

## **God Is Raging**

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**July 23, 2022**

**Luke 1: 46-55, 4:16-21**

There's some evil going on.

There's some evil going on.... The top .1 percent and the bottom 90 % hold the same amount of wealth in our country and what's more the wealthy often pay a lower tax rate.

Some evil going on...2/3 of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck.

Some evil going on.... There are 724 billionaires in our country, some think there are more... and at least 100 households joined the billionaire category during the pandemic, as the working poor worked the front lines, at risk of death.

See this stack of play money. This represents a million dollars. Each bill a thousand and this is a stack of a thousand bills. This is a million. How high would this stack be to represent a billion? One, two, three, four, five, six... and keep counting to a thousand. Let this sink in. Let it sink in. A billionaire owns at least a thousand of these stacks, a thousand million.

Yes, there's some evil going on.

And almost everything sorrowful you read on the front page of the New York Times on a given day, well! You can follow the money and see it, how money is at the root of all evil.

There's some evil going on.... The increasing concentration of wealth and power in our land, in these times.... 724 billionaires. Even one is too many.

The same thing was happening in Jesus time-- the increasing concentration of wealth and power. As the biblical scholar Dominic Crossan writes: "The peasantry was becoming steadily more hard pressed through insistent taxation, attendant indebtedness, and eventual land expropriation, all within increasing commercialization in the expanding colonial economy of the Roman empire. Jesus lived, against the systemic injustice and structural evil of that situation, an alternative. He also died for that alternative."

The bad theology I'm preaching on this morning is the Prosperity gospel, common in mega churches with movie star preachers who preach that material and financial success is a sign of divine favor. You got to have faith in God, confess the things you want, visualize that wealth and donate to that mega church. Most prosperity gospel preachers are millionaires happy to ostentatiously model their great wealth. The Oral Roberts blessing pact covenant of 1947 was that God returns donations to the church seven fold. Prosperity gospel preachers preach that wealth is the mark of heavenly favor.

Then what do these preachers do with the Magnificat, the song of Mary that we heard today? While the beginning of the song is promising for them.... *My soul magnifies God, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For God has looked **with favor** on the lowliness of God's servant. For the mighty one **has done great things for me** and holy is God's name.* But then not even the most creative, loose interpreter can make the rest of this song fit with the prosperity gospel. Mary, pregnant with Jesus, already shaping his faith while he's in the womb, she does **not** sing: *God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant... for the mighty one has done great things for me and holy is God's name. God has brought great wealth to me. My homes are bigger and bigger, so are my cars, and planes, and yachts, and I have great power in the land....*

Sure, the prosperity gospel claims the Bible. They string together a few passages, like commercial jingles, making them sound like they are about material wealth and financial prosperity.

*Ask and you shall receive.... I will pour down for you an overflowing blessing... Give and it shall be given back to you tenfold.... I came that they may have life and have it abundantly... God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to God's riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*

Make no mistake, this prosperity gospel movement is spreading across the land and overseas. Don't know how many of the 724 billionaires in our country sincerely believe in this, but they sure like it that the masses do. Politics makes strange bedfellows. It's not so surprising then that a certain president, named Donald Trump, invited two prosperity gospel preachers to speak, to give their blessing, at his inauguration in 2017.

But it's bad Christian theology. It's the opposite of how Jesus talked about money. It's highly individualistic. It's not about the common good. It ignores our interrelatedness, and how excessive wealth usually comes from exploitation of humans or the land. It rots the person's soul just as it rots the society. It's called greed. And it shames those who are poor. Telling them that if you are not prosperous, it's not because of the low minimum wage, high rent, no universal health care coverage... It's because you are not one of God's favored ones.

God's preferential option for the rich? Where is **that** in the bible?!

Instead, Jesus mother sings:

*God has looked with favor on the lowliness of god's servant. The mighty one has done great things for me and holy is God's name. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

And the first public words out of Jesus mouth, according to Luke, the first public speech or sermon? His mother taught him well! It's the words of the prophets that he was raised on, the words of Isaiah:

*The spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the Jubilee year.*

These are revolutionary words. The jubilee year... It's words like these that inspired the social gospel movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which in turn inspired Frankline Delano Roosevelt to create the new deal, a redistribution of the wealth that had been gathering through the gilded age.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is about creating a society that fosters life abundant for everyone, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven...

After he preached his first sermon, Jesus went into the world and taught and lived this revolutionary message. According to Luke, he talked about money all the time. Not only about the prophets or the exodus liberation story but more.... Remember? The beatitudes... the rich young ruler. The parable of the rich fool. The story of Zaccheus. So many stories about money. Jesus loves the rich, as he loves everyone. He dines with the rich and then they wake up to the venality of their great wealth and give it away...

Jesus' time. Our time.

There's some evil going on... Just follow the money....

And our children are being hurt, damaged, ravaged by this evil—their bodies and their souls.

Not only would the total increase in wealth among America's billionaires in just the last 24 months be enough to expand the child tax credit for 16 years, how do young parents afford rent, health care, let alone childcare coverage? What kind of super powers do we expect from them?

But follow the money... behind the school massacres in Uvalde, you find the firearms industry, the NRA, the industry's bought off politicians. The NRA is the most powerful special interest lobby group in the country. What would happen if parents gave permission for us to see photos of their children's ravaged bodies like Emmet Till's mother did, and like Darnella Frazier who showed us George Floyd's crucifixion? Might that be the last straw, turning us against the wealthy gun manufacturers and their power over congress ... no more profit from semi-automatic weapons.

Follow the money behind our inaction on climate devastation. Our earth is deathly ill, unalterably changed but it's not time for hospice yet. Our beloved children are suffering more and more mental health issues due to climate change despair and dystopia. But we have the clean energy technology we need, and it's even cheaper; we have what it takes to keep the body of the earth's temperature from rising to the ultimately catastrophic; and history is on our side, human beings have successfully faced unheard challenges in the past. But in the 2020 election cycle the oil and gas industry gave 84 % of its political contribution to Republicans and for coal it was 96%. Such is the power of greed. And Joe Manchin you, a Democrat, have has taken more campaign contributions from oil, gas, and coal companies than any other senator, do you call yourself you a Christian? Have you read the parable of the rich fool in the gospel of Luke?

This my last time preaching for several months. I thought long and hard about this sermon. I kept telling myself to tone it down; to not add to the heat of the moment; not fan the flames; to resist stirring up anger in my myself and others. Already too much anger out there...

Then I pulled from my office library, second from the top shelf, my very well-worn copy of Abraham Heschel's book *The Prophets*. And I read the introduction yet again. He starts with these words of the Prophet Amos.

*Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, And bring the poor of the land to an end, Saying when will the new moon be over that we may sell grain? And the sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refuse of the wheat?*

Then Heschel attempts to describe why the prophets are the way they are.... "Why such indignation? Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria." He writes. "They speak and act as if the sky were about to collapse because Israel has become unfaithful to God.

The prophet's words are outbursts of violent emotion. Their rebuke harsh and relentless."

And then Heschel writes this: "But if such sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails? The lack of our moral comprehension, the incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by our own failures, is a fact which no subterfuge can elude. Our eyes are witness to callousness and cruelty of humankind, but our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to silence our conscience."

The prophet, and I would add the prophetic church, feels fiercely. "God has thrust a burden upon our souls, and we are bowed and stunned at humanity's fierce greed. No human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a crossing point of God and human."

"God is raging".... The prophet speaks....

Our children's bodies are being ravaged by gunfire. Our children's minds are being ravaged by climate change despair. That we can fix these things, but we don't? Children might wonder if we really love them.

If this is not the time, oh church for raging, I don't know what is! This prophetic raging does not lead to despair nor resignation. On the contrary. It releases a powerful energy for organizing. It's time for the jubilee\* the second new deal, and the clean energy revolution. Not only will we not bless your wealth as a sign of God's favor, we will do everything we can, short of violence, with God's power, to overcome this evil.

There's some evil going on.

The top .1 percent and the bottom 90 % hold roughly the same amount of wealth in our country

...2/3 of Americans are ... living paycheck to paycheck.

There are now 724 billionaires in our country....

I end with the words of the prophet Jeremiah who is speaking for God.

Be appalled, oh heavens at this... be shocked, be utterly desolate, says God. For my people have committed two evils: They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

Yes, God is raging.

But God has not given up on us. Amen.

**\*Introduction to scripture:** *Before you hear the poetry of scripture from the Gospel of Luke, remember with me the meaning of the Jubilee, or as Luke calls it "the year of God's favor". This is not just an interesting fact to tuck away but rather a major theme running through the prophets and the gospels, to keep at the forefront of your mind.*

*The Jubilee year or the year of God's favor is every 50 years. The land is granted rest, debts are cancelled, indentured servants set free. As the biblical scholar Sharon Ringe writes: "It is clear that the implementation of such laws would result in periodic economic upheavals throughout the land. That was the point. The laws would have prevented the accumulation of wealth—particularly capital, in the form of land—in anyone's hands. Rather, once in a lifetime the entire economy would be given a fresh start."*

## Sources

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