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"The 'God-factor' in our recent elections"
Texts: Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20
Circle of Mercy Congregation
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In the weeks before the recent Women's March on Washington, I heard from several friends around the country who were planning to go. I sent them notes saying, "Look for Nancy and our granddaughter Sydney. They're going to be wearing some kind of pink hats with kitty cat ears."

I didn't realize nearly everyone in the crowd would have one of those hats.

The moral of that story is twofold: First, we need to constantly work at looking beyond the horizon of our own skyline. There are lots of people, in lots of places, who are at least as creative and intelligent and passionate as we are.

The second moral of that story is: No one can create large-scale movements with vibrant moral centers. What we are called to do is be prepared to mobilize when they arise. Meanwhile, as individuals and communities, we stay busy constructing the building blocks to be used when the pregnant moments comes: building blocks not to build walls but to pave roads that lead to the Beloved Community.

We've all been on emotional rollercoasters of late, with the installation of merchants of fear, of profiteers, of bombardiers into our governing institutions. But then record-breaking marches broke out, and airports were jammed in resistance to cruel policies. Maybe you heard this: Even US Park Service rangers began clandestine organizing to oppose the threat of turning our national parks to the highest bidders. Last week attendance at a "sanctuary" training here in Asheville on

how to protect the undocumented doubled the anticipated number of participants. On Friday so many people showed up at the Islamic Center here in Asheville that they couldn't fit everyone in the room.

The times are hard, but refreshing news is available.

Years ago an Episcopal journal ran a series of articles from people of different denominational traditions, asking each to say "Why I am still a . . . [Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist, etc.] They asked me to write about "Why I am still a Baptist." I traced my own spiritual lineage to the anabaptist movements in the 16th and 17th centuries, and told some of the stories of persecutions endured by my ancestors in Europe and Colonial Baptists. I closed by saying: We usually do our best work when we're on the run from authorities—and, come to think of it, that's true of us all.

Sometimes we're not running, but walking. Sometimes not walking, but crawling. Sometimes all we can manage is leaning. However modest, the point is to keep moving forward toward the promised New Heaven and New Earth.

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Many of you heard Rev. Franklin Graham's statement that a "God factor" was involved in the election of our new president and his crowd. I never thought I'd have much occasion to agree with Bro. Graham, but strangely enough, at this point I do. More on that in a minute.

Our texts today, from the soaring, disrupting vision from the Prophet Isaiah and from Jesus' core teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, are among my all-time favorite texts. I feel like a kid in a candy store.

After graduating from seminary, Nancy and I lived in a large common house with as many as seven others. Among those were Gary and Lenora Rand. Gary was trying, without much success, to make it as a singer-songwriter. Over dinner one evening he read to us from a letter he'd received from his Mom, a pious, god-fearing woman. In her devotional readings she came across thrilling images from Isaiah, in chapter 58.

“Then your light shall break forth like the dawn. The glory of the Lord will be your rearguard. Your gloom will be as noonday. You shall be like a well-watered garden. Your ancient ruins will be rebuilt. You shall be called the repairer of the breach.”

Strong stuff. Gary decided to look it up. What he found was very interesting.

You see, each of these beautifully poetic promises actually began with the word “then.” “**Then** your light shall break forth like the dawn. **Then** the glory of the Lord. **Then** gloom as noonday. **Then** a well-watered garden.” And so on.

Turns out, each of the promises was predicated on a prior premise. There was first an **IF**, followed by a **THEN**.

IF you loose the bond of injustice and let the oppressed go free. . . . **IF** you share your break with the hungry. **IF** you satisfy the needs of the afflicted.

The assuring promise is always predicated on a prior premise: **IF** such-and-such . . . **THEN** so-on-and-so-forth. You can't cut the *if's* and the *then's* out of the text. Or, if you do cut them out, the provisions offered, and the outcome promised, are nothing but dust in the wind. If our piety does not generate perspiration—on behalf of the afflicted, the hungry, the unwelcomed refugee, the terrorized, and all who

have no place at God's table of bounty—then when we say our *hail-Marys* and our *thank-you-Jesuses*, when we gather at our prayer breakfasts and place our hands on the Bible to be sworn in as public leaders . . . God will neither see nor honor our claims on Heaven's favor.

“Day after day they seek me,” God says, “as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness.” You'd think that line should be a headline in daily papers and cable news broadcasts.

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Today's Gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount begins with images that have become so common in our culture that people who've never cracked a Bible know them. “You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its taste, its savor, its preserving power, what good is it? You are the light of the world. What fool would ever consider putting a lamp under a basket?” The light's purpose is not to be preserved and protected but to shine and illumine.

But remember—these commonsensical bits of wisdom are not genteel recommendations to be made from the comfort of a carpeted parlor. These are not conventional sayings that lead to what is now considered the good life. Remember what I said earlier about cutting out the *IF's* and the *THEN's* from the text. While those literal words do not appear in Matthew, the teachings in verses 13 & 14 about being salt and light in the world come directly after verses 11 & 12: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you on my account.”

Did Jesus intend to build a personality cult? Did he want everyone to say his name over and over, as if it were a magical incantation? No. What did he mean when he said “on my account” and “for my sake?”

The “sake” of Jesus is personalized in the “sake” of the little ones of this world. Go home tonight and reread the text from Isaiah 58. For whose sake is it directed? Reread the text here in Matthew 5, particularly the first 10 verses that begin with “Blessed are. . . the poor, the mournful, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers.”

Behind every *then*, every promise of comfort and security, there is an *if*, a charge to take risks. And not investment banking risks; not stock portfolio risks; not gambling and corruption risks. The risks are always on behalf of “the least of these.” The virtue of the nation—every piece of legislation, every executive order, every policy directive—is implicated in its outcome for the common good.

Not the greater good, mind you. The *common* good. By now we should know, all too well, that the greater good of predatory capitalism leads to extreme income inequality. Right now the 8 richest men in the world have a combined wealth equal to the bottom half of the entire world’s population: 8 people own as much as 3.6 billion people.

Let me recommend a simple exercise for you. Sometime this week, when you’re at your computer, do a web search for the “global wealth calculator.” There are several of them, so pick any one. Type in your annual income, and the site will then tell you what percentile you’re in compared to the rest of humanity. I’m pretty confident everyone in this room will be in the top 10%, and in fact most of us will be in the top 1%.

I'm not recommending this to make you feel guilty. I'm recommending this so you'll get perspective. The repentance God seeks from us is not to cause pain. God is not a sadist. God is a savior, who wants us to see the world clearly so we'll better know how to spend our energies on behalf of the Beloved Community.

When grace breaks out, revolts gear up.

When grace breaks out, fears are faced and silence is broken.

When grace breaks out, marches are mobilized and rulers are put on notice.

When grace breaks out, renewed public consensus demands righteous public policy.

When grace breaks out there will be conflict and discomfort and disagreement aplenty. The "sake" of Jesus is controversial in a world than moves on the wheels of injustice and impunity and corruption.

Another way to say this: The text from today's reading from Matthew doesn't say: YOU ARE THE SUGAR OF THE WORLD. Grace is sweet to those with the willingness to receive it. But it is bitter to all who have a stake in keeping things the way they are. Salt preserves and flavors and is a key component to healthy bodies; but there are a lot of powerful people managing health care and pharmaceutical companies invested in sick care rather than health care. Light provides powerful illumination and clarity, but a lot of powerful people in fossil fuel companies who want to maintain control of the generators.

The Gospel is sweet, but its calories are nutritious. The sugary faith that dominates our age is what blesses the sanctified diabetes and obesity epidemics that are killing us all.

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Before I finish, let me get back to what I mentioned about my point of agreement with Rev. Franklin Graham. Probably a shocking admission, so let me clarify what I mean.

Bro. Graham attributed our recent electoral outcome to what he calls “the God factor.” And I agree. But our agreement is short-lived.

I do in fact think that the Holy Spirit was behind this turn of events. But I also believe it is an act of divine judgment against our nation’s way of life. It is, if you will, Heaven’s intervention in our public addition to deadly forms of living. It is a painful wakeup call. (And I say these things with trembling recognition that me and my family will not be among those enduring the most pain.)

At the end of this month a Lenten reflection group will begin meeting weekly until Easter. We will be reading and interpreting two things side by side. The first is the lectionary texts for each of the seven weeks of Lent. The second texts we’ll read are three of Martin Luther King’s most pivotal speeches and sermons, in particular his last major address on 4 April 1967, when he delivered his blistering speech titled “Beyond Vietnam: A time to break the silence.”

This year is the 50th anniversary of that speech. It was his most controversial speech, and his most forgotten. Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech has in our day been turned into sugary sentiment. The promise of the dream Dr. King articulated is still potent, but it has been deep-fried in heavy batter and coated with sprinkles. The beloved community has become the betrayed community. Isaiah’s vision of restoring the breach in our body politic still inspires but its wings have been clipped

by empty piety and patriotic slogan. The Reign of God announced by Jesus still inspires hope for a radically different future, but that future has been projected into a distant, ethereal afterlife which is speechless, toothless, and irrelevant to the earth we now inhabit.

We are being called to a deeper penitence, not to expose our shame but to empower lives beyond this world's bartering habits and market shares. To get to the mountaintop for a glimpse of God's land of promise will require a discomfoting, dark and dangerous ascent. But we are promised provisions for the journey. And good traveling companions. May it be so, even here, even now.

Amen.