootings:

(... shall we bow our heads for a moment of prayer)

*Eternal our God, heal our hearts, calm our fears,
Douse the flames of burning anger inside of us
So our actions will reflect love and deflect hate,
Exude deep respect and reject violence;
So our eyes when they see fellow human beings,
Will stop us from inflicting hurt
And direct us to spread hope.
Give us protection with every step of our lives. Amen¹*

The shooting in Dayton was awful too -- but El Paso. So close. Lots of us go to Walmart, right? Many of you have been to that exact Walmart ... My neighbor had been there the week before, buying back to school supplies for *his* kids.

On Friday, court documents were unsealed, that verified, what most of us already knew, the shooter *was* targeting people of Mexican descent.

Meanwhile this week, the ELCA, our wider church body, at their once every three years national assembly, affirmed, loud and clear, that racism and any type of white supremacy are sins:

¹ (published 1:30 pm, August 3, 2019 on Facebook)¹

For... *In the beginning, God created us, in the image of God, God created us...* [Genesis 1:27] and each of us no matter our color or ethnic origin have the breath of God in us. Each human life is infinitely sacred.

At this point, we Lutherans happen to have a majority of members who are white Anglo - but it's not because God prefers any particular of the many colors and shades of people God Himself created,

in fact, worldwide the majority of the 2.3 billion Christians in the world, have African, Asian, or Latin American faces, and we can't ever forget that our Lord Jesus and his mother Mary certainly had brown skin, dark hair and brown eyes.

Even 80 million Lutherans Christians worldwide are mostly people of color; the ELCA happens to be majority white mostly because in America, Lutheran churches were *mostly* started by immigrants or their children from Northern Europe – Germany, Norway, Denmark, Finland, who were fleeing war or looking for a freer, and safer place to live, create opportunities for their families.

So it's an accident of history that our Lutheran churches tend to be anglo white but most of us long for the day when we Lutherans become a more colorful, mosaic of a church, the way God *intended* churches to be.

What does all of this have to do with God's word to us today? Today the Holy Scripture reminds us loud & clear:
no matter who or what color our *physical* ancestors are,

our *spiritual* ancestors, as Christians, are Abraham and Sarah, immigrants from the land of Ur in the Middle East, God called them to leave *their* country and family, to begin a new life and become a blessing for people of all ethnicities.

I love the story of Abraham and Sarah, and not only because God called them to new faith when their faces were already wrinkled and their hair white, they were both in their 70's when their real adventures began...

But I also love their story because of today's passage in Genesis 15. It's hard for old man Abram to believe that God is going to yet work through him and old Sarah, to bring something beautiful into the world.

Then, God brings Abram outside at night. *Look up*, God says. Try to count the stars. So shall you descendants be.

Any astronomer can tell us how stars have different colors and sizes and characteristics-

There are stars with tails,
 The Methuselah star which is older than the universe (figure that one out)
 Dwarf stars
 Racing stars,
 Binary stars,
 red, orange, green, and blue stars....

Look at the stars, says the Lord, so many! So shall your family be, Abram.

And despite all appearances, and his wrinkled body, Abram believed the LORD. And God called him righteous. Meaning, they had plunged into a relationship of trust. Old Abram and God.

So, Abram and Sarah – become our father and mother in the faith, no matter the color of our skin, or ethnic origin.

How *about us*, then? When outward appearances are that the world is literally going to hell. When hell breaks out in a Walmart, or at a border close to you. Is it possible to believe God's promise, that God *is* Lord, that there will yet be justice and beauty in the world, and *some* of that justice and beauty God is going to make happen through you and me, & our little old church here?

“Do not be afraid, little flock, “Jesus says to his disciples today, “for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32)

Growing up in Rockford, Illinois, where we had lots of street lights, I had a shock when, at the age of 20, I travelled to Israel, camped in the Sinai desert, with no electricity. And the sun went down, and the stars came out, and I said Ah, this is what the LORD was talking to Abram about. Not the 7 stars of the Big dipper, which I could see in Rockford, but thousands of stars visible on a dark desert night.

Many of you heard about young parents, Andre and Jordan² who were shopping at Walmart a week ago for a triple celebration – their wedding anniversary, their daughter’s birthday, and Andre had just finished building their new house.

They say Andre died protecting Jordan, Jordan died shielding their 2 month old baby, Paul.

We pray *Kyrie eleison*, Lord have mercy.

Can we also hope in realities unseen?

Can we pray that baby Paul, a miracle whose parents, gave their own lives, to save him,

may he grow into a legacy NOT of the hate spewed through the barrel of a gun...

but may he grow into the legacy instead, of his parent’s love, which is an earthly, Mexican-heritage example, of Christ’s life, given for us, in love.

A woman named Janet Irene was interviewed by NPR “All Things Considered”³ last week before all this happened. Janet lives in a small town near one of our country’s dark sky sanctuaries. She says the night sky is something that always amazes her, even after decades.

“It’s so exciting” she says, “to know there’s something else up there, other than what we see every day here.” “And you can actually see some small part of it. It’s an insight into what might be.”

God called Abram to look up at the night sky and get an insight into *what might be*.

Thanks be to Jesus Christ who *today* gives us the assurance of God’s eternal love: It’s here, even though in many ways still unseen. Amen.

² <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/08/749099244/the-couple-killed-saving-their-baby-in-el-paso-had-just-found-a-future-together>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/01/747037627/this-remote-corner-of-nevada-is-one-of-the-darkest-places-in-the-world>