



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
August 27, 2017 Sermon

What Kind of World Will This Child Grow Up In?

Isaiah 40:21-31

What kind of world will this child, Adelyn Louise, grow up in?

I remember my grandmother asking that question about me. I was—what?—maybe seven or eight years old, sitting on the floor in the living room, playing with a matchbox car; the TV was on (back then the TV was a piece of living room furniture with three channels that you had to get up off the couch to change). They had “interrupted our regularly scheduled program for a special news bulletin . . .” about—what?—violence in Newark or Detroit, the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr—I don’t remember. But I do remember my grandfather, who was sitting in his chair, putting down his newspaper—*The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* (back then, every city had at least two major daily newspapers)—to lean forward and watch.

I think I remember what my grandmother said because children, even young children, have a keen interest in, and already some anxiety about, the kind of world they will grow up in.

“America’s original sin,” that’s what Jim Wallis calls racism. Jim Wallis is president and founder of *Sojourners*, a Christian magazine, a Christian community, that addresses issues of social and political justice; Wallis, by the way, will be here at Westminster, in September of 2018, as our first speaker for the Westminster Lecture on Faith and Civic Life—more on that in the next 13 months.

But back to racism as America’s original sin—it’s a provocative and loaded metaphor.

At one level, it captures an undeniable historical truth. European settlers first came to North America to (among other reasons) escape the sinfulness of the old world, to live as we were meant to live in a new world, a new Eden, to found a city upon a hill, a light to all nations, a golden door for all peoples. Later, with the founding of the United States, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution: “we hold these truths to be self-evident all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But from the very beginning, from the beginning of the European settlement of North America and from the beginning of the United States of America, *racism was there*: the forced removal and the genocide of Native Americans; the African slave trade and the ongoing enslavement of blacks in America. Discrimination against Irish, Catholics, Italians, Southern and Central Europeans, Jews, Latinos, Asian-Americans, Muslims, Syrians, middle-easterners, and people of color in general. Racism: America’s original sin: from the beginning it was there, and it has been with us ever since.

But the metaphor works at another level, too—a psychological and emotional level. Our responses to racism in America, often parallel people’s responses to the doctrine of original sin.

At one extreme, the claim of innocence, the desperate attempt at self-exoneration: “Hey, you can’t hold me responsible for all that *bad stuff* in the past. Whatever Adam and Eve did or didn’t do, they weren’t me; I’m not a sinner; I’m a good person . . . Well, at least pretty good; anyway . . .”

And you can see—you've heard—the parallel: "Hey, you can't hold me responsible for all that *bad stuff* in the past. Whatever those slave holders, or those people who lived a long time ago, did or didn't do, they weren't me; I'm not a racist; I don't have a racist bone in my body. I like everybody. Some of my best friends are . . ."

That's one extreme. At the other extreme: despair. For original sin, in general: No matter how hard we try, no matter what progress we seem to make, we humans keep making a mess of things—everything is broken, especially us. Sin and its consequences keep recurring and recurring often in ever more insidious forms. For every apparent advance, every time we seem to take one step forward (television, the internet, digital technology—wow!), we seem to take one—maybe even two—steps back (television, the internet, digital technology—ugh!).

Same with racism in America: racism and its consequences keep recurring and recurring in American history often in ever more insidious forms. From the 3/5 rule in the United States Constitution, to Dred Scot, to the Mexican-American War, to Plessy vs. Ferguson to Jim Crow to the Zoot Suit riots, to the current statistics on incarceration in America. From the Trail of Tears to Japanese internment camps to the Scottsboro boys to the killing of Rueben Salazar to the lynching of Leo Frank to "I can't breathe." For every apparent advance, every time we seem to take one step forward (we elect the first African-American president of the United States, and some even begin to speak of a "post-racial" society—wow!), we seem to take one—maybe even two—steps back (eight and a half years after that election, we seem more divided on racial issues than at any time in living memory—ugh!).

Self-exoneration and despair . . . and, those are just the two obvious extremes: there are all kinds of combinations and variations in between.

One of my favorites: Use the despair *for* self-exoneration. For sin in general: "Hey, nobody's perfect, we're all human—so you can't really blame me; you can't hold me responsible—and who are you to judge me anyway? . . ." For racism in particular: "Hatred of 'the other' is just hard-wired into us; we can't help it. Genetically, we're tribal animals . . ."

Or here's another variation: Make a big show of you own sinfulness, and especially your own awareness of it, to exonerate yourself, especially at the expense of others. This is the stuff of the old-time camp revival meeting: "I stand here before you a sinner—the very *worst* of sinners, I tell you." And *as a sinner* . . ." And so the camp meeting goes on . . . and on and on. Paradoxically, by condemning myself as a sinner in such a public way, I mean to say, "I'm not really a sinner, not anymore—but *maybe you* still are, especially since you haven't made a dramatic confession like mine." And yet, if I had I any real appreciation of the unspeakable evil of sin and the untold suffering it has caused, not to mention its dishonesty, arrogance, stupidity, and ridiculousness, I doubt I would be indulging in such a showy and self-serving confession.

Likewise with racism: "I stand here before you a white male, a white male, I tell you" (really, no special news bulletin needed for that). "And as a white male, I know I have benefited from, and am complicit in, the systemic racism in America, and I tell you the same is true of the Christian church, and in particular the Presbyterian church." And so I could go on . . . and on and on. And *no doubt* it's all true. And yet, if I had I any real appreciation of the unspeakable evil of racism and the untold suffering it has caused, not to mention its dishonesty, arrogance, stupidity, and ridiculousness, I doubt I would be indulging in such a showy and self-serving confession. (Of course, confessions can be sincere, and repentance, real. But that's more likely to be seen in how I live my life afterwards, not in what I'm saying while standing up at the camp meeting or in the pulpit.)

And no doubt I could go on and on up here pointing out the parallels between original sin in general and the sin of racism in particular. But there's only one parallel that really matters: *we need God*. If we are

to be free from sin in general and racism in particular, we need God. As humans, we can't do it on our own. On our own, we will keep doing the same bad things over and over again in ever more insidious forms. We need God. And we have God, God is with us—and always has been. Wherever gains have been made, wherever victories have been won, wherever courage and truth and beauty and love and goodness and humanity have prevailed, God has been there—whether acknowledged or not, God has been there. To say otherwise, to say that we human beings are doomed forever to sin and we Americans are doomed forever to racism, is to deny the courage and truth and beauty and love and goodness and humanity of all those who have won those victories, *and* it is to deny the grace of God that enabled them to win them. I won't do that—I can't do that—because I have *truly* benefited from their victories, truly known and truly benefited from their courage and truth and beauty and love and goodness and humanity, truly received God's grace from and through them.

And yes, I know: sometimes—often, far, far, far too often—we have turned away from God's grace and allied ourselves with evil, the church included. But the thing about the Bible and the church, the thing about the Declaration of Independence and the US constitution, is that they contain the *resources for our correction*. By God's grace, we are led through them to see the error, the evil, of our ways. And we are called to do better. Listen to Abraham Lincoln invoke the Declaration and the Constitution and the Bible to call us to live up to them, to live up to the better angels of our nature. Listen to Martin Luther King, Jr. invoke the prophets in the Bible, and in comparison, you'll hear all the attempts to use the Bible to justify racism and slavery as the hollow and pretentious counterfeits that they truly are.

A few weeks back, I was sitting in the living room. The TV was on (not a piece of furniture, but sitting on its own piece of furniture) with the volume turned down. I was reading on my iPad. I was reading *The Book Thief*, a novel, by Markus Zusak, set in Nazi Germany. I was reading *The Book Thief*, because I had heard it was good, and because I had wanted to read it for a long time, and because . . . well, because, Graham, my fourteen-year-old son, had been assigned it as summer reading for his 9th-grade English class, and I wanted to be able to talk with him about it. Graham was lying on the floor, watching television . . . on his phone. (I know, I know: in about nine months, one of us will have a fine ninth-grade education.)

If you've read the book, I was at the scene where Hans Uberman, a poor, kind, humble unemployed house painter, is standing with all his neighbors, in the center of their poor section of town, watching Jews, all wearing their yellow Stars of David, being marched in the street to Dachau—Dachau, the concentration camp. It's a regular occurrence.

I looked up from my iPad for a moment, to look at the TV, and there I saw the pictures of Charlottesville. They were carrying Nazi flags; they were wearing swastikas; and the closed-captioning told me they were chanting: "Jews will not replace us! Jews will not replace us!"

"My God," I thought, "can't we ever learn? My God, this is America." My parents' generation fought and died to defeat Nazism, and for that they have been called—and rightly so—"the greatest generation." And now *this*?! In the hometown of the university founded by the man who wrote those words, "All men are created equal"?! My God.

There is no moral equivalent to Nazism.

"No one is righteous, no, not one," Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. "All have sinned, all have fallen short of the glory God." And that's true—original sin infects and affects us all. But that doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't make moral judgments. In truth, we must. Our call to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls and lives, our call to love our neighbors as ourselves, requires it of us. We should make such judgments in fear and trembling, with humility before God, but make them we must.

There is no moral equivalent to Nazism. In our day and age, it is seen—and rightly so—as *the* ideological and symbolic embodiment of sinful racism. To suggest otherwise, to suggest that there is some kind of moral equivalence, especially with those who oppose it, is at best willful ignorance; at worst, demagoguery.

By now, I was looking not at the TV but at Graham who was still looking at his phone. *What kind of world will this child grow up in?*

Back to the book: A Jewish man stumbles and falls in front of Hans. The man is old and weak—starving.

His eyes were the color of agony, and weightless as he was, he was too heavy for his legs to carry. Several times, he fell.

Hans, who is hiding a Jew in his basement, can't take it any longer: he fishes out a crust of bread, runs into the street, picks the man up, and gives him the bread. For that, both he and the old man are whipped—ten times—by a Nazi soldier.

And then the moment is past; the march, and the killing at Dachau, and the bombing, and the war—all go on. That one moment, that one act, may seem insignificant, but it is not. *There is no such thing as an insignificant act of humanity.* It was a victory. A victory of goodness in the face of sin and racism. God was present there—with those two men, Hans and that old Jewish man. Their wounds were the wounds of Christ. By his stripes we are healed.

What kind of world will this child grow up in?

Yes, a world full of sin and racism, lies and hatred, and violence and inhumanity. But that is not what defines our world. *What does* define our world? The courage and the truth and the beauty and the love and the goodness and the humanity of God—the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

And so, like Hans, we must act. Both individually collectively, as a church and as a community, we must act. We must act for goodness in the face of racism and sin. However small or insignificant our acts may seem, we *must* act—there is no such thing as an insignificant act of humanity.

What kind of world will this child grow up in?

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.