

Knowing in uncertain times

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

For continuing education a few years ago I registered for the *Festival of Homiletics*, world class event that is presented in different cities each year. This particular event in 2018 was in Washington D.C., its focus, "Preaching and Politics" - I was intrigued. It wasn't politics in itself, but I wondered, in Washington D.C.: *What it is like when God's Word intersects, maybe collides, with the empire of the day?* Put more concretely, what does one preach when God's Good News of liberating God's children is *not* such good news to the empire of the day?

I persuaded my good friend Minister friend, Paul, to come. How particularly interesting to hear sermons in a time when the former president was in the White House just down the road. There we felt the Spirit move mightily as we worshipped in various African American churches around Washington. We basked in the lively hymn singing, and the preaching several dynamic, sermons. Most of the preaching comprised of variations on one core biblical message: *Thus says the Lord: let my people go!*

Remember that famous prophetic word given to Moses?¹

This holy message that has been preached within racialized Christian communities long before we heard George Floyd's haunting plea, "I can't breathe." For centuries that message has been preached, and, sometimes it seems like those in power have been, and still are, deaf to it.

I most wanted to attend lectures by eminent Hebrew Bible Scholar and pastor Walter Brueggemann. One of his favourite themes focuses on the Fourth Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." Sabbath as Resistance.²

At the Festival I attended in Washington, Brueggemann painted a picture of life for those Israelite slaves; intense production demands making mud bricks so that the Egyptian empire could build up its infrastructure. Building using the sweat and blood of slaves. But in Exodus, Yahweh gave the gift of Sabbath to Israelites in bondage – God said, you shall take time to rest.

Anyone old enough to remember when Sundays were quiet? Sabbath. I'm not at all going to cry out to my culture from the wilderness demanding that we give back Sundays as a day of rest. But, embedded in Jewish Law is the gift from the Creator:
You will keep Sabbath.

To our busy 24 hours-a-day, culture taking a day, any day, to rest feels strangely radical. As our call to right relationship, to spirit-filled living collides with our culture – that is political. God is not political. But holy living becomes *protest* when our attending to the spiritual in our lives collides with our culture.

¹ Exodus chapter 8, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=exodus+8&version=NIV>

² *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No in the Culture of Now*. ©2014 Walter Brueggemann. Westminster John Knox Press.

Earlier in Lent I used the term *Holy Interference*. How our routines and systems are important for normality, but, sometimes routines and systems need to be disrupted. Sabbath as Holy Interference.



On screen, a piece of art, from the *Jésus Mafa* series. Itself, this art, disrupts our conventional images of Jesus; not at all a person of colour, we often see the European Jesus.

The Palm parade. Modern scholarship suggests that the Palm parade for Jesus unfolded at the same time – around Passover – because at the very same time, each year, a very different sort of parade entered another Jerusalem gate; the Roman authority flaunting its armour

and weaponry, and people would have come to greet them out of fear.

What drama! However orchestrated the palm parade for Jesus was, fear was nowhere to be found at THIS parade; quite the opposite: there was exuberance, excitement. But maybe, too, there was some sense that Rome was watching?

Parade... protest? Make no mistake, this parade sent a message: that deliverance might be at hand, Rome might control peoples' day-to-day lives, but never would Rome have a hold on their hearts.

This party didn't include ancient tools of violence. Can demonstrations, protests, have a spirit of joy and kindness? I can only speak from my own limited experience. In the tense, angry days following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, an alliance formed among countries to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. I remember demonstrations, and the concern among organizers that what people said or did in that parade must send a peaceful, nonviolent message.

I have since seen numerous mass demonstrations on television since, many that looked more like parades. In Palestine my work was to chronicle life under illegal occupation. I photographed demonstrations that were always both Palestinians and Israeli peace activists standing together. There would be singing, and flags. But, as an onlooker I felt an edge, tension. A parade becomes a protest, I think, when it echoes God's words through Moses to the powerful Pharaoh: Let my people go!

Christians would do well to re-member our ancient heritage of resistance grounded in God's ways; God's call to disrupt our cultural routines. God's call to: Honour the commandment to practice sabbath. Then, modelling sabbath for our neighbours, to liberate us all the human spirit from the demands of producing, of the culture of "more" and "now".

God of all times and places creatively, even playfully calls out to us through our modern prophets, saying: Let me people go. Amen.