

The violence of this day is excruciating; the suffering of this day, unbearable really to contemplate.

Jesus of Nazareth, put to death by crucifixion for treason/sedition, crimes against the Empire, and for blasphemy, a crime against the Temple authorities of the day.

Jesus of Nazareth, who spent his few years of ministry bringing people back to God – teaching the importance of relationship, of love, of taking care of one another; demonstrating the liberating power of healing, and forgiveness, and the imminent reality of the Reign of God. This is what earned him his death sentence. Radical hospitality; generous provision for the poor; relationship across class, gender, and culture; the prioritization of love, and service, and care, and life – all of which is really hard in a world that's oriented toward entirely different things.

Jesus' ministry interrogates the world's priorities.

The brutality of crucifixion was reserved for political prisoners and rebellious slaves - gruesome, public, an excruciating way to be put to death, designed to be a stark reminder of the unquestionable power of the Imperial Regime, and its refusal to tolerate anything or anyone that might publicly challenge it; dissent is not tolerated.

Two thousand years may have passed since Jesus' time, and many things have changed, but some things remain the same: Jesus still calls us to actively question what it is we live for, what do we prioritize as we organize ourselves into society. Jesus still exposes the truth that we cannot live to store up worldly power and material wealth, and be in right relationship with God;

Jesus still exposes the truth that we cannot live only to ensure our own comforts, and remain in right relationship with our neighbor. And Jesus still makes it clear, that the world's priority of profit and wealth and power for the few is still the reason so many suffer and struggle to survive.

Jesus' entire life was one of resistance and dissent. And the force of the truth of his radical response to the worldly powers of his own day is what got him violently arrested, tried, publicly humiliated, and violently executed in the most horrific way.

Two thousand years may have passed, and much has changed, but some things remain the same. Violence is still very much a part of everyday life; the worldview of this dominant culture, is propped up by ideas that are, inherently, enmeshed with violence:

That life is survival of the fittest; that there should be an eye for an eye; that there can only be peace through strength.

We may not always be conscious of these deeply ingrained beliefs – but you'll likely see them kick in (in our own life, and in the world around us) whenever there's enough stress or anger. Our learned responses to challenge, or to threat, or to being hurt, our learned responses are all too often a violence of some kind, a violence of speech, or perhaps of behavior, but it'll be something we consider justified, given the circumstances. And as a society, we invariably, and often willingly, turn to violence to control; to control unstable or volatile situations that arise out of conflict, to shut down disruptive behavior; to remove or exclude those who aren't "unlike us;" and we'll justify use of military force and war the world over to keep the wheels of industry and profit turning.

And violence, at any scale, and of all kinds, is always inseparable from suffering; ... and, if we're not careful, there can be violence in our resistance and dissent just as there is violence in the suppression of dissent.

And there's a whole lot going on in the life of our country today that's warrants dissent:

- mass deportations, the intentional separation of families, inhumane forms of incarceration

- the limitation of free speech, and right to protest

- the criminalization of those speaking out for Palestinians, and their mislabeling as terrorist sympathizers; enabling genocide

- the denial and erasure of transgender, non-binary, and two-spirit people

- the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs from universities and other civic institutions; systemic racism

- the erosion of reproductive rights

- the resumption and expansion of the death penalty .. I could go on

All of it is violent, and dependent on violence. All of it bound up with terrible suffering.

We're followers of Jesus. What then is our response to state-sanctioned violence toward migrants and immigrants in this country? ... to violent abuses and atrocities committed by our criminal justice system? ...

to the violence of removing rights and protections for transgender, disabled, and non-white folks - and for the planet? To our country's role in the global war machine? .. what is our response to the violence, which is the lack of care and support for all struggling to survive in the midst of a brutal and unjust economic landscape?

What is our response, what is our response to the suffering, and to the cause of the suffering?

What is our response, given many if not most of us are inheritors of a world view that exalts strength and power, and claims violence and control are necessary to maintain order and stability in society.

Too often and too fast we can all slide into violence, violence of thought and speech, and sometimes even action. Our response and resistance can be rooted in the very same world-view shared by all dominating and authoritarian-leaning systems. We may not mean to, but we too can be the source of the suffering or pain of a neighbor.

The Way of Jesus refuses to do violence in order to bring about change, refuses to damage or hurt or diminish or exclude in order to control or change the behavior of another. We all must be uncoupled from violence, from ways of claiming power over, we must be uncoupled from violence if our response, our dissent is going to instead reflect the glorious loving, healing, and liberating promise of the Reign of God.

Few of us, if any, might think of prayer as a primary proactive and potent response to the horrors of this broken world. But I think it's only through prayer that we can heal the violence that dwells within all of us; violence that's ready to be given shape and form in the world through any of us, if we're sufficiently provoked, through stress or fury.

As we draw closer to God, prioritizing prayer, we come to trust a different way, able to release the deeply ingrained habits of thought and action we've soaked up from the world around us.

As we draw closer to God, prioritizing prayer, we will be changed ... emboldened, courageous enough even to risk following the liberating Way of Jesus in response, and as resistance, to the violence of the world around us. This is the true revolutionary power of a life born of prayer.

Lent has been a season of self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; reading and meditating on God's Holy Word – *all* in order to restore us to right relationship with God and one another, and to guide us into freedom, freedom from all the ways our being and doing has been shaped by the habits of this world; and we begin to disentangle ourselves from the love of power, the need for control, and the use of violence to get what we want.

To paraphrase Nietzsche, if we're fighting monsters we've got to make sure we don't become monsters ourselves; and a life of unceasing prayer and a commitment to ongoing transformation in Christ is our safeguard.

The violence of this day is terrible; the suffering of this day is awful – and yet on this day there is also glory and triumph through Jesus' ultimate act of resistance. Jesus breaks the cycle of pain – and shows us definitely the Way into life.

Violence and death do not and never will have the last word.

