

Alas, what shall we do?

Sermon by Timothy Palmer

Delivered at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, New York City

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Texts: 2 Kings 6:8-17; Mark 8:14-21

Good morning. My thanks to all of you for welcoming me here. I come not just as a guest preacher, but as a messenger. I work for an organization called the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. We are a faith-based organization working with clergy and congregations on a range of sexual justice issues, primarily sexuality education, reproductive rights, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality.

Injustice in each of these areas often involves incidents of sexual abuse and violence -- crimes no one likes to talk about, but that occur with staggering frequency. Sometimes they erupt on such a scale that the world has a difficult time hiding its eyes. Through our work with the V-Day organization, we have become aware of the violence that has ravaged the Eastern Congo for more than a decade. Knowing what we now know, we have no choice but to bear witness. And so we have agreed to help carry the message, wherever we can, to raise awareness of the Congo, in the hope that the violence eventually will end.

But I have to step out of my professional role and confess something to you. I struggled with this sermon this morning. Certainly crimes against humanity *should* be addressed from the pulpit. But once I tell you what I know about horrific crimes taking place in a remote country, what then? The more I learn about the Congo the more powerless I feel. I worried that my sermon might leave you feeling powerless as well – and where is the good news in that?

I approached this morning feeling very much like Elisha's servant.

Elisha's servant has lost heart. And who can blame him? It's war time. He steps out at daybreak, and he finds himself surrounded by hostile enemy troops. The situation is surely hopeless. "Alas, Master!" he cries. "What shall we do?"

The servant feels powerless in the face of brute force. How often do we, as servants of Christ, feel powerless ourselves – powerless in the face of human suffering, in the face of human evil?

Jesus may have been speaking of the presence of evil when he warns his disciples in Mark's gospel, "beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." It is a peculiar statement, coming when it does, not long after Jesus has fed multitudes with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish.

Throughout the Scriptures, bread is a symbol of abundance, a sign of God's blessing. Yet Jesus warns that even the bread of life can sometimes be laced with evil. "Yeast of the Pharisees"

may have been intended as a caution against religious doctrines that the Jesus movement had come to reject. For us, it may speak to a particular kind of evil that lurks in unexpected places, an undercurrent we don't always recognize, or perhaps refuse to see.

"The yeast of Herod" is a more chilling phrase – Herod, the murderer, the agent of an oppressive Roman regime. Herod is evil institutionalized and brutally enforced by the principalities and powers of the world. It may be easier for us to recognize and challenge this kind of evil, evil writ large, than it is to admit to the evil that lurks in the human heart. Yet one does not exist without the other.

The Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, just writing less than a decade after the second world war, had this to say about humankind's response to the presence of evil: "This essential predicament of man has assumed a peculiar urgency in our time, living as we do in a civilization where factories were established in order to exterminate millions of men, women, and children; where soap was made of human flesh. What have we done to make such crimes possible? What are we doing to make such crimes impossible?"

Half a century later, we have no answers for Heschel. Not that we haven't tried. We've analyzed, fictionalized and commoditized the suffering of the Holocaust. But we haven't prevented its recurrence – not when you remember Bosnia. Rwanda. Kurdistan. Darfur. Congo.

Last week, I attended an event at the 92nd Street Y with Dr. Denis Mukwege, a surgeon from Bukavu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He described an absolute collapse of law and order in the Eastern Congo, where marauding militias – some from the Congo itself, others from neighboring Uganda and Rwanda – are competing for power. Sexual violence is the weapon of choice. The militias have learned that they can decimate entire villages and demoralize entire populations by enslaving and violating their women.

More than a quarter million have been raped and tortured – women as old as 80 and as young as three months. Ten new victims arrive at Dr. Mukwege's hospital every day – dozens more remain untreated. Even with medical attention, many of these women are beyond repair, physically, emotionally, spiritually. U.N. peacekeepers and international relief agencies are doing what they can to mitigate the suffering, but the violence goes on.

The Congo story has been reported in the press, but what I've read in the *New York Times* and other places mostly describes the horror of the situation, not its causes. What's at stake in the Eastern Congo is not just political power, but economic as well. Congolese mines contain 80% of the world's supplies of a mineral called columbite-tantalite, otherwise known as coltan. When coltan is refined, it becomes a heat-resistant powder that can hold a high electric charge. In the mining, processing, exporting, refining, and distributing of coltan, it passes through many hands. Eventually, it ends up here – in cell phones, laptops, Playstations and Blackberries.

Coltan is a valuable natural resource. That's why the Congolese, Rwandans and Ugandans are fighting over it.

In this age of global supply chains, many of us may well be carrying a piece of the Congo in our pockets. I don't know the price of the tiny piece of coltan in my cell phone. I don't know who paid it. And what can I do about it anyway? We assess the enormity of a situation like the Congo – we place it in the context of violence, genocide and exploitation taking place in so many other parts of the world – and like Elisha's servant, we lose heart. We turn to God in prayer and ask, "Alas, what can we do?"

When Dr. Mukwege got this question from the audience at the 92nd Street Y, his response was simple and direct. He didn't ask for donations or petitions, although these things would surely help. His principal request was that we help tell the story. It doesn't sound like enough – not nearly enough. But isn't that what we as Christians have always been called to do, to whisper a message of hope, even in the face of enormous odds?

Remember that the central image of our faith, the cross, is itself a symbol of human evil, a memento of unspeakable violence. Jesus was just one victim in a systematic genocide that killed thousands. After his death, his disciples went underground. Their movement was demoralized and powerless. And yet it endured. We canonize the heroic martyrs who died defending the faith ... but the gospel lived on because of those who survived, the ones who passed the story on, the ones who whispered a message of hope.

I return to Heschel's questions – what have we done to make crimes, like those we are witnessing in the Congo, possible? What are we doing to make them impossible?

They are made possible by our inability to break cycles of violence. Many of the perpetrators in the Congo are themselves victims of violence that raged in Uganda and Rwanda in their childhoods. Cycles of violence persists because we do not see them or feel powerless to change them. But every day, more eyes are opening, more ears are hearing. With enough force and a collective will, the nations of the world might intervene and stop the violence in the Congo. This needs to happen. But even this is not enough to prevent violence from recurring.

The gospel, remember, is not about imposing our will or marshalling armies for a noble cause, even though political realities often demand that we do just that. Rather, the gospel teaches us to keep the faith, to remember that, in the resurrection, love defeated the power of death, leaving us with an enduring promise of hope and redemption.

The gospel doesn't teach that God will save us from suffering and death, any more than God rescued Jesus from the cross. Rather, the promise is that our prayers, our messages of hope, our actions to confront evil – however slight and seemingly fruitless they may feel to us – do not go unheard. Hearts and minds do change. Human beings can choose a different course. The

gospel assures us that these small things, these imperceptible shifts of the heart, will triumph in the end.

This is the good news that we are entrusted to keep alive. This is the promise that can heal brokenness. This is what gives up hope for a world that values women's lives over profits, a world ruled not by economic or military strength, but by moral conviction. Sharing this gospel, keeping it alive – this is what we do to make crimes like these impossible. It is an enormous undertaking, one we will not complete in our lifetimes. But that is no reason to lose heart.

When his servant became discouraged, Elisha opened the man's eyes to the ever-present power of God. He witnessed it in horses and chariots of fire. But God didn't unleash this power to defend Elisha against the Arameans. That is not how this story ends.

Elisha prays that the Aramean soldiers be blinded long enough for them to be captured. Then he marches them to Samaria, where the king of Israel is encamped. When their sight is restored, it is the Arameans who are surrounded, it is the Arameans whose situation appears hopeless. Sure enough, the king of Israel wants to slaughter them on the spot. But Elisha stays his hand. "Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master."

This was a blessing of bread leavened with the yeast of mercy. The Scripture tells us that, once they were safely home, "the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel." Because one king was moved to a different course of action, the eyes of soldiers opened to a new reality. And so a history of warfare, and a cycle of violence, came to an end.

I invite you to join me in a prayer for the women of the Congo. And as we pray, remember the power of our message. Help spread the word about the Congo, in whatever way you are moved to do. Leaven your words with the conviction of your faith. Let a whisper of hope emerge from this small community that women in the faraway Congo may one day hear.