

“Ride Out With Me”  
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 and 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12  
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Preached November 4, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

There is a moment in the film, “The Two Towers,” the second in the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, which kept coming back to me all week. It is the moment King Théoden of Rohan realizes that his beloved stronghold is about to fall to the savage forces of the wizard Saruman, and that not only will all his warriors fall, but also the women, children, and infirm who have taken refuge in the depths of the fortress. With a glazed look on a paralyzed face, he simply says, “So much death. What can men do against such reckless hate?”

Many within, and known to, the ECF community were affected both directly and indirectly this week by just such a reckless hate, a hate revealed in the stabbing deaths of three people in an Escazú garage inside a gated community home to some of us. I have heard stories of the heroic, if unsuccessful, efforts to save the lives of those now deceased, and I have heard other equally heroic stories of the compassionate ways in which members of ECF, and the expatriate community, have supported those affected, but not even these signs of hope quite seem able to quell the sense of unease and even paralysis the proximity of those deaths has generated. Sadly, as disturbing as these rather gruesome murders were, these were not the only murders reported in the news media this week and it was the sheer quantity of murders this week in San Jose’s richest and poorest neighborhoods

alike that kept leading me back to the moment in the movie. You see, there were also three people shot to death in San Felipe de Alajuelita, and a woman shot in the stomach as she resisted giving up her purse in San Jose, and far too many other stories of the kind reckless hate against which we, like the King of Rohan, feel so powerless. So much death.

Alas, the horror and unease our community experienced this week is neither new, nor merely in the imagination of Hollywood blockbusters. The prophet Habakkuk seems to offer his prophecy with the same fatalistic resignation: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing, and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore justice comes forth perverted.” In Habakkuk’s time, like our own, violence beget violence; the eagerness of Israel and Judah’s kings to disregard the ways God had given to protect the beloved community, their wholesale participation in perpetrating the violence of poverty among their own people made it certain that Habakkuk would witness violence twice, first at the hand of his own people, and then at the hands of the Babylonians whose violence God used to punish the violence about which God’s people were duly warned. A

witness from his watchtower, Habakkuk asks the same question, “What can men do against such reckless hate?”

Several hundred years later, another group of God’s people was also feeling surrounded by violence beyond their means to control or understand, a church in Thessalonica to which Paul writes, “we boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions you are enduring.” The specific violence to which that church was witness goes unnamed in this letter, but it must have been severe enough to prophecy the righteous vengeance of God. We may be uncomfortable with this Old Testament sounding language about God repaying “with affliction those who afflict you...when the Lord Jesus is revealed in heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus,” but there is also something comforting about hearing pretty straightforwardly that “These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” According to Paul, not only are the bad guys not going to win in the end, but boy will they suffer. “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord” and better at God’s hands than our own, is all I can say, for in our clumsy hands, violence begets only violence. The waiting will be the hardest part, and the test of our faith to neither give up nor strike back in vengeance, but to endure and resist, even at the cost of

our own lives, so that the violence we experience directly and indirectly might end with our own generation. God's reply to Habakkuk is a challenging one: "For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely not delay." That is all well and good for God to say, "Just wait," but Lord, it is easier said than done. We believe Lord; help our unbelief!

At the risk of sounding like I am following the Gospel according to J.R.R. Tolkein rather than that of Luke or John, let me return us to Middle Earth and the response the dazed King of Rohan receives from another character in the story, the yet to be crowned king Aragorn. Sensing the King's despair, Aragorn responds, "Ride out with me. Ride out and meet them," meaning to ride out of the fortress and through the enemy lines and to go on the offensive, rather than remain on the defensive. Théoden's face brightens, and he replies lustily, "For death and glory," to which Aragorn replies, and here's the Gospel: "For Rohan. For your people." Aragorn's reply is Gospel because it serves as the correction to Théoden's shell-shocked reasoning, a correction to his sense of personal failure at having let down his subjects. But Aragorn reminds him of the true purpose of a true king, not to be remembered as a glorious figure that died a valiant death, but to lead one's people bravely and faithfully even if the result was an untimely death. You see, there are a number of responses to one can make to the threats in one's life, and some are

better than others, but the best responses are those that issue forth from a reason worth dying for, and in King Théoden's case, that reason was to live into his role as the King, and ride out *for* his people, rather than simply *to* his death. And since Théoden and Aragorn are the good guys in the movie, you have probably already figured out that they rode out and were victorious in the end.

If the best responses to the threats in our lives are those that come from that place in our souls which recognizes a reason, a person, worth dying for, it behooves us to check out that place in our souls and see what and who resides there. The Apostle Paul reminds the Thessalonians just what is in their souls as they endure their persecution and affliction: "...we always pray for you," he says, "asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ." Deep down, Paul knows, and they know, that it will only be through the faith of Christ that they will endure and find the strength to continue in their faithfulness.

Among our options as we face the horrifying violence that seems to be drawing nearer to us each day are the options of vengeance and vigilantism, or despair and paralysis, but these are probably not the best options for glorifying the name of our Lord Jesus, or being glorified in him. We can ride out with our own

guns blazing and extract the justice which seems perverted, or hole up in our homes with our own guns trained on the front door by day and tucked under our pillows by night, but these don't seem like the works of faith to which we are called as the people of God. I think we will find that the best option is to ride out armed with Habakkuk's wisdom that "the righteous shall live by their faith," a faith which sends us forth according to God's purposes and using God's methods. It may well be that we die confronting the reckless hate of the world, as many faithful persons have done, but if we are slain, they had better find us lying on the battlefield or the street with plowshares in our hands rather than swords or guns, and pruning hooks rather than spears or missiles, for only with those weapons can our "good resolve and work of faith" be empowered by God. We are indeed called to ride out, but Christ will not be glorified, and we will not find ourselves glorified in Christ Jesus unless we are riding out for God's people, rather than to satisfy our own fatalistic sense of despair or our own mistaken notions of glory.

I have seen your faces this week, dazed and paralyzed at the violence which touched our community, and I see everyday the dazed faces of people riding by on buses to go to jobs which barely pay their bus fare. I see the paralyzed faces of people standing for hours in lines at the clinics hoping to secure an appointment before they, or their children, get even sicker. I see the despair on the faces of the children working the street corner traffic lights. I see the fatalistic resignation of

women and children sitting on the curb waiting for their husbands and fathers to come out of the bar on payday, only beat them when they get home. So much death, even among the living.

Ride out with me, ECF, Christ is calling. Ride out with me and use your hearts, hands, and voices to sow peace and reap justice. Ride out with me, Church of Christ, Jesus is saying, and let my power affirm your call as my people and fulfill every good resolve and work of faith that you do in my name. Live by faith, my righteous ones, and I will prepare you for my vision, a vision which will make you forget forever the horrors you have seen. Friends, we receive a glimpse of that vision at the Lord's Table, a foretaste and a foreshadowing of a banquet at which no violence can be found. Let us prepare ourselves to ride out to that heavenly banquet, our communion tonight, and our calling as the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ by reading together the responsive reading found in your bulletins:

One: Let us remember all who have been harmed by violence.

**All: We acknowledge the strength of those who survived and of those still struggling to heal.**

One: For their sake and for ours, we commit ourselves to building each other up and to healing together.

**All: Let us remember the families and loved ones of those who have died in violent crimes.**

One: We acknowledge their pain and their deep grief.

**All: They too are part of our community and need our love and help towards healing.**

One: Let us remember the perpetrators, and the families of those who commit violent crimes.

**All: We acknowledge that their lives too are devastated and their hopes dashed.**

One: For their sake, and for ours, we remember that pain goes out in many directions from each act of violence.

**All: We will stand up to violence.**

One: We stand together expressing our unity,

**All: Our connection to each other and to God,**

One: Our hope for healing and for transformation.

**All: Let the Spirit of our Creator move through us.**

One: Help us to transform and heal our communities,

**All: And let us begin by transforming ourselves.**

One: Let us pray for that transformation.

**All: God of life, stir in our hearts a renewed sense of reverence for all life. Give us the vision to recognize your spirit in every human being, however they behave towards us. Make possible the impossible by cultivating in us the fertile seed of healing love. May we play our part in breaking the cycle of violence by realizing that peace begins with us. In the name of Christ, who is our peace, Amen.**