

“One More Step,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 11/23/25

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

*It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD.*

Jeremiah has been speaking out trying to save the people, but the leaders of Israel have not been listening. It was a time for the people to repent their sins, but their king and religious leaders were saying everything was fine. It was a time of war, but false prophets were prophesying peace. These were misleading promises made to maintain the current situation. And it would all be for naught.

*Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.*

This would be a long-term process as the people would be scattered across the invading Babylonian Empire, spending generations far from home. In time they would return and Jerusalem would be restored. But they would not return as a free people.

Jeremiah was denouncing the way the kingdom was being led and the behavior of the people. Jeremiah was concerned about Judah, the southern kingdom, worshipping other gods, worshipping false idols. Religious practices that had only been reformed within the past generation. As a result, the more diverse practices of the northern kingdom of Israel were being eliminated and the focus of worship on the Temple of Jerusalem was being reinforced.

Jeremiah perhaps saw the new threats to Jerusalem as a continuation of the faithlessness of the defeated northerners. Repent your ways, turn away from your false idols. Otherwise, the end was nigh. And, as it turns out, it was not just nigh, meaning near, it was inevitable.

Jeremiah is not the only prophet to call out the worship of false idols, but it is a larger concern for him than others like Isaiah. Isaiah, who lived during the invasion of the north and who also focused on the bad behavior of the kingdom, but more about not caring for the poor and favoring the wealthy at their expense. In a sense, Isaiah is also worried about false idols, but these were worldly preoccupations, like greed and selfishness, rather than other gods.

For our purposes, there might not be any appreciable difference. Worshipping the wrong thing remains a concern thousands of years after the lives of Isaiah and Jeremiah. I might even describe idolatry as the most common modern sin. More on that later.

First, I wanted to talk about another religious figure. This one is a well-known and controversial American. One who lived recently by historical standards. And that man is Malcolm X.

Born Malcolm Little, his home life was disrupted by tragedy. His father died after being hit by a streetcar in Lansing, Michigan, though his mother believed it was an intentional act organized by a local white supremacist group. She was eventually committed to an institution with a nervous breakdown. Malcolm and his siblings were sent to foster homes.

Malcolm had a troubled childhood and early adulthood. He moved around, including living for a time in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston. In Roxbury and Harlem, he engaged in various criminal activities, including breaking and entering. He was arrested while picking up a stolen watch he had dropped at a shop to be repaired. He was sentenced to prison for eight to ten years.

While in prison, Malcolm was introduced to the teachings of the Nation of Islam, a Black nationalist religious group that uses Islamic traditions and terminology, but which varies substantially from traditional Islam in many respects. More on that later.

The teachings of the Nation of Islam contain alternate historical theories about the origins of the races. For example, Blacks were created many thousands of years ago by a divine figure named Allah. Whites were later created about six thousand years ago by a traitorous Black man named Yakub.

I could spend hours describing this history and theology to you, but it would be tedious and, in some cases, disturbing. The Nation of Islam is essentially concerned with Black racial supremacy, strong elements of anti-Semitism, and intense opposition, if not outright hatred, of whites. To that end, the Nation of Islam advocated for the wholesale return of African-Americans to Africa so that they might be freed from racism and social subjugation.

And you might be wondering at this point, Mark, why exactly did you decide to talk about this? For a few reasons. First of all, there are occasionally efforts to lump the Nation of Islam into traditional Islam without any effort to distinguish them. And these are wildly different.

Traditional Islam typically has no element of racial supremacy, instead teaching strong racial and ethnic *diversity* as a unifying theme. Islam is also not anti-Semitic in its teachings. Both Judaism and Christianity are embraced as so-called “Peoples of the Book” for following earlier versions of the Abrahamic tradition. Furthermore, all human beings were created by God and notions of racial theory have no place in what might be called “standard” Islam.

We might consider the Nation of Islam as a uniquely American religion formed in reaction to racial tension within the United States. It responds to the racialized history of our country in what might be described as a radical and absolutist way. And, by the way, if you were to read white supremacist materials about the nature of race and the origins of such differences, you might be equally as puzzled and appalled. Because the idea of race is a social construct designed to justify the unfair treatment of a group that has been declared outsiders.

Why was it permissible to enslave Blacks and Native Americans? Because some would argue that they are somehow fundamentally different. One religious theory was that Blacks are descendants of Noah’s son Ham. Ham is criticized in the Bible because, after the flood, he enters Noah’s tent and sees his father naked. He goes and tells his brothers, Shem and Japheth. These two brothers enter the tent with their eyes averted and place a cloak over Noah’s nakedness. Ham’s *son* Canaan is supposedly then cursed for the action of his father.

All of which is truly bonkers. Why was it a problem to be naked inside a tent? Why was it such a harmful state to stumble upon? And why would the son, who did nothing, be cursed? One theory is that the name Canaan happens to be the name of the people of Canaan, who would become the enemies of the Israelites, who were promised some land. Land the Canaanites happened to have been living upon for untold centuries.

Malcolm Little became Malcolm X, as members of the Nation of Islam were encouraged to drop their so-called slave names for the last name “X” to await the granting of real names. Malcolm X then became a leader and a preacher, well-known for his provocative language which was often anti-white and anti-Semitic, labels he would not have disputed. For this, he was criticized and

demonized throughout much of the 1960s. And I will admit a lot of what he said was troubling, not worthy of defense.

But then something happened. Malcom X went on the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims are expected to make in their lifetimes. Bear in mind that the Nation of Islam was organized around traditions and terms drawn from Islam but that there were very few Muslims in the United States in the 1960s, about 100,000 to 150,000 people in the 1960s. As a point of comparison, the City of Newton has population 90,000. Basically, Malcolm X probably had seen few traditional Muslims in the United States.

And then he went to Mecca. While he was there, he saw hundreds of thousands of Muslims engaged in the pilgrimage. He saw them and realized he had misunderstood Islam, feeling a new sense of unity and brotherhood. He also remarked that the strong diversity of Islam was a basis upon which racial tensions could be addressed in the United States and around the world.

This led in part to Malcolm X's break from the Nation of Islam. He converted to Sunni Islam, the largest Muslim group, and in time took on a new name, Malik el-Shabazz, Shabazz meaning "Patriarch."

I do not want to gloss over the other reasons Malcolm X left. He was concerned that the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammed, was on the one hand too close to the more *pacifistic* elements of the civil rights movement. Malcolm X was not interested in such peace, at least before his Hajj journey. And, on the other hand, that same leader was engaged in numerous sexual indiscretions with Nation members. This pre-dated the pilgrimage and may have destabilized Malcolm X's faith leading to his next conversion experience.

If you read the works of Malcolm X from a specific moment in time, you might come away with a sense that he was a racist, a Black supremacist, and an anti-Semite. And, that was probably an accurate assessment, one that he would have affirmed. But in the last years of his life, he shifted away from much of that thinking.

However, the Nation of Islam did not let Malcolm X leave quietly and, it is surmised, that someone in the group orchestrated his execution. At one point his house was firebombed. And eventually, he was gunned down in Manhattan in 1965.

His death led to many reactions. Some people, like James Baldwin, decried the system of white supremacy that led to his death. Others, like Martin Luther King, Jr., mourned his death while also acknowledging their differences.

And the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammed, said that Malcolm X reaped what he had sown, saying, "*We know such ignorant, foolish teachings would bring him to his own end.*"

This is similar to the dispute between Jeremiah and the false prophets of his time. Two competing messages, two competing ideologies. Jeremiah was speaking out against the king, against the leaders of the Temple. And then Jeremiah was hounded for his opposition. He was captured and thrown into a cistern to drown in the mud at the bottom. He was rescued and fled. And when the Babylonians finally conquered Jerusalem, Jeremiah was treated kindly even as everyone else was carted off to Mesopotamia.

A true prophet might then be defined as the one who survives to tell the tale, and the false prophet is the one who lost out.

What then to make of Malcolm X? Do we look to his early life as a criminal? Do we look to his life under the Nation of Islam and his racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric? Do we look at his later years under the influence of more traditional, less radical Islam? Do we look at the positive relationships he had with Black civil rights leaders or at the not so positive relationships he had with white leaders? I don't know.

I truly do not know. Because honestly, I do not think this sermon is about Malcolm X. This sermon is about *false idols*. It is about what happens when we place a particular idea at the center of our lives, politically, socially, or religiously. The problem with placing something in the center in this manner is that it gets in the way. It blocks the view.

It makes it harder to see God.

That is the fundamental problem with idolatry – something stands in between God and us. And that intervening idol can be anything. In the Bible it is sometimes literally another god, an idol of stone or bronze. But it can also be wealth or power. It can be self-indulgence and self-satisfaction. It can even be self-righteousness, as religious leaders place their power and their privileges at the center. That happened in the time of Jeremiah and it happened in the time of Jesus. Religious leaders had power that they wanted to protect.

What about Malcolm X? What about the Nation of Islam? What did they place at the center? The ideas about race that they had borrowed from white supremacists and then turned on their heads. The Curse of Ham becomes inverted into the betrayal of Yakub. This is doubly problematic because it is both racist and anti-Semitic at the same time. A reminder that Yakub, or Jacob, was renamed Israel by God. No subtly here.

We face a similar crisis of idolatry in the present moment. Christian nationalists use thinly veiled racist language. Fascism is no longer an accusation but an everyday identity among certain political groups. Nazis are described as misunderstood and their symbols are edgy rather than obscene. This was idolatry in the thirties and forties, and it is idolatry today. The worship of racial identity as the central concern for a large group of Americans. And it is terrifying. It should be called out, and it should be opposed.

And I could leave things there for this Sunday. Racism is bad. Fascism is bad. Anti-Semitism is bad. I could round off my sermon with a self-righteous flourish and cue the last hymn. Not my most demanding message, but they can't all be gems.

But I am reminded of an old piece of advice that preachers are taught in seminary: comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Sometimes we need to hear things that challenge our preconceptions and this one idea has been rattling around in my head for a while.

White supremacy is the idea that places white identity as the highest concern in someone's life. Some would also argue that white supremacy is a system, it is the way that America's culture and economy are organized to benefit white people and to hinder pretty much everyone else. And so, there is a need to address both the personal aspects of white supremacy and the systemic effects of white supremacy. And we as good white liberals need to do that work.

Years ago, when I was in seminary, one of my classmates who was Black had grown very tired of white classmates asking him to help them sort out their thoughts about race. And he finally

refused, saying to the effect of, “You all need to go into a room somewhere and sort yourselves out and let us know when you’re done.”

And I think it would be good thing. A good thing for people to wrestle with these ideas about race and ethnicity, anti-Semitism and all the other isms. I truly think it is important work and far delayed.

But I worry. I worry that human beings are prone to idolatry. That we place something in the metaphorical center of our lives by our nature that will stand between us and our relationship to God. I think for hundreds of years that thing in the middle has been feelings of superiority among certain groups. That was true in the South, but it was also true here in Boston. In the South it was race, among other things. In Boston, it was about education and class and breeding.

There were many Northern abolitionists who hated the practice of slavery who also thought Blacks were fundamentally inferior to whites. There were many Boston Unitarians who advocated for religious freedom who also thought that Catholic immigrants were barbaric heathens. So, we fine New Englanders need to remain self-aware of our past sins and our potential weaknesses.

And as we try to sort out our past and build a better future together, I anticipate a different worry. Some religious communities in their drive to root out white supremacy culture fall into a different pattern of idolatry. They struggle to displace white supremacy and, in that process, they let something else quietly slip into that central place. As they take down the false idol of white supremacy, they unknowingly replace it with a new graven image: *white guilt*.

White guilt about how people of color were historically treated. White guilt about the mistakes of the past and the people who made those mistakes. And the proposed solutions to those concerns are broad gestures that can be unrealistic, performative, and downright self-defeating.

At some point, those conversations can turn into self-absorption. They can turn into conversations among white progressives struggling with their guilt, and endlessly obsessing over that guilt. My classmate who told us to go off into a room and sort it out probably never imagined that we might never leave that room.

For this sermon, I sorted through many examples from near and far across the country, and I realized that any one example I used could lead to a good old-fashioned church fight. So, I decided to use hypotheticals.

Do you think the city and state of Washington should be renamed because George Washington owned slaves? Do you think Abraham Lincoln should be cast down from his throne on the Washington Mall because he was for most of his life a white supremacist who happened to dislike the institution of slavery? Lincoln’s thinking changed over time, but he clearly was not on the side of the abolitionist angels his entire life.

The problem with essentially worshipping white guilt is that it is a form of perfectionism. It does not matter if Lincoln changed his views. It does not matter if such imperfect people made incremental changes towards a better future.

History is filled with events and people we use as examples of how to be and how not to be. Jefferson was a strong voice for religious freedom and he also enslaved people. What do we do with that?

In the Christian system of forgiveness, we are called upon to repent, to acknowledge what we have done wrong, and to ask for forgiveness. *And then don't do it again.* In this way, it makes no sense to wipe away the memory of what was wrong as it is a disservice to the people who have suffered. We need reminders to never do it again.

Feelings of guilt are unpleasant, but they are necessary. Does that mean we should keep honoring people who did bad things? I don't know about every case, but I do wonder if the effort to rename a state and our nation's capital would be worth it. I wonder if the effort to topple symbols stands in the way of fixing what is systemically broken—repentance also requires restoration. And I truly wonder if these symbolic attempts to relieve white guilt will have any effect on making the lives of Blacks and other people of color any better.

I would guess that white guilt is better than white supremacy. And that is because guilt is the first stage of repentance. But then you must do the work, not talk about the work. Not pray in public about how enlightened we are and make showy gestures that have no practical effects on the lives of people. Because renaming a school or a building or a city does not make any real person's life better, though it makes the people talking about it feel like they are doing something.

So, what should we do? Focus on God. Focus on loving other people here and now. Focus on protecting people and making sure they are not faced with racism or sexism, homophobia or bigotry here and now. Focus on the work, not merely the symbols. We can be meaningfully guilty about what we have ourselves done. And we can try to address the harms done by others, historically but more importantly right now.

But worrying about symbols is not enough. Worrying about symbols can seem like an effort towards perfectionism. Worrying about symbols can become more about lifting up someone's hurt feelings rather than helping those who were, and *are*, actually being hurt. Amen.