

"There My Servant Will Be"

1) See something? Say something!

2) Get the vaccine, and help others to do so!

(the video of this sermon presents a slightly abbreviated version)

*If someone is ready to serve me, let them follow me;
and where I am, there my servant will be also.
If anyone serves me, my Father will honor them.*

Jn 12:26

Today's scriptures pick up a number of themes. The First Lesson speaks of a new covenant by which our hearts are transformed, so that we truly know God. This is not a passing acquaintance knowledge. It is that we are intimate companions with God.

The Psalm also speaks of this inner transformation, seeking God's forgiveness for past transgressions, and the cleansing of and transformation of our inner lives, so that we are willing to obey God, and thus our relationship with God becomes a source of joy.

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Christ as our Great High Priest, one greater even than Aaron. Because Christ is the perfect high priest, he is our source of salvation. This is not so much salvation **from** an afterlife of torment as it is salvation **to** a present life of blessedness and peace.

Then the Gospel has Jesus announcing that his ministry is about drawing everyone to God, and that his servants join him in that work. He teaches further that the crucifixion is that paradoxical method by which the entire world will be drawn to him, and the forces of darkness will be defeated.

I think this Gospel passage may have been behind the affirmation we find in Philippians 2. Certainly the same themes are given voice. It is the suffering and humiliation of Christ that has resulted in his being exalted to the place of highest authority, so that all the world may, in one voice, give glory to God. We will share in that reading (in the liturgy) in a few moments.

In the coming days, I would invite you to spend time meditating on each of these readings, individually, and in relation to each of the others. There are ways of interweaving them, but considering this would take more time than we have for this video today, we will not make those connections today. I know that the Spirit leads and guides us into all truth, and I trust that as you meditate, and as questions arise, not only will you pray about them, and discuss them, you will also seek counsel from those qualified to teach.

Sometimes "the news" demands that we bear faithful public witness in response, even if those events are not directly related to our readings for the day. There are two such items I would like to highlight today, though others also may well be deserving of our time and attention.

The first does have a connection so obvious it cannot be missed. This is the ongoing violence in our nation that is based in racism. For the Christian there can be no toleration of/for this kind of behavior.

Not only did we witness that kind of behavior in the European nations some 80 years ago. We also saw it here, with internment camps like the *Heart Mountain War Relocation Center* in Wyoming. (*One of nine that I know about...*). Probably, like me, you do not have a literal memory of having lived through those years, but you may have a memory from history you studied.

While the scapegoating taking place 80 years ago, in Germany, was rooted in a lost war, loss of respect, and economic hardship, the rhetoric of hate, rooted in powerlessness and fear this time is brought about by the global Corona virus pandemic. ^{Note 1}

I would suggest also that racial hatred is really underneath the anger and violence we see directed at refugees from Latin America.

Combine that racial hatred with selfishness and fear of losing, and instead of building a longer table, we have been erecting taller fences, and separating children from their adult caregivers, and placing each in their own internment facilities. In doing this, what witness to the world is being offered by those in this nation who wish the world to think of us as a Christian nation?

With Black History month, not only were we reminded of many persons of color from decades past, towering in their historical significance. We also were reminded of many who have lost their lives in recent years, and we have been challenged to **"say their names"**.

As Christians, if we see something, we must say something. What the passion narrative teaches us, at the least, is that Christ has identified with those at the margins... with others who have suffered and who have been humiliated by the powerful and privileged.

Those who would serve Christ must be where he is. Those are the words of Jesus. For those of you who think that the King James is the preferable translation, or perhaps the only good translation, here you go...

where I am, there shall also my servant be:
v26

We cannot ignore it. Christ himself has summoned us to stand with those who have suffered at the hands of the privileged and the powerful. When we see something we **MUST** say something. Let's put our energies into ending the scourge of racism. Yes?

*Can I get a witness here?
An amen? A Hallelujah?
Maybe you can tell that my roots are at least partly in the "evangelical" wing of American Protestantism.*

The second item I would like to highlight concerns the Corona Virus vaccines.

Some of you may not know, but before moving to the study of Divinity in preparation for the Ministry, I was in training to be a scientist. In particular, I was studying physics. With my college admissions tests ranking me so strongly in math and science, I questioned whether I was crazy to switch my field of study to the Religion department at Point Loma Nazarene University.

My guidance counselor at the school suggested that my analytical mind could serve me well in either field, that my interests in science could allow me to bring strengths to serving Christ that others may not have.

In the years since, I have seen people come into ministry from a variety of fields. Some have backgrounds in business or economics. Some are historians, whose grasp of the course of human history has again informed ministry in ways that I could not match. *I don't know how many times someone has mentioned an event of history, expecting me to nod my head at least, and I would need to plead ignorance.* Some are artists and musicians, the talents of whom I sometimes find myself envious. Some are psychologists, with insights into the human personality to which I have only been introduced.

All this to say, **first** ... none of us would have thought to take up the mantle of this job presumptuously. **We found ourselves "called"**, and parishes, and committees on ministry, and boards of ordained ministry have found themselves confirming that call. While Hebrews was talking about Christ not taking up the task presumptuously... I still think there is a warning for us... we who labor in pastoral ministry.

Second, that excursus on my interest in science is to say this... while I am not a doctor, or pharmacist, or a research scientist in the field of immunology and vaccines, my training has given me some ability to **recognize the difference between science, and science fiction, and pseudo science.** ^{Note 2}

And my interest in science remains strong. Someone in the parish has recommended for my attention: The Physics of Climate Change by Lawrence M. Krauss, just out this month. I am looking forward to getting it and reading it.

Now third, my prior training in science, and my professional training in Scripture and Theology, along with the analytical mind of which my counselor spoke, connected with the roots of my faith being in evangelicalism, have **perhaps given me a somewhat unique perspective from which to speak** on the vaccines and some myths and misinformation.

Doctor Fauci was at an event at the national Cathedral this week, in which numerous clergy participated, as part of a campaign to assuage fears and to correct disinformation about the vaccines. I will leave a link in the show notes below, to an article where you can read more about it. ^{Note 4}

Dr. Fauci has mentioned several points that have caused persons to be, shall we say, less than enthusiastic about the vaccines. I would split them into two groups. The first is a set of objections which, to the uninformed, may sound like scientific objections. The second set of objections are those rooted in some kind of theological perspective. I will touch on these briefly, and in reverse order.

The theological concerns of which I have heard are two. One is the theological/ethical concern **that fetal tissue may have somehow been involved** in research, development, and testing of some or all of the vaccines. In answer to this concern, there are two points to be made...

1. "Neither the Pfizer nor the Moderna vaccine uses cell lines that originated in fetal tissue taken from the body of an aborted baby at any stage of design, development or production,"

~ UAB's Sherri Blank .

2. As arguably the most conservative voice to be found on this particular topic, even the Pope has counseled that *“When ethically irreproachable CoViD-19 vaccines are not available,” it is “morally acceptable to receive CoViD-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses in their research and production process,”* ~ the Vatican News

both cited by Chelsey Cox, and Miriam Fauzia, in USA TODAY, Dec. 29, 2020

Then, on Jan 11, Pope Francis went further suggesting that people have a moral obligation to take corona-virus vaccine. Then in February, vaccination was made mandatory for Vatican Employees. *This mandate was later rescinded, but it still shows the acceptance of the vaccines by (arguably) the most conservative of Christian voices.*

The second concern originates from a very particular stream of interpretation regarding the last book of the Bible and what is therein called **"the mark of the beast"**. This concern alleges that someone, perhaps Bill Gates, has engineered an electronic implant that is injected into your body with the vaccine. The supposed motivation is to track our movements. There is a tinge of plausibility: We have the ability to microchip our pets, so why not ?

The microdot technology idea, at this point remains in the realm of science fiction. I say this for two reasons.

First, even Intel is still struggling with the 7 nanometer architecture for the design of circuitry. There are limits, hurdles, imposed by the basic laws of physics.

Second, there are medical issues that would expose the whole scheme in fairly short order. Even if only a small percentage of the population had an immunological response to the introduction of this foreign body. However small it may be, it is still larger than a virus, and our bodies have strong immune responses to these small scale intruders.

There is a third reason that makes this scheme seem most unlikely: Where is a motivation that would make profitable the investment involved? Business always needs a "return on investment". I do not see any reasonable answer to this question.

But, whether or not the technology really exists, or whether or not there is a plausible motivation, is not really the focus of the theological concern. **The concern is about aligning oneself with the Empire and against Christ.**

Here is the deal... All of this theological thought is new. And it assumes that Christians in previous centuries couldn't discern what the author of the Revelation was really talking about. ^{Note 3}

As a student of the Bible, and of theology, I can only offer you my assurance that this conspiracy theory does not do justice to the Biblical message and, in my opinion, does harm to our witness for Christ.

The mark of the beast is not an injected or otherwise implanted microchip. The mark of the beast is in how we conduct our business in the world. Anyone who has lived in a small town will tell you how easy it is for a youthful indiscretion to leave you forever "marked" in that community.

So I would counsel, stop trying to pretend that the mark of the beast is your Social Security Number, or Selective Service Registration, or a credit card, or a bar code tattoo, or a microchip, etc! Christians should be clear headed, and Biblically grounded, so that we can give a clear answer to others regarding our Christian hope.

Next turning to the concerns presented as "scientific", these are, in brief...

- a) Coming down with the corona virus illness from the vaccine.
- b) Having the vaccine alter your DNA.
- c) Having the vaccine result in sterility.

Those who know how the science really does work are assuring us, **there is no scientific basis for any of these concerns: The vaccines simply do not work that way.**

Having said this, we must also recognize that the groups where these concerns seem most prevalent are groups who have been the victims of scientific experimentation in decades past. That history of abuse at the hands of the privileged and powerful has resulted, understandably, in being predisposed to fear something that is new and seems to have been hurriedly developed.

We can have some empathy for this concern, and we can help them to overcome the concerns by leading the way, getting the vaccines ourselves.

And regarding a supposed "hurried development", in point of fact research on the corona family of viruses has been ongoing for decades. Dr. James E.K. Hildreth, has been part of that extensive research and went public in getting vaccinated in order to help instill confidence among members of one of those communities that had the painful history.

The science is good. Vaccines work generally: I have been vaccinated against Smallpox, and Polio, and Pneumonia, and the Flu... etc. My next will be the shingles vaccine. **We know vaccines work. These Corona vaccines in particular also work.** They have been tested and approved, even if that approval was more expedited than the FDA's usual process.

One of the leading clergy from our conference, Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, was at that event at the National Cathedral this week. In an article by Eric Alsgard, she is quoted as saying...

"I took part in today's event, because getting vaccinated is a primary way that we love our neighbor. This is part of being a caring member of community.

We have been told and assured by those who know best – the scientists and ethicists and all the others working so hard on this vaccine – that vaccination is one of the critical pieces of caring for one another and getting the virus under control."

"Our interfaith witness as clergy leaders today is important to combat the falsehoods, rumors, and fears about COVID-19 and the vaccines,"

Her church, Foundry UMC, "will continue to listen to science and support vaccines, wear masks, maintain safe distance, and make careful decisions for the future and re-entry based on our values of justice, hospitality, health and safety, and the common good."

And now for those who are wondering... I have been saying for weeks that, when it became available for my group, I would get vaccinated. For reasons I have suggested here today, and many more, I believe it the right thing to do, for myself, for my family responsibility, and for my civic responsibility.

Were he walking around among us today, I think Jesus would get the shot, and tell us, his disciples, to do the same, saying it is a very practical way to love your neighbor. I can imagine a new variation on the Good Samaritan as a parable to teach it. (note 5)

So, yes ... I had my second jab this week. When you have opportunity, I hope you get it too, whichever is available to you.

Note 1: Rhetoric accusing the Chinese government for responsibility for unleashing the pandemic has been weaponized, by means of a propaganda technique of labeling, that has resulted in all Asians being responded to by a segment of our society that is so predisposed, with hatred and violence.

Note 2: I have kept up an active interest in science too, have read physics books for the mass market, like Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time*, and James Gleick's book on *Chaos*, and Lisa Randall's book on hidden dimensions beyond the four we regularly experience. And as an illustration of my continuing interest and staying informed, let me mention a conversation. A number of years ago, someone was talking to me about someone they knew who actually needed to have periodic blood draws. This was because, without this intervention, the excess iron in their blood would cause organ damage. I said, "Oh! Hemochromatosis". The person with whom I was talking said, "how did you know that?" The answer to that question is another story.

Note 3: This kind of thinking got its start with a gentleman named Scofield in the 1800's, and has been developed and refined in recent decades, with Hal Lindsay in the 1960's, and more recently with personalities like John Hagee and David Jeremiah. If you have accepted the kool-aid they are pushing, then this concern will likely resonate with you. Having so-called conservative media push this conspiracy theory will not help. For a good CONSERVATIVE overview of what the Revelation may be understood to say, as seen from a variety of perspectives across the years, I would recommend Merrill C. Tenney's volume, *Interpreting Revelation*. Bruce Metzger is another solid author. I could recommend others.

Note 4: <https://www.bwcm.org/news-and-views/foundry-umc-pastor-addresses-vaccine-hesitancy/>

Note 5: I noticed that since I first presented this sermon, Franklin Graham has made a similar kind of statement. There is another voice from a different part of the political spectrum, and a different part of the theological spectrum, that also favors getting the vaccine.