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## ***Daily Meditations***

### ***August 10-15, 2020***

*The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 2 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Becky Denton, Pat Gillory, Traci Maxwell, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T.Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.*

*Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.*

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## **COLLECT, PROPER 14**

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

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## **Do You Turn Away and Shrug?**

*Monday, August 10, 2020*

### **Acts 5:12-26**

*Then someone came in and reported to them, "The men whom you put in prison are in the temple area and are teaching the people."*

During these many days of violence in the streets of cities such as Portland and Seattle, it's difficult for us old-timers to remember what nonviolent disobedience looked like. It's improbable that younger folks have any notion of what those words "nonviolent civil disobedience" meant in the 1950s and 1960s when the Civil Rights and anti-war movements filled city centers with protesters. The death of Rep. John Lewis in July did help highlight the guts it took for him and Martin Luther King Jr., among many, many others, to speak truth to power without brandishing long rifles or throwing bricks.

In these few verses from the Book of Acts, we see their ancestral roots. The apostles led by Peter are healing the sick and speaking about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and they are arrested and thrown into jail. They escape. Then they return to the temple area and again minister to the debilitated and live as Jesus taught them to live. They are then arrested again. This report of those arrests contains no indication they fought the authorities or resisted detention. They did what they believed was the right thing. Interestingly, the soldiers or guards who were tasked with taking them back to jail didn't escalate or add drama to the effort. They didn't beat the apostles; they didn't turn dogs on them; they didn't pull out tear gas or fire hoses. They might have. They could have, but they didn't. Why not? Were they just being

good cops? Nope. Verse 26 tells why: "Then the captain and the court officers went and brought them in, but without force, because they were afraid of being stoned by the people." What does it tell us about American society today that so many of us just turn away and shrug as if what is happening on our streets is normal behavior for armed troops and police officers?

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## **Out of Harmony with the Moral Law**

*Tuesday, August 11, 2020*

### **Acts 5:27-42**

*"We must obey God rather than men."*

Standing before the Sanhedrin in court after his arrest, Peter details why the apostles disobeyed the demands of those who had the power and the will to kill them. In doing so, he lays out the very basics of nonviolent civil disobedience. The rationale is stated above. "We must obey God rather than men." Those words have resonated down through history, and we find further and definitive refinement of the concept in the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" written by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. during his confinement. I wish I had the space here to reprint the entire letter. Instead, let me go to the heart of the matter at hand, which is how one who follows the path of Christ and the commandments of God must respond to injustice. King writes: "A just law is a manmade code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law...Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."

Now, for the rest of the story: The apostles are hustled out of sight in the court area, and in steps a man named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law. Gamaliel argues that Peter and the apostles might be right. He's a practical man, the kind who would never fit into this nation's White House scrum. "So, now I tell you," he tells the Sanhedrin, "have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God." The apostles are released. "And all day long, both at the temple and in their homes, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the Messiah, Jesus."

Have we become so numb, so deaf and blind, that we don't understand that much of what is going on in this country today by the 1 percent in the name of greed and lust is simply unjust?

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## **It Just Never Seems to End**

*Wednesday, August 12, 2020*

### **Acts 6:1-15**

*They presented false witnesses who testified, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law."*

Perhaps you recall what happened to a man named Cameron Todd Cunningham. Mr. Cunningham lost his three children in a house fire in Corsicana. He was arrested and charged with their murder. Prosecutors loaded the deck against Mr. Cunningham, and the state killed him in 2004. Since then we have learned of the prosecutorial misconduct and also of the faulty evidence contrived to convict him.

I refer to the case of this man wrongly put to death by the State of Texas

because the kind of thing that is happening to an apostle named Stephen in these texts just never seems to end. Stephen had been appointed to feed the hungry, and one assumes he also helped spread the word about Jesus Christ. Enemies of the nascent Christian movement had him arrested and hauled before the Sanhedrin, and then found witnesses to lie about him. This road, as I say, goes on forever. We hear regularly about such cases, although few have the radical outcome that resulted in Mr. Cunningham's death. My point is that the truth does not always win out. And in fact what's true in the national conversation about almost anything gets lost in the fog of lies spread by the powerful to keep their boots on the necks of the downtrodden, the voiceless. Today in America, the death sentence is carried out against people like George Floyd even without a rigged trial. It's heartening to me that our Bishop David Reed speaks out against injustice. Let me quote his June 4 statement here:

*In the same way that God the Father has sent the Son, so Jesus sends the Church, sends us by his Holy Spirit and with his very breath, to bring peace, and to show our wounds. And because we are sent as he is sent, by our wounds we offer his own healing love, his own breath of life.*

*Pray for the repose of the soul of George Floyd: "He who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies through his indwelling Spirit." (Book of Common Prayer, p. 501) Receive our brother into the arms of your mercy; give him your Spirit; give him the breath of life eternal. Amen.*

*And, from the New Zealand Prayer Book, pray for Peace: "O God, it is your will to hold both heaven and earth in a single peace. Let the design of your great love shine on the waste of our wraths and sorrows, and give peace to your Church, peace among nations, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts." Amen.*

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## **Stand By, Things are About to get Nasty**

*Thursday, August 13, 2020*

### **Acts 6:15-7:16**

*Then the high priest asked, "Is this so?" And he replied, "My brother and fathers listen."*

In this way, Stephen begins his defense before the Sanhedrin. He starts at the beginning with a history of the people of God and their enslavement in Egypt "for four hundred years." Stephen says that God told those in Abraham's clan that after that period ended, "I will bring judgment on the nation they serve..." The verses cited here leave me unnerved. Why would God allow his chosen people to be enslaved for 400 years? I know that's not a lot of time from God's perspective, but from my perspective even one day of enslavement is too long. And why would God, after that period of time had lapsed, then punish the Egyptians? Does God punish nations that enslave and oppress the people who are already powerless? If so, stand by: Things are likely to get really nasty for the powerful America. (By the way we are now standing almost exactly 400 years after the first Africans were enslaved in the Virginia colony.)

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## **In the Same Predicament**

*Friday, August 14, 2020*

### **Acts 7:17-29**

*"He (Moses assumed [his] kinfolk would understand that God was offering them deliverance through him, but they did not understand."*

In the immortal words of Kurt Vonnegut, "And so it goes." Moses wants to save his tribe; they reject him; he leaves. Moses is a stranger in a strange land. Or perhaps he is naive. Here he's trying to help, he's speaking his truth. And nobody is listening. They'd rather be ignorant and enslaved. Now, fast-forward a few thousand years, and aren't we in the same predicament? As Buffalo Springfield sang in the '60s:

*There's something happening here  
What it is ain't exactly clear  
There's a man with a gun over there  
Telling me I got to beware  
I think it's time we stop, children, what's that sound  
Everybody look what's going down*

Do we know what's going down? Yes, many of us do. We know we're being lied to about a number of things having to do with governance and science and medicine, and we know the lies are deliberate and support the powerful against the oppressed. We cannot walk away, though, can we? And so it goes. Or does it? Listen again to the words of another song from the '60s, this one written by Chet Powers and sung by the Youngbloods:

*Love is but a song we sing, fear's the way we die  
You can make the mountains ring or make the angels cry  
Tho' the bird is on the wing and you may not know why*

*C'mon people now, smile on your brother  
Everybody get together, try to love one another, right now!*

*Some will come and some will go, we shall surely pass  
When the one that left us here returns for us at last  
We are but a moment's sunlight, fading in the grass*

*C'mon people now, smile on your brother  
Everybody get together, try to love one another, right now!*

*If you hear the song I sing, you will understand  
You hold the key to love and fear in your trembling hand  
Just one key unlocks them both, it's there at your command*

*C'mon people now, smile on our brother  
Everybody get together, try to love one another, right now!*

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## **We Are Called to be Christ-like** *Saturday, August 15, 2020*

### **Acts 7:30-43**

*"Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him; instead they pushed him aside and in their hearts turned back to Egypt..."*

Moses leads his people out of Egypt, and then we all know what happens. They turn on him. And they turn to idolatry, the worship of an object. No good deed goes unpunished, right? What I take away from these passages of Stephen's description is that ignorance abounds throughout human history, and "the people" are unlikely to be very trustworthy; their leaders even less so. Our nation's founders tried to straighten all that out with the creation of the Constitution that governs the United States. They well knew that people were not angels at any level, from top to bottom, and they tried to build into their governance document checks and balances that would elevate generations to

come out of a life that was nasty, brutish, and short. Now, we can see how what they envisioned can be undermined by the forces that worked against Moses: ignorance, willingness to lie to one another, greed, all the other seven deadly sins.

Does that knowledge, though, stop us from doing good or trying to do good? Why not? Why not just give up and let fate take its course? Well, for one thing we are called to be Christ-like. It's who we are. That's reason enough, but there is also this: as a group, we must stand strong. I was recently reminded of the importance of developing inner strength by the story of Admiral James Stockdale, who spent years being tortured in North Vietnam prison camps. The author of *The Daily Stoic* holds Stockdale up with this reminder:

*We have spoken of his courage, his wisdom, his self-discipline, and his sense of justice But nothing better encapsulates the man and his heroism than this one quote, which applies today to our own adversity just as it did to the horrible ordeal that he went through:*

*"I never lost faith in the end of the story, I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect I would not trade."*

*We must never lose that faith. Does that mean we ignore the brutal reality of the current moment? Does it mean we pretend that all is well, even as blows rain down upon us? No. Of course not. We must be realistic. We must be honest.*

*Yet we should be ever confident of our ability to respond to the situation we have found ourselves in. We decide where this is going to go. We decide what we're going to get out of this. We will prevail in the end and turn this into a defining event in our lives. We will make it something we would not trade.*

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