

# Sermon Text for March 10, 2019

*by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema*

Psalm 137, Acts 8:1-8  
**“You can’t handle the truth”**

Can we get the obvious out of the way and say that the title of this sermon absolutely comes from Jack Nicholson screaming at a young Tom Cruise that he can’t handle the truth. The truth being that there are people like him who are needed but who are not wanted and liked because they have a job to do and nobody wants to admit that they need him because of the grotesque nature of what he is asked to do, because of the immoral character of what he is asked to do, which ultimately, in his twisted perception, saves the nation.

It has been used as a meme, as a Gif, to address people who may think that they really want to know answers but aren’t really capable or mature enough to handle what the answers might be. In both of our Scriptures today I hear almost a covert message that is screaming at us here in this safe and secure sanctuary that we can’t handle the truth of what is required of us for our faith, as we see people who risked it all for the sake of the faith.

We began our Lenten season on Wednesday with the stark recognition of the truth that we are dust, we were created out of the dust, and to dust we will return. It is a truth we would rather ignore as we live our lives happily oblivious to the needs of others around us as we try to focus on our own spiritual growth and our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We saw on Ash Wednesday that we often eschew the more difficult questions related to what is our calling as a community, we even dipped into the calling as a nation, for the much more easy and docile responsibilities that we have during this season of Spiritual disciplines and personal barometers for our faith.

We are called to a fast that both Isaiah and Micah require of us, a fasting that has less to do with our personal spirituality and more of our communal and even national calling. A fast that has as its primary purpose the reshaping of human society to reflect the life that Jesus lived, a life of service and sacrifice to our neighbors, to those who are unloved, unwanted, the least of these in society who more often than not aren’t in our churches, but are behind borders and walls set up either figuratively by society and the church or literally.

Last weekend I was at my Alma Mater, Swarthmore, to see the basketball team play in the NCAA III playoffs. They won, in case you wanted to know. But afterwards a bunch of us

who had played on the 1991 team went out and spent some time together. I was the only one who would consider himself a Christian in that group. One, who is a medical doctor, said to me, Bob, I have always understood religion as making bad people good and making good people do bad things. This is a perception that people have of us, and I try to live a life that contradicts this negative understanding. It is easy from the outside, and from the inside, to find faults with the church.

Our Scriptures today lift up a consistent truth about our faith that is repeated over and over again in the life of the church, this bride that Christ loves so much. A truth that we may not be able to handle. Being a child of God requires us to accept that we can and we will be persecuted for our faith.

### **READ**

I have to admit that Psalm 137 is not one of my favorite Psalms because it really disturbs me. It is one that I have always wanted to preach on in Lent, but never really had the courage to do so because the message that we receive from it, the truth which it elicits is disturbing. Look at it again and you can sense a sadness, the anger, the heartbreak, the need for revenge which comes off the page as you read it. It is written by someone who is agonizing over the loss of a country that is no longer under control of its destiny and has been taken over by another country and the people have been forced into exile.

They had their lives torn from them and their homes and their families scattered and torn to the ground. Some of them had no idea where their family members were, but as they looked back they saw the smoke of their homes burning. Along the way the people who had captured them played games with them and told them to sing songs from your homeland. How could we sing songs? It is a mournful Lenten Scripture, until we get to vs.8 and 9 where we find the author praying for vengeance, the kind of vengeance that makes you say that isn't very Christian. But we have had those feelings before and they are a part of the truth in which we find ourselves. This Scripture disturbs me because I don't like seeing the people of God asking God to dash the babies of the children of their enemies against the rocks. I can't teach that.

But the sneaky reality of this Psalm is the recognition that being a child of God sometimes places us in a position where we are going to be persecuted because of what we believe. When we read Acts 8 we find ourselves in vs.1 at the lowest point in all of Acts for the Christian Church. It became obvious at that point that if you were a believer in Jesus Christ then

you were not safe. Stephen had just been executed and as a result the Scripture tells us that this led to, look at vs.1, a severe persecution. That day, the day of Stephen's martyrdom, led to a severe persecution which forced the believers to scatter from Jerusalem outward.

The emphasis in Acts we find is the perseverance of the disciples even in the face of threats. The truth of our faith in 21<sup>st</sup> century America is that we do not face the threats, not even close, to the threats that the early church faced in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The growth of the Christian church back then was not based upon the dissatisfaction of mainline Protestantism so there was just a parallel shift from Judaism to Christianity, like there is today from traditional Protestantism to non-denominationalism. No, this growth was a result of the Holy Spirit scattering the church because people were dying. Not because people were dissatisfied and were looking for something that better suited their religious or spiritual tastes. No, people were dying because they proclaimed Jesus as Lord and Savior.

In the midst of the description of the chaos and persecution that is taking place we are reintroduced to someone who is taking front and center stage in this persecution. He is going into the homes of Christians and taking men and women and dragging them before the church to be prosecuted. Paul, Paul who reminds us that God's possibilities are not exhausted when humans reject the offered salvation with violence.

How many of us would find ourselves in the same situation and stick with this faith that we now have? When we lived in Russia the closest thing we got to seeing someone persecuted for their faith was my colleague who was a medical doctor and we had started a medical clinic together and had the cover of a number of different embassies whose doctors volunteered at this clinic so we knew that they probably would not shut us down. He was in one of the Stans, Kirk, tajik, at a conference on evangelism and he was a pretty outspoken evangelist who never hesitated to preach the Gospel. When he tried to re-enter Russia at the Moscow airport they refused him entry without giving him reason. He had to return to the United States. It was February and his wife and four children were home in Moscow where they stayed to finish out the school year with our girls. They didn't see their dad for 4 months, but he was never under the danger of death.

There is a group here today who will be travelling to Israel and we will be seeing something that is to me one of the most disturbing sights in modern day. You need to know that it was disturbing to me long before two years ago. There is a wall, just like the Berlin Wall, that

separates the Palestinian section near Jerusalem between the Jewish Israelis and the Arab Israelis. Within that wall live the oldest Christians on the face of this earth. These Christians cannot go to good schools, get good jobs, have no freedom to travel because they happen to have been born in this area of the world. It is close to the first century Christians and very close to the same region.

What would cause you to leave your home if you had to. Think of your home and your family. Your kids if you have them, your spouse, your job, that may be an easy one for some of you, your church... What would cause you to leave and scatter like the earliest Christians felt like they had to leave and scatter in order to keep their lives. Would you ever see your faith so important that you would be willing to leave home and all other things so that your family, your children, your spouse would be safe? What would it take. It would take a lot more than your fit bit not working properly, or a whole array of first world problems that we seem to have.

Last year we went on a device fast. For the season of Lent I encouraged you to fast from using your devices unless you had to use them for work. I'm not sure this is the fast that the Lord would choose. It may make us better people and it may strengthen our personal walk with Jesus, but is that really the biggest enemy to God's kingdom at this time?

The biggest attack on our Christian values comes today more from within than it does from without. I think culture and society wants us to be more Christian and we are not living up to what is expected from us. The Christian values of unity and peace and decency and preference for the poor and the voiceless is being sacrificed for what has become an American value to be as wealthy and as powerful as we possibly can be. Since when has that been a Christian value? This wealth and power can only be gained by putting our heels on those who are weakest and the least of these in society and the world.

I pray that for this Lenten season we will all go on a fast where we ask the question what are we doing to fulfill what is required of us? What are we doing to Isaiah..., and how are we encouraging those around us to fast in the same manner, especially if we call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ. Because the truth of the matter is that anything less than that, if we take the other side from that, then we are living a lie. Amen.