

Genesis 1: 1-5 “Where From Here?” Rev. Janet Chapman 1/10/21

So this scripture was leading me in a completely different direction a couple weeks ago when it was chosen. It reminds me of when I trust Google Maps to get me somewhere and it sends me in the opposite direction of where I want to go. After it gets acclimated, I hear “Make a U-turn at the next intersection.” “What? Why did you send me that way in the first place?” Briefly, I was going to explore with you the dynamics of living in Night and Day, light and dark, binary opposites... or so we think, because Genesis challenges that assumption of opposing natures. But my journey took a wide U-turn on the day of Epiphany, 2021. For you who don’t live by the church calendar, which is no doubt the majority of you, Epiphany was last Wednesday, January 6th, the day our nation’s Capitol was violently attacked, not by foreigners, but our own people. From those who stand on opposite political views, opposing stances on all things in civic life, came the identical cries, “This is unacceptable; this is rock bottom – we don’t go any lower than this.” But shouts rang out around the Capitol, “Remember this day!” And so it shall be, in the annals of time, that history books will record January 6th like they do 9/11, Pearl Harbor Day, and the day Martin Luther King Jr. and JFK were shot. In the midst of one of the worst pandemics in human history, with the United States leading the world in overall deaths, and an economic crisis resembling the Great Depression, there is no doubt the events of January 6th will be remembered. But where do we go from here?

Beloved John Muir, America’s greatest naturalist and mountaineer, was once climbing Mt. Whitney in late autumn. Although a snowstorm descended and Muir was without a blanket in temperatures reaching 22 degrees below zero, he pressed on, obsessed with reaching the summit. Survival did not matter; only the summit. He struggled to within 500 ft. of the top.

Suddenly, he said, "I felt as if Someone caught me by the shoulders and turned me around forcibly, saying 'Go Back' in an audible voice." Sometimes we receive a prophetic word in the middle of a crisis saying "stop, turn around, and go back." I can't help but wonder if there were some last Wednesday who heard such a voice, but ignored it and went on for whatever reason, refusing to back down. Certainly, there are those like the Idaho Mormon who has had regrets about his behavior and now seeks forgiveness from his family, church, state and nation. He remarked, "I just got caught up in the moment. I look back and I am ashamed." It happens all too often.

Rev. Dr. Joey Jeter shares a story from scripture for such a time as this. It comes from Judges, chapter 18. There was a young man named Micah (not the prophet Micah), who stole some silver from his mother, but finally confessed and returned it. She was so pleased by his repentance that she gave him part of the silver to set up his house. He did, made an idol of part of the silver, and hired a priest. But the Danites, these thugs who were looking for a home, descended on Micah's house, stole his idol and his priest, and went their way. When Micah found out, he summoned a mob of his own and went after them, braver in this case than he was smart. He caught up with the Danites and we hear the following: (Micah and his men) shouted to the Danites, who turned saying, 'What is the matter with you that you have summoned men for battle?' Micah replied, 'You've taken my gods that I made, and the priest, and have gone off! What do I have left? How can you ask me what is wrong?' But the Danites said to him, "Don't raise your voice with us or else hotheaded men will attack you, and you will be killed along with your household.' Then the Danites went their way. When Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned around and went home." This story raises many

questions, not the least of which is what is it doing in scripture? Given the Hebrew tendency for telling their own stories, even when the stories are bad, if there are lessons to be learned, we can guess why. We can surmise that faith cannot be made or bought, as Micah tried to do, nor can it be achieved by force, for the Danite's worship center didn't last much longer. Ironically, the name of Micah in Hebrew means "Who is like Yahweh?" but in this story, no one seems to know who God is or what God wills for God's people. Again and again, we hear, "All the people did what was right in their own eyes." Not being especially bright, Micah's reaction after his gods and priests are stolen is baffling because he chases down a 600 man army with just a handful of his own thugs. Sort of reminds me of the cartoon character Calvin when he goes after Moe, the class bully – what do you do once you catch him? You turn back and go home, lucky to be alive.

The lack of any plan from the domestic terrorists is baffling -it is hard to know what they expected to accomplish. At the same time, the lack of adequate law enforcement, as has been the case with previous protests, speaks volumes concerning the expectations from superiors. It was almost as if superiors never would have guessed white Americans would commit insurrection, so why bring in the National Guard as was done during Black Lives Matter events. The assumptions once more proved the death-wielding effects of systemic racism. There were no winners last Wednesday, all of us lost. Like in the story in Judges, I am reminded that one of the hardest things to learn in life is when to give up, to go back before it is too late. It is in the words of Kenny Rogers' song The Gambler, to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em. Reinhold Niebuhr prayed it this way, "God grant me the courage to change what I can, the serenity to accept what I cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference." There are

times when the goal, as desirable as it may seem, is unattainable, or only attainable at such a cost as to make it unacceptable. The words, “We shall never surrender” may have been good coming from Churchill, but they are not always wise coming from you and I in such times.

Every one of us can remember some time when we felt wrongly treated, humiliated, and left seething with anger. Micah’s abject humiliation at the hands of the Danites left him angry, bitter, and helpless which probably mirrors some of the feelings of that Capitol mob. What Micah did not realize is that those things that were stolen from him, a cast metal god and a hireling priest, were not good for him, were perhaps deadly for him, his soul, and his whole household. Sometimes we have to go back, either because the way was not good for us or the goal was unachievable. Sometimes we have to go back to reassess our former judgments like day is good and night is bad because God created both, not as opposites, but as partners working together. It takes a lot of courage to admit when we are wrong, to submit our wills to God’s, or simply to recognize that some of our goals may not be accomplished because God intended them for others.

Jeter tells a story of driving home late from work when his headlights picked up an animal on the road. He slowed down and saw that it was a coyote, frozen in the middle of the road by the lights. He pulled over, turned his lights off, and got out. The coyote trotted over to a grassy area, and then they just stood, staring at each other in the moonlight. Bob Dylan once wrote, “One should not be where one does not belong,” and that coyote did not belong there. If he stayed in the city, he would wreak havoc or get killed. This was populated turf and he was a threat to pets and small children. Joey tried to think of some way he could help, but there was none. He couldn’t open the door and say, “here nice doggie, get in and I will take you back

to the country.” Both neighbors and animal control would shoot it, so the only way for that coyote to survive was to find its way out of that place the same way he found his way in. Survival meant go back, retreat, and most of all, remember. Remember where you belong, the way you came, and the way back. The way back does not mean retreating to old habits, practices, or assumptions; it is not about being ashamed of past behaviors but it means remembering where you belong and to whom you belong. We can still press on to new partnerships in the midst of a pandemic. We can come to see how day and night, light and dark, work together. We can transform anger into focused action and let frozen immobilization melt into collaboration and community. We can have dialogues with people of opposing views without resulting to violence. We can live into new forms of civic and communal life while still remembering who we are as children of God planted in the land of democracy. In Pilgrim’s Progress, the main character named Christian loses hope of ever reaching the celestial city, not knowing which way to go. But the character Hopeful reminds him, “Did we not see from the Delectable Mountains the gate of the city?” If we saw it once, we can see it again. May it be so.