

**“Grounded in the Bedrock of Faith”**  
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**Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:1-12**  
**Circle of Mercy, Asheville, NC; January 29, 2017**

On the night of January 19<sup>th</sup>, the eve of the inauguration, several of us from Circle of Mercy’s immigration mission group gathered at the home that Bill and I share. We kept a vigil in the tradition of the Watch Night Service.

Watch Night is typically traced back to New Year’s Eve of 1862, when enslaved communities stayed up all night waiting for the Emancipation Proclamation to take effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>. When I was collecting oral histories among African-American UCC churches during my time as an associate conference minister, I was told that the custom is actually much older—that enslaved families stayed up every New Year’s Eve, because January 1<sup>st</sup> was when masters decided whom they would sell off. Families facing the imminent threat of separation spent all night singing and praying and hoping that they would be together for another year.

Our mission group adapted this tradition of lamentation and hope to our current context, and energies. We didn’t stay up all night. But after sharing a meal, we spent a long evening in silence, interspersed with songs and scriptures, poems and prayers. We listened to several testimonies drawn from interviews with undocumented persons already suffering from—or living in fear of—deportation and separation from their families.

I remain extremely grateful for that time. It offered grounding for the days that followed. With each new pronouncement from the White House related to immigration this past week, I felt buffeted by another upending wind. Each day brought more bad news: escalation of deportations, punishment of sanctuary cities, militarization of the border, extreme vetting for some Muslim-majority countries, a slammed door for Syrians, the wall.

I woke up each morning dreading what would come next. And not just with the avalanche of executive orders related to immigration. Arguments about inaugural crowd size, false claims of massive voter fraud, the advent of “alternative facts,” imposition of gag orders, a commitment to move Israel’s capital and to beef up our nuclear arsenal—all in just the first week of Trump’s presidency.

We watched as a president who doesn’t believe in climate change but does believe in torture, who is in a rush to build up oil pipelines and tear down affordable health care, assembled his billionaire cabinet. If his appointments hold up, we’ll have a Defense Secretary nicknamed “Mad Dog” and a Treasury Secretary known as the “foreclosure king” for his massive profiteering off of vulnerable elderly people. We’ll have a Labor Secretary opposed to the minimum wage and named in numerous worker lawsuits for discrimination, sexism, and wage theft; and an Education Secretary who wants to defund public education.

The proposed head of the Environmental Protection Agency has repeatedly sued the organization he’s going to lead; and, not to be outdone, the Energy Secretary famously suggested eliminating the department he’s about to take charge of. The leader of the Small Business Administration is a co-founder and former CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment Inc., and Trump’s Chief Strategist is the former executive chair of the misogynist, white-supremacist, neo-Nazi Breitbart News, who recently told the media to “keep its mouth shut.”

I feel trapped in a bizarre and surreal tragi-comedy.

In times of fear and unpredictability, the natural human instinct is to flee to safer ground and hide. That’s understandable. But I believe our faith calls us in the opposite direction: to root

ourselves more deeply where we are, and to make our resistance as visible as possible. This is a time to plant ourselves firmly in the bedrock of our faith.

Thankfully, two of our core scriptures appear in today's lectionary. Micah 6:8 inspired the mission statement of Circle of Mercy: "What does the Holy One require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" I dare say that if we actually followed this commandment, our world would be transformed.

It's appropriately paired tonight with Matthew 5:1-12, the opening of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Nothing is closer to the heart of what it means to be a Christian than this compelling hillside homily that launched Jesus' ministry. And tonight's verses are the heart of its message.

The Beatitudes are the marks of the upside down realm that Jesus came to establish on earth. Despite what seems to be incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, it is not the rich, the blissfully ignorant and the blatantly arrogant, the satiated, bullying, corrupt, war-making persecutors who are on top. Those in God's favor are the poor, the ones who mourn, the meek, those hungry for bread and for justice, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers, and the persecuted.

I've heard a lot of talk this past week about re-examining our values and priorities as a nation and asking, what does it mean to be an American? For those of us who are followers of Jesus, I think the gripping question of the day is, what does it mean to be a Christian? How do we live faithfully in this time of shifting uncertainty?

First, a little perspective. I heard an NPR commentator say on Thursday that the 70-year, post-World-War-II era marked by diplomacy, multilateralism, and global goodwill toward the United States is now over. I felt immediately and strangely nostalgic for those good old days. As if the cold war and the nuclear arms race, CIA coups in Guatemala and Chile and Iran, a blockade and repeated assassination attempts against Castro in Cuba, atrocities in Vietnam, covert war in Nicaragua, invasions of Granada and Panama, wars against Iraq and Afghanistan never happened. Not to mention economic policies around the globe that have *always* put America First.

Just after November's election, at a meeting at our local immigrants' rights center Nuestro Centro, our Spanish-speaking sisters and brothers acknowledged that, yes, this new regime is dreadful and dangerous. "But," they told us, "we have survived worse. We are used to corrupt tyrants. And to the repressive power of the United States."

With each new executive order last week, I thought, "It couldn't get any worse." And then it did. And likely it will continue to. How will we respond? How will we be Christians in the era of Trump?

I confess that I read the end of the Beatitudes with a bit of fear and trembling: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt. 5:11-12). I don't personally have much interest in persecution. I'd rather not suffer, thank you very much. But for those of us with a measure of privilege—who are not yet targets in the crosshairs of the executive orders—being allies in public solidarity with those who are seems critical to following Jesus. Whatever the cost.

I also realized this week that I need to be concerned about more than the ending of the Beatitudes. Just because I'm not running the country doesn't mean that I can't be as arrogant as those who are. My responses to our current situation have not been humble or meek. The thoughts in my heart have not been pure. And my feelings and actions have not always been ones of peace.

Just before Christmas, during the bitterly cold spell that visited us, I was driving up I-26 toward home. Around the New Stock Road exit, I heard a terrible roaring and clattering. I pulled off the highway and into the service station at the bottom of the ramp. I got out, looked under the car and, sure enough, the muffler was dragging on the ground, barely attached. The very nice cashier at the station called the closest repair shop on my behalf and reported that someone would try to come to help, but she didn't know how long it would be.

Overhearing my dilemma, a young man wearing a John Deere cap and camo fatigues asked me, "How far are you going?" When I told him I only had to make it to Mars Hill, he said, "I think I can get you there." He climbed into the bed of his big truck with huge wheels and a Donald Trump bumper sticker and pulled out a length of wire. On what was the coldest day of the winter to date, he got down on the ground on his back under my car and wired up the muffler so that I could drive the 10 miles to our repair shop.

Not long ago I overheard a woman say, "At least the ones who voted for him will suffer the most." I was caught up short by that, in part because something close to it has sometimes flitted through my own mind.

But that woman was talking about my neighbors. About 84-year-old Alma, who walked up the road and welcomed Bill and me to our rural mountain cove with heirloom tomatoes out of her garden when we moved in. She held up the big stick she was carrying and said, "Now, don't think I need this to lean on. This is to scare away the snakes and the dogs."

That woman was talking about the three sisters who own the unoccupied farm next door to us, who give us free roam of its 120 acres of trails with stunning ridge views. And about Bruce, who leases its pastures for his cattle. Bill lets Bruce know whenever there's a break in the fence, and we've both helped him herd strays off the road or out of our yard and back to safety. In return, he grades our driveway from time to time.

Yes, these are among the folks who are likely to suffer the most under the new regime. They don't usually make our list when we talk about the vulnerability of immigrants, Muslims, African-Americans, LGBT persons, and women. But I'm convinced that we're not going to get out of this mess we're in without them, without our listening to their lives and understanding the disaffection and sense of powerlessness that drove them to grasp for what looked like hope and change.

It's important in this moment that we're talking about resolve and resistance, even rebellion and revolution. But maybe we could add reaching out—maybe even reconciliation—to that list. Walls through our hearts are as dangerous as walls at borders.

About a decade ago, I visited Nogales, Mexico. I sat and listened to people's stories in tiny, dark shacks constructed from old tires and tin, on washed-out roads in neighborhoods without running water or plumbing. These are the homes of the workers in the *maquiladoras*, the more than 3,000 U.S. factories just across the border that pay a million Mexican workers pennies an hour, keeping them in oppressive poverty and fueling their dreams of fleeing north. Imagine, for a moment, how much better off and more secure we all would be if we took the billions of dollars it would take to build a wall and instead paid a living wage to all those workers, allowing them to live with dignity in their own country. Walls, threats, and hateful actions only feed our own worst instincts, make it easier for those deemed our enemies to grow their ranks, and harden their resolve to launch counter-attacks.

But here's the good news, friends. A whole lot of us aren't buying the hatred and violence that the new regime is peddling. Today, the airports are clogged with protesters reacting to Friday's anti-Muslim orders. The day after the inauguration, millions of people participated in

the Women's March on Washington and its sister marches all around the nation and the world. A member of my family who went to D.C. said, "We felt a kinship with all the marchers. They seemed to be like us...historically complacent progressives that have been woken up by Donald."

And that, I think, is the gift of Trump. Like a knife lancing a sore, he's exposing attitudes and policies that have always been part of this country, drawing to the surface what was previously hidden—or at least a bit nuanced. He's bringing out the worst in us. But he's also bringing out the best.

Yesterday more than 200 people from local immigrant and faith communities packed into Grace Episcopal Church for a workshop focused on offering protective Sanctuary to those facing the threat of deportation. Many of us here tonight were there. It was high energy and standing-room-only at this heartening event co-sponsored by Circle of Mercy, with thanks to Greg Walker Wilson and Bill for serving on the planning committee, and to Arturo for opening us with his beautiful music.

Our leaders in this effort are Spanish-speaking young people, and it has been a joy to partner with them. The LGBT group SONG (Southerners on New Ground) is part of this network, and efforts are under way to reach out to other targeted communities. In the decades that I've been involved in this kind of work, I've never seen so strong a commitment to bring everyone together.

We can't yet know what the future will bring for us. All we can do is stay grounded in the bedrock of our faith, rooted in the promises of that upside down community of the Beatitudes, in solidarity with those who mourn and hunger. This is a time to be vigilant. To stay awake. To cling tightly to God and one another—and to the sort of hope that once compelled enslaved communities, suffering the absolute worst, to believe that freedom would come.

I end with these words of encouragement from the historian Howard Zinn:

*To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives...If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction...The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.*

Amen.