

Cradles to Caskets  
Pastor Sam Richards  
January 10, 2021—Christmastide

**Come unto Me all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.**

Today's sermon, prepared in the waning days of 2020, was intended to be a topical "first of the year" sermon which, as those of you know who attended last week, was replaced by a message on resurrection—that we should be more mindful of the power that is ours in the resurrection power of the Risen Lord so as to *face the new year with confident and faithful hope! I will not be following the Joseph story in Genesis this Sunday either.*

However, the recent civic unrest in Washington, makes this message particularly timely (especially as it was written prior to any of the violence). Opinions vary immensely over the significance of the assault of the capitol building by some of the angry protestors. Some of them were exercising their right to revolution—reserved, as a last resort, when the government has turned too tyrannical, as, no doubt, some of them sincerely believe our government has become given the immense degree of public corruption, allegations of a rigged election (coupled with vehement denial by the winners, the partisan press and big tech influences). Denial and suppression of information is not the way to assuage genuinely perceived injustices (redress grievances?) and neither wing of the political spectrum has the high ground, at this point, with regard to the resort to violence. The peaceful "spin" put on looting, arson, destruction of property has not set well with the testimony of our eyes, nor with the enormous loss of property in the process. It is hard to distinguish between anarchy and revolution these days. And the recourse to violence has been seeded by heated rhetoric, hateful speech, slandering, race baiting . . . arrogance, contempt and divisiveness. It is written: **They that sow the wind, shall reap the whirlwind.** (Hosea 8:7) Now that word, and not the words of some pundits, or ranting of some politicians (both sides of the aisle), will stand. Please do not take this prologue, my setting of the stage as partisan—I like the response of the commander of the Lord's army in Joshua 5:13-15: Joshua asks, **"Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No (meaning neither), but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come (Sword drawn and battle ready). Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my Lord say to his servant?" (v. 14) The Lord is nigh.**

It is His will that his **justice roll down like mighty waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream** (Amos 5:24) That is why He has come to Washington, come to us. It is the government's role to insure that justice is done, to do justly and to help everyone down the line to live uprightly and justly as well. It is God's will that we learn His ways and teach others His ways—His Law, his commandments and statutes—a *submissive government attends to the instructional priority*—as modeled by Moses before the mountain of God in Sinai. Every dispute, every quarrel and contention came before him **so that the people might hear from God; that is, receive an oracle from God and so be informed as to the Word of God on their matter.** "What does my Lord say to His servant?" Over and over again, the Word of the Lord is to be reiterated, repeated, so that the people would know God's

will—at which point the dispute resolves itself and justice was served to both parties (two, or more)! If government has strayed from its purpose, **to do justice** by teaching the people God's will! (and it plainly appears to have done so) then there is to be a shaking up and all the subterfuges, inventions and imaginations/aspirations *are to be overthrown(!)*. *The template, or pattern for accomplishing God's purpose is plainly laid out in Scripture (See Exodus 18)—we are not in the dark as to his approach!* The purpose of government is not secular, and it is not partisan—neither; but it is universally compelling, and binding. God recognizes no wall of separation! So much government is extraneous, burdensome, futile! In just such a crisis moment, full of danger, and strife—a perfect storm (**not one stone will be left atop another**)—we are to hear Jesus' soothing invitation: **“Come unto Me, all ye who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give thee rest.”** **Come unto Me**—means return to God, turn to do things His way, repent, and give up **our foolish ways!** (“Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”—v.1 #418) Be gathered in now—even as the storm is breaking! The way is plain but it is not simple; it is known, not hidden for it has been revealed to us, meaning, the way in which we should go. **Seek the Lord and live.** (Amos 5:6) Either we shall change, or He shall break us.

A while back (2009), SMASH put on a production of Shakespeare's “*The Tempest*” in the church sanctuary with lights, cameras and sound effects! The play began with a singing of Psalm 100. Then the play begins cataclysmically, portraying a scene of apparent nautical disaster: the foundering of a royal ship. To the young, innocent eyes of Miranda, the scene is terrifying, an unmitigated disaster: the ship appears to founder, the passengers appear to be lost in the sea suffering a drowning death. Horrifying. She is totally alarmed. The special effects employed, music, lighting (with lightning flashes), the roaring of a storm mixed with cries of dismay (some scripted and others extemporized), were powerfully effective—and some in the audience experienced a taste of Miranda's terror and dismay! The ship even appeared, and foundered before their eyes. We successfully portrayed the catastrophe. Some of you may have actually seen the production, but, while I love to reminisce over Shakespearian productions, I have a broader, more Scriptural purpose in mentioning the play.

Imagine that you are present with Jesus as he departed from the Temple on the day recorded in Matthew 24 that he told the dismayed disciples the Temple would be destroyed. The Temple complex was still under construction. Herod had begun the work in 20 BC and it would not be completed until A.D. 64. Jesus never saw the completed project! And within six years of its completion, Jerusalem would be invaded by the Roman armies and put under siege conditions. By A.D. 70, Jesus' words, **not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.** (v. 2) In other words, the entire temple complex would be cataclysmically destroyed—only it would happen in reality and not merely appear to happen. What a horrifying prediction!

And, as we know, not only the temple complex but the entire city of Jerusalem would be razed, the population would perish—either slain, or dispersed—the crown city of Judea would become a barren, uninhabited wasteland. When this happened, it was a national and religious *catastrophe*. It also fulfilled the words of Jesus

uttered prior to his prophecy regarding the destruction of the Temple—which is the “house” in this saying:

**37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who have been sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. 38 Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!**

While I am not suggesting an equivalency between the shock and dismay of a teenage girl, witnessing a shipwreck off the coast of her island abode, and the reaction of the disciples to Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple. I want to assert, in no uncertain terms, that there are disastrous consequences for those who refuse **to be gathered in by Jesus**. As the sinking of a fictitious royal ship pales in comparison to the literal destruction of the actual Temple, both of these “catastrophes” pale in comparison to eternal damnation reserved for this who decline Jesus’ invitation. In *The Tempest* the ship’s foundering, and in the disciples’ eyes, the destruction of the Temple, completely and utterly, are “wake up calls.” Miranda is awaked to the reality of perishing. Wars, and the rumors of wars, plagues and pestilences surrounding the end times are wake-up calls as well—but we should be well awakened by their current relevance! It is a matter of some urgency . . . it is time sensitive, **we must work while it is day!**

Here is what we are to wake-up to: the in-gathering **which is the fulfillment of God’s will in redeeming us**. Note: God has given the elect to Christ that they might come to him and be saved. **Come unto Me all who labor and are heavy-laden** is addressed to them, the elect—to *those who are truly believers*. Nothing, not sin, Satan, the flesh nor the world can hinder their coming! The “will of God” will be done—the saints will come home. They will enter into the **rest** of Jesus’ promise: **I will give them rest**. How can we be so sure about the success of Christ’s mission?

First, we note that Christ has put forth a super-abundance of grace (a more-than-sufficiency of grace) to effectually perform his promises. Christ will use all means necessary to bring about the restoration: the **come and be saved** purpose of God, the Father. The Father’s “end/or will” will not be frustrated.

What does this invitation **come unto me** entail? 1. It entails a coming of the mind (a turning of our thoughts to Him and towards His purposes, ends and goals) God becomes our preoccupation. 2. This transformed mindfulness is joined with a movement of the heart (the new heart, the heart of flesh instead of stone), a love of the Father as in the affection of beloved children. And 3. there is an implantation of desire, a desire for more of God certainly, but also a desire to be justified, purified and sanctified *in order to stand before God*. In a word, we will come into a desire to be holy (**as He is holy**). Justified, purified and sanctified is a description of the holy condition of the saved! They are made right (by Christ’s atonement) and want to be right with God (from then on) and they want to stay right—the fix, as it were, is permanent one which the saints persevere in, while maintaining that state of grace into which they have been brought—through faith, love and obedience!

How does this **come unto me** come about? There must be a certain sense of lostness which apparently comes before accepting the invitation—perhaps it is framed as “disappointment?” Has success turned out to be “a ladder to nowhere?” Or it may come as a sense of incompleteness, a dissatisfaction rooted in a deep sense of the vanity of all things temporal. Or, positively, it can be a yearning to please God better, to do something of lasting significance (in his eyes).

Anyone of these, and other causes as well I’m sure, may appear and motivate us to **come to Christ/to me**. For some it may come more as a calling, or as a summons to a quest; for we know that God calls the elect, and we are also aware that those who seek God are those who find him. Therefore it is good to pray that motivation comes to those who are far off that they may draw nearer . . . and **come to God**.

When it comes to it, we have many accounts of such motivations. When the three thousand came to Christ at Pentecost, we know that they came from amongst those seeking God (pilgrims), seeking religious fulfillment, and the consolation of Israel. They were in Jerusalem when many awful things went down—like the murder of notoriously innocent man as if he were a criminal. *What is gong on here?!* Corruption, appeasement of Rome, the perversion of justice, the use of false witness, illicit trials, presumptions of guilt, fear, hatred and the naked quest for power, or the retention of position, place and privilege—all pursued in an atmosphere of death, news relating to graves and tombs and corpses *revivified*, just to name a few. And there were other strange *occurrences*—an inexplicable darkness from noon to three, earthquakes, the reports of saints long deceased being raised and walking the city streets—and credible reports that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified, had risen from the dead and had appeared to many. A desire to understand what was going on, to clear up confusion and make sense of it all, all these were motivations to draw near God. Passover had been their primary purpose in coming to Jerusalem!

The last thing they expected to hear was: **this Man delivered over by the predetermined plan of God, you nailed to to a cross by the hands of godless men, and put Him to death. . . . But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.** (Acts 23-24) Jesus’ tomb doubled as the cradle of resurrection life! Peter’s address raised serious religious questions.

Just what is **the agony of death**? Is it the struggle of dying? Is it not the denial of all things held to be valuable in this life? The end of everything? Death’s finality and hopeless—just death, dust, worms and corruption! The envisioned loss of personhood, the real separation from family, friends and loved ones—the thought of never being seen, heard from, or being together again? *Are these not the monuments of death that haunt the minds of all mankind?*

But if, as Peter claimed, someone has come back, **been raised up from the dead**, is that not the signal defeat of our most mortal enemy?! The **agony of death** swallowed up by resurrection life! If death is not the end, what lies ahead then? Jesus’ resurrection raised many questions in their troubled minds.

How was it **impossible for Him**, this Man Jesus, **to be held in its power** as Peter asserted? Does that mean it is possible that death must relinquish its grip on me? On my thinking? What if the **agony** is based on the mistaken assumptions we hold about death and dying? Why, the whole future opens up and we are, at that instant, very open to learning more about what's to come, about who this Jesus actually was and about what that means for who we are! So it is not surprising that they were changed, mind, heart and motivationally, and thus cried out, **What shall we do? Repent, and each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins**, for your rotten complicity in this depraved and fallen world, **and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** (vv. 37-38)

Why bring up **the gift of the Holy Spirit**? *Isn't forgiveness of sins sufficient?* Because this was the presenting concern of those observing the effects of Pentecost! ***These men are not drunk, they are filled with the Holy Spirit just as Joel had prophesied.*** Peter deals with what concerned them first last—something that he learned from his Master. He took what they considered odd, or freakish and in a moment made it a most desirable thing.

Shifting locations for a moment, the jailer in Philippi, certainly saw his life flash before him, when he discovered that the prison doors were all wide open! He knew he would be held accountable and pay with his life for what could not be construed as anything other than a dereliction of duty! The authorities would blame him and who knows if any of them believed in angels releasing prisoners. *What is going on here? A catastrophe?* The immanence of death, his own, was certainly on his mind and the last thing he expected to hear, from one of the more significant detainees, was: **Do yourself no harm, for we are all here** (Acts 16:28). Certainly the jailer experienced that development as unanticipated favor! From whom? For what? It is little wonder that, after gathering his new thinking and after a swift heart transplant, he would cry out, **Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**

When death is before people, then they both see and fear it. It feeds upon their minds and threatens to devour their thinking! ***But only if they refuse to come to Christ, and are unwilling to be saved.*** I wanted to gather your children together . . . but you were unwilling. It seems as if some will only come under the press of dire necessity; forced to it by the sense of fear and dread induced in them—only in the extremity of sensing that they are about to die, to be utterly and everlastingly undone. ***And they are if they do not take refuge and find their safety in Christ.***

Now we know this and believe this but what do we do as a result of this knowledge, this conviction?

It is later than we think! Even now, even today, Christ is calling to us, **Come to me.** Our response, at this hour, should be a running to, a flocking to—think of fleeing a fire, or outracing an approaching tsunami— a fleeing of the wrath to come. Sadly, it is only when all other refuge fails us that we see the enormity of our peril, the danger we are in, the at risk-ness—only when it comes suddenly upon us. Perhaps it is partly a problem of vocabulary, we think of “at risk” as pertaining to academic failure, child abuse, or to dropping out of high school—and it desensitizes

us to our genuine vulnerability before God. Real danger attends our imperiled state, and more so the state of the godless unbelievers(!), and we know this—but what do we do about it? A lighthouse can warn a ship of impending dangers of shore lines, shoals and sandbars—but if we do not heed the warnings, we run the risk of wrecking, of running aground and sinking and drowning.

**Come unto to me.** Unless I activate this option, there is nothing left but sin, death and damnation. These are to me as destruction was to the Temple. Fly to Christ in order to escape, in order to live. Somehow our need for Christ needs elevated about niceness, above mere moral improvement, above even forgiveness of sins (for those coping with shame, guilt and blame). Miranda cried, “Poor souls, they perished!” Fortunately for her, and for the rest of the play, she mistook appearances for substances; but her heartfelt compassion remains un-reprovable! A piece of moral magnificence. We have an absolute need for rescue—like the disciples did on the stormy sea, **Lord, save us or we perish!** (Matthew 8:25) *It is something only He can do!* A scene of shipwreck brings mortality and death into view.

**Come unto to me.** What does it require of me? An honest, entire and sincere forsaking of everything as in a fire . . . “Flee the building, do not stop to gather up your things. Run for your lives.” **Whoever does not bear his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.** (Luke 14: 26-27) Whoever would truly come must forsake all else . . . toss it all behind their backs. There is no way forward to the thrones except by way of forsaking all else, and by entering into the fellowship of suffering (and of humiliation) with him. The disciples who were called from fishing gave up their main thing, and in that exchange, look at what they became—the envy of all those who gave up less! And Paul who considered the gain of Christ worth the loss of all things—he became the envy of the Christian world and, properly understood, still is.

**Do you not see these things** (Herod’s Temple complex), **not one stone will be left upon another.** (Matt. 24:2) A World War I veteran, Raymond Keene, in my first church, was assigned the duty, without relief or reprieve, of stacking the bodies of soldiers who had died from the flu in the trenches of Europe. He created a corridor of corpses, stacked on both sides as far as the eye could see. He saw. And the sight of it broke him, Ray suffered a nervous breakdown from that unrelenting mortuary duty. As he lay dying, decades later, the images of that horror returned repeatedly to torment him. We prayed. And asked him to consider what provision our God of love may well have made for those deceased. I thank him for the service he provided, I honored him as best I could. I shared that people beyond number were blessed in his ministry of returning to them their dead. He understood **not one stone will be left upon another** better than I ever could. His calamity, our catastrophe was truly more than an unbelieving heart could stand. “Poor souls, they perished.” Perhaps some did perish, but my hope and prayer is that many, many fled to Jesus, sought refuge in his arms and they live forever more—never even perish! Jesus became the Man of sin that all all who believe might enter in and be saved . . . just as the Father intended. **And all that the Father gave the Son**, this we know, **they are all safely gathered in.**

I pray that God give us the heart of compassion we need to perceive the state of the perishing and grant that he would use us to rescue whomever he wills to be saved . . . to turn mind, heart and will, to the King. So that, in the end, they may enter his rest.

**Amen.**