

The Problem with Empire (Matthew 4:12-23)

In *Night*, the memoir of his time spent in Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel offers up his impression of the horror of his first night in the camp:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith for ever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

*Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God
and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.*

*Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned
to live as long as God Himself.*

Never.

If you've seen the pictures, heard the interviews, watched the documentaries, you know that the atrocities perpetrated on human beings by other human beings in the Holocaust defy description.

People have attempted to wrap the horror in words, but a description—as crucial as that is—can never touch the depths of despair and darkness at the bottom of the abyss.

Because our words can never quite convey the depravity humans are capable of, we're always in danger of stumbling back into the darkness. And there's too much riding on it.

Viktor Frankl, himself a survivor of the Theresienstadt Camp, wrote:

“So, let us be alert—alert in a twofold sense.

Since Auschwitz, we know what man is capable of.

And since Hiroshima, we know what is at stake.”

But the holocaust and the attempted extermination of the Jews by the Nazis didn't come out of **nowhere**. Anti-Semitism had seethed beneath the surface of European culture for centuries. No matter how long a Jew had lived in a particular country, they were always considered somehow alien, somehow “other.”

They were dehumanized, called vermin, and seen as a social disease to be eradicated. Their presence was viewed as an invasion. Reducing Jews to a pestilential plague made it much easier for ordinary, otherwise cultured people to collaborate in destroying the Jews—if not actively, then certainly by their silence.

Lately, we've seen the rise of political illiberalism in our country—a growing wave of people convinced that the country has fallen into ruins and must be saved from the gathering horde of the “other.”

The New York Times just printed a conversation between two longstanding and thoughtful conservatives, Brett Stephens and David Brooks, about their thoughts on the descent of their former political party into something they no longer recognize. They offer multiple theories for this decline—which, boiled down to their essence, amount to an increase in radical populism—a shift from the emphasis on the **reform** of government to an almost

complete rejection of government (or at least a complete rejection of a government the populists believe has been stolen from them), which has resulted in multiple attempts to undermine and even overthrow state and national governments. They lament the loss of a proud conservative tradition and its proud intellectual tradition, with its emphasis on practical reform and maintaining institutions (like the senate and the office of the president), to what they both describe as a “cesspool” of “Nihilists” conducting their very own “clown show.”

What their discussion about the collapse of political conservatism in this country only touches on, but which I’m convinced is closer to the heart of the breakdown, is fear and hatred that follows closely behind. Bret Stephens does mention that so many of the people who make up this new radical populism aren’t conservatives but illiberal con artists.

But overall, they don’t pay sufficient attention to one crucial reality I believe lies at the heart of this deterioration: Our country

has been undergoing a vast (and unsettling to many) shift from a majority white, straight country dominated by Christianity to a majority-minority, queer country in which Christianity has been on the decline for three generations. Put more simply, there are a lot of people in this country used to living in a world built almost exclusively for them. As a result, they fear that this world will be taken away from them and replaced by a new one where they have less control.

A significant portion of the people in this country is terrified they'll soon wake up in a country they no longer recognize because it will be populated by people they've historically felt superior to because of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, immigration status, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

And these disillusioned souls are sure that the only way to protect the lives they believe they're owed is by marginalizing, harassing, discounting, and dominating people who don't look, love, or pray like them.

Some lessons from history, apparently, are beyond us to learn permanently.

But none of our cruelty toward Jews, people of color, women, queer people, and foreigners would have surprised first-century Palestinians. Raj Nadella observes that "the Roman Empire had been subjecting people to darkness and death for generations. It made darkness and death integral aspects of the society and tried to normalize them."

This dark pit of Roman oppression is the backdrop for our Gospel this morning. Jesus had earlier been baptized by John the Baptist before being "led up by the Spirit in to the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

And do you remember the nature of the temptations Jesus faced out in the wilderness?

Political.

Seeing Jesus without food, the Devil says, "It looks like you're hungry. If you really **are** the Son of God, if you **are** the one who's going to help fix the problem of poverty and hunger that Rome has visited upon the peasants of this land through evictions and foreclosures, then why don't you do something useful? Command these stones to become loaves of bread. Then you can feed everybody, and that's a great brand to carry into a political career."

No luck. Jesus doesn't bite.

Then the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says, "You know, if you really **are** the Son of God who's going to lead the people to liberation, you've going to get serious about marketing. Your P.R. team just ain't gettin' it. Here's how you fix that. Throw yourself off the top of this building, and God will send angels to bear you up. It'll be epic! Imagine the spectacle **that**

would create. You want to grow a following? That'd be a great way to start."

Nope. Jesus isn't buying it.

Finally, the devil brings Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. The devil turns to him and says, "Look, if you're really serious about this stuff, if you **really** care about the suffering people of your land, I'll tell you what. I'm going to help you out. You bow down to me, and I can make not only the Romans go away but also make you the new Emperor to take his place. Caesar's big, but I can make you bigger. How's that sound?"

Again, Jesus withstands the call to do politics the way the rest of the world does politics. He's going to go up against Rome all right, but he's not going to do it riding in a big Secret Service motorcade. He's not going to be flanked by people in

wrap-around sunglasses, talking into their wrists. No gold-plated jets for Jesus. He's going to go about the whole thing differently.

Now, the first thing Jesus hears after he makes his way back from his interview with Ol' Scratch out in the desert is that John the Baptist has been arrested by Herod. The Empire has reached its hand into Jesus' world in a very specific and horrifying way.

As we'll see, John has stuck his nose where Herod thinks it doesn't belong, and Herod's going to oblige him by chopping it off.

But that's the way Empire always responds when people speak the truth about its shady practices. Caesar can't stand to be told that he's not perfect, that he serves only his own best interests, that some see through his hollow promises.

And whenever that happens, you can be sure somebody's head will end up on a pike.

So, Matthew tells us that after hearing John's run-in with old King Herod, Jesus "withdrew to Galilee."

Withdrew. That sounds very orderly and dignified, doesn't it?

But in fact, the word in Greek means something more urgent: to flee. Matthew uses the same word in describing Joseph and Mary taking the baby Jesus and hitting the road to Egypt to escape Herod the Great's wrath (2:14).

Then, after the holy family moves back to Judea, Herod the Great dies, and they hear that his idiot son, Archelaus, is going to rule over Judea, and they once again **flee** from Judea to Galilee (2:22).

Later, Jesus hears about John the Baptist's execution and flees himself to the wilderness. In each case, the word signifies flight from imperial violence—or at least the potential of it.

But it's not like Jesus had an outlaw hideout to "withdraw" to, no safe space to flee from the Empire. It was everywhere. Jesus doesn't go into hiding; he's just trying to stay one step ahead of the man.

So you see, our passage today opens with great foreboding—John's in jail and Herod's on the warpath. Nobody's safe.

But as I say, this chaos in the system isn't new for Jews under Roman rule. So, when Matthew draws on the famous Isaiah passage to help set the stage, his allusion is apt:

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death ... light has dawned."

Then Matthew says, "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

In other words, a light has shone among those huddled in the grim shadow of the Empire of illiberalism, the Empire of poverty and hunger, and oppression. And this light—Jesus—has fled not into **hiding** but into the very heart of the Empire to announce a **new** realm—a realm that seeks to establish on earth God's idea of heaven.

In a few short verses, we glimpse what this new realm will look like. But before we get there, Matthew tells us that Jesus looks to recruit some help.

Jesus says to some potential new disciples, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

But here's the kicker: Matthew says, "Immediately they left their nets and followed him." No sales pitch. No setting down the

salary figures and benefits package. No strategic plan. Just "follow me," and they follow.

I'm not sure how to interpret this quick buy-in from the disciples. What stands out because of the way Matthew tells the story is that, apparently, things were bad enough in the land that any chance to join up with somebody willing to stand up to the Empire proved too tempting to pass up.

But what I want to draw your attention to are the ***kinds*** of people Jesus recruits. Not politicians. Not professionals or academics. Not the captains of industry. Jesus appeals first to fisherman.

Choosing first to go to fishermen doesn't sound especially significant to modern ears until you realize just what kind of social status fishermen had. When he ranked occupations, Cicero placed first the owners of cultivated land—you know, the rich people who were busy swallowing up the subsistence farms of the peasants.

Fishermen, on the other hand, occupied the lowest ranking. Athenaeus suggested that fishermen and fishmongers were the social equivalents of moneylenders and were as socially dubious as greedy thieves. In other words, Jesus couldn't scrape any lower for disciples in the barrel of respectability than the first four he calls. Peter, Andrew, James, and John—again, not a very auspicious beginning to a **relevant** political career.

But you see, that's the perfect place to start for a new realm—one that will challenge the Roman Empire, which was always and only about enriching the people who already sat atop the food chain. The Roman Empire cared nothing for the peasants, the merchants, and those who fished for a living ... except how best to pacify them and keep them in line so they didn't cause trouble down at the country club.

But this new realm Jesus announces is the kind of good news that appeals to everybody **else**—the other 99%. In fact, the news is

so good that, according to Matthew, "Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in [the] synagogues and proclaiming" it—healing the social, physical, and economic disease in the land.

Because this new realm is best exemplified not so much by Jesus' rhetorical gifts but through his **traveling about** and "curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

In other words, the "kingdom of heaven" concerns itself with **healing** instead of **domination** and **violence**. It seeks out not the most powerful but the people everybody else walks past without noticing—the sick, the poor, the hungry, the houseless, and those who've lived virtually every day with the fear of what tomorrow holds for them.

As Warren Carter says, "Jesus' healings are acts that repair **imperial damage** and enact God's life-giving [realm] in restoring people's lives."

And this is why the Empires of this world will always fail—because their oppression and exploitation are always in the service of the interests of those who are wealthy and powerful. For a while, the Empire appears inevitable, a permanent fixture that will always prevail in its corruption and self-dealing. But the good news that Jesus announces is that the "kingdom of heaven" inspires and empowers those willing to stand up against Caesar, lift up their voices for the voiceless, and offer healing instead of rejection and scarcity.

The question for those who would hear Jesus' call today, who would drop their nets and follow him, is how we will respond when faced with imperial violence and subjugation.

Do we make peace with those powers?

Do we sell our integrity and our souls for a Scooby Snack from Caesar?

Do we flee, searching for a place to hide?

Or do we follow Jesus into the wilderness to shine our light, to unmask the Tempter and the powers of evil and darkness?

As Joel C. Rosenberg asked in *The Auschwitz Escape*: “The question shouldn't be 'Why are you—a Christian—here in a death camp, condemned for trying to save Jews?' The real question is, 'Why aren't **all** the Christians here?’”

We know what the Empire is capable of.

And with all the chaos swirling around us right now, like Viktor Frankl, we **know** what's at stake.

But the good news we have to offer is that the Empire will **always** fail, that the light will shine in the darkness, that God will create through Jesus a new world, and work to establish a new realm that looks like heaven on earth.

The question is: Are we willing to drop our own nets and follow?

—Amen.