

Evil has its day, but God will prevail

Message for Sunday, December 30, 2018
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-23

Children's Message: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

I have a gift for each of you. But don't thank me for it; it's not from me — I'm just delivering it to you. Give each child a cheque, with the amount written in as "Eight thousand, seven hundred and sixty hours." Sign each one from "God."

That's how many hours there are in this year. 8,760 hours. That's a lot of time! Bring out a pile of paper to represent the time!!

God has given that time to you. Now it's up to you to choose how to use that time.

If you waste it, you don't get any extra. It's gone.

But the Bible reading today tells us that doesn't mean we should spend all our time working, and never take time to play or relax. It is good to take time for all these things.

Ask for ideas on something they would like to do with their time during the coming year.

Message "Evil has its day, but God will prevail"
April 9, 2017 was a Sunday, Palm Sunday. A day of celebration in churches around the world. At St. George's Coptic Church in Tanta, a city in northern Egypt just 70 km from the Mediterranean Sea, worshippers were singing "Hosanna to the King of Israel." This song re-enacts Jesus' entry in Jerusalem, and they joyfully welcome Jesus as symbols of his presence are brought to the front of the church.

At that moment, a suicide bomber detonated his bomb at the front of the church. It blew apart the first three rows of pews. 27 people died, and 78 were injured, many of them critically. Shortly after that, another bomb went off at a Coptic Church in nearby Alexandria, but the bomber was detained outside, so the damage was not as great: "only" 22 people were killed. What happened that day was horrifying.

This was not something new. The Coptic Church is the indigenous church in Egypt, started by the apostle Mark. It is one of the oldest Christian groups in the world. Coptic Christians have been

the targets of persecution for centuries, but the violence and death are increasing every year.

I thought of this after reading the story of King Herod ordering his soldiers to slaughter all the infant boys in and around Bethlehem. It's the old, old story of evil having its way in the world. What happened that day was horrifying. It's evil, pure evil. And it's part of the Christmas story in the Bible.

Sadly, that story is still repeated today in many parts of the world. There is good news here, though. The good news is that Jesus—God in person—*chose* to come into our world, a world where rulers torture and murder their own citizens, where children are abused and killed, where human rights are discarded when they are inconvenient, where money and power make the rules. God came into this world, not swinging a sword to strike down the evildoers, but carrying a cross to redeem us—I say "us" because I am one of those evildoers, and so are all of you. All of us, according to the Bible, have sinned and fall short of God's glory.

When Jesus died on the cross, it looked like evil had won. When Jesus rose from the tomb, he showed us that God will prevail in the end. Even though we live in a world where it often looks like evil rules, we can live in the peace of Christ because we know how the story ends.

That's the gist of my message today: evil has its day, but God will prevail. But I'd like to give an example of how that belief affects the way we live.

Back to Palm Sunday in Egypt. (By the way, members of the Coptic Church are commonly called "Copts." That's a bid hard to pronounce; try saying that with me a couple of times. Good!)

That same day, just a few hours later, Father Boules George stepped to the front of the Alexandria church. It was packed with people full of grief and anger. He preached "A Message to Those Who Kill Us." It was a short and simple message, with three points: "Thank you," "We love you," and "We're praying for you." Here are some excerpts:

Thank you because the terrorists gave the dead the honour to die as Christ died; because the terrorists shortened the victims' journey to their heavenly home; because the terrorists allowed

Christians to fulfill Christ's words in Luke 10:3, "Behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves"; and because the terrorists' actions made people mindful of their eternal destinies... [The church was overflowing with people who didn't ordinarily attend.]

We love you, because even murderers and thieves love those who love them, but only followers of Jesus are taught to love our enemies...

We're praying for you, because if a terrorist could taste the love of God even one time, it would drive hatred from his heart...

A week later, the nightly news had an item on the bombing. The news anchor in the studio introduced the story, and the screen cut to a video recorded earlier that day. A TV reporter was interviewing the widow of one of the victims of the blast. She said, speaking to the people behind the attack, "I'm not angry at the one who did this. I'm telling him, 'May God forgive you, and we also forgive you. Believe me, we forgive you.'" Then the TV screen cut back to the news anchor in the studio. He was speechless for about ten seconds. He finally said, "The Copts of Egypt are made of steel! How great is this forgiveness you have!"

Christians have suffered persecution ever since the time of Jesus. But it is spreading to more parts of the world, and increasing in intensity. People who track this say that more Christians have been murdered in the previous century—the 1900s—than in all the preceding centuries combined.

By the way, religious persecution is not limited just to Christians. People of every faith face harassment, violence, and even death in countries around the world. That's a large reason why there are more refugees who have fled their homes now than at any previous time in history: almost 70 million. The vast majority of those refugees are living in neighbouring countries—countries which are mostly poor and barely able to feed their own population, let alone an influx of hundreds of thousands or millions.

Three things we can learn from all this:

Next Steps:

- Jesus is called the "Prince of Peace," but we have a long way to go before our world knows peace. Still, we do what we can, wherever we are. We seek reconciliation, not retaliation. When we hear someone spouting prejudice and insults about others, we can say, "Excuse me. Even though you're not talking about me, I find that extremely offensive."
- Canada has a role to help people begin a new life. Each year, thousands of refugees find a welcome here. Perhaps you will have the opportunity sometime to be part of that welcome.
- The Bible tells us that Jesus can identify with us: with our joys, with our temptation, and yes, even with our suffering. Jesus does not ask us to follow a set of principles and doctrines: he calls us to follow *him*. When we do that, when we have fellowship with him, then his strength becomes our strength. That's what enabled Father George and the widow to say, "We forgive you. We love you. We are praying for you." That is not the normal response when people are hurt. But that's how Jesus responded when he was hurt. And as we surrender our lives to Jesus and he lives in us, then we become more like him, and we can do that. All things are possible with Christ.