

## **“Unprecedented Times of Biblical Proportion”**

Genesis 7:11-24; Matthew 24:1-14 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might grow bold enough  
to truly hear your Living Word and follow. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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Let's stay with that image on the screen for just a moment more, because it basically makes my first point today: I just read you one of the most well known stories in the Bible, a tale of massive, global destruction and devastation. And this is what we have done with it: the story of Noah and the Flood is primarily used in our culture today as a theme for decorating nurseries. Take a moment and consider how absurd that is. You have to feel for the parent who left this decor up long enough for their baby to turn into an inquisitive four-year-old: “But why, Daddy, **why** did all the animals get on the boat?”

The story of Noah is just one stark example of how the way we use scripture would be unrecognizable by the people who recorded those stories. Where, for instance, are the “swarming creatures that swarm upon the earth”? You rarely see those depicted on nursery walls! But the details are not really the point here. What I want to talk about today is the disservice we've done ourselves by assuming that all of scripture is applicable to our lives all the time. We want to use the whole Bible; we want people to be familiar with all of scripture. And we want to engage in applying the

Bible to our lives. Indeed, our relationship to scripture is usually based on an assumption that there is something there to provide us with guidance for what we're facing on an everyday basis.

Much of the Bible does, in fact, provide us with wisdom and insights that help us live our day-to-day lives. The epistles gently (or not so gently) chide us to treat the people we interact with each day better. The gospels remind us not to be greedy and selfish or judgmental or unforgiving. But the truth is that there are also a lot of scripture passages whose scale stretches far beyond what we're usually dealing with. Those are the stories that give us the phrase "biblical proportion." If you're talking about something of "biblical proportion," it probably not just about not being angry with your neighbor. When we hear "biblical proportion," we think about plagues of locusts or frogs, or Jonah being swallowed by a whale, or yes, the whole earth being covered up with flood waters for 150 days. These are not normal circumstances. One might even call them "unprecedented." And yet, because we want people to be familiar with the stories, because we want children to understand that the Bible offers us wisdom and comfort, we end up watering down the flood story (if you'll pardon the pun), to the point that we can adorn the walls of our babies' rooms with it.

What I'm trying to say is that in order to ensure we're familiar with the more dramatic stories in scripture, we end up applying them in ways that sap them of their strength and scale. The problem with that is that when a time eventually comes – as

indeed it has – when we need a story with “biblical proportions,” we don’t have them anymore, because we’ve domesticated them all down into commonplace bedtime stories. We have tricked ourselves into assuming that while scripture can provide sage advice for our regular, mundane interactions, it can’t necessarily speak to our deepest fears or guide us in dealing with truly unprecedented times. Because we have spent most of our lives applying scripture to “normal, everyday living,” it can take us a moment to recognize that, indeed, many of these stories and much of this wisdom comes from times when people’s worlds were falling apart and transforming into something else.

Now Disciples, along with most mainline Protestants, have been shy about engaging with apocalyptic literature in scripture. We are proclaimers of the “end times,” as a general rule. And that’s not what I’m trying to get at today. I have long said that Jesus’ line here in Matthew 24 about “wars and rumors of wars” and “famines and earthquakes” actually seems carefully calibrated to apply to almost any point in world history. Six years out from the onset of a global pandemic, we have grown a little weary of the word “unprecedented.” I do not want to be an alarmist, but I also cannot let us keep our heads in the sand. But the truth is that the world that we are living in now has shifted dramatically from the world we were living in on New Year’s Day just a week and half ago. Whether it is a shift of “biblical proportion” or not remains to be seen; but that also depends on how we respond.

We have a president who says a lot of things. He complains often about how other countries treat the U.S. and makes all sorts of threats about what he's going to do about it. For many months, we've mostly tried to convince ourselves that he wasn't that serious and none of that would go anywhere. But a little over a week ago, the administration invaded a sovereign nation and took their leader into custody. Obviously, there are lots of nuances to the situation, but the bare bones are shocking. Most of us have lived our entire lives under what is sometimes called the "rules-based consensus," in which nations are supposed to respect each other's borders and the right of the people in each country to self-determination, regardless of what they do with it. Influence over what goes on in other countries was relegated to monetary policy and media propaganda and other forms of "soft power."

But those assumptions have been violently up-ended, and we now have a government that is openly declaring that it will approach the entire world with the belief that "might makes right," that actual coercive power is an appropriate way to get what you want, regardless of what anyone else needs. Was anyone taking the chatter about conquering Greenland seriously before? In the light of the current moment, that conversation looks very different.

Before that shock had even worn off, this "might makes right" mentality was turned on our own citizens. Renee Nicole Good was not the first person shot by ICE in recent weeks; Keith Porter was shot and killed outside an apartment building in Los

Angeles on New Year's Eve by an off-duty ICE agent. But Renee's killing has set off an even more fervent movement to resist the militarization of our communities that is being carried out in the name of immigration enforcement.

One of the ways we express "biblical proportion" is by not just telling you that it's affecting everything, but by listing all the things included in that everything. The sources in Genesis didn't just tell you that all the animals came, two by two. It talks about "every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping things that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature." And then the second voice chimes in with "two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life."

In the spirit of fully understanding the biblical proportion of the current moment we find ourselves in, I want to share this list with you from my college friend Kacia. Kacia is a doctor in Minneapolis. As you probably know, I went to college in Minnesota, and it remains dear to my heart, and I have many friends who are directly impacted by what is happening in the Twin Cities. Multiple other people living there have corroborated this information that Kacia shared yesterday, including clergy colleagues. I am sorry for how difficult this will be to hear, but we need to know what is going on.

Kacia wrote: Friends outside MN, you need to know what is happening here. Everyone knows that ICE shot and killed a woman here on Wednesday. But that's not the only thing that's going on:

- ICE agents are cruising areas with immigrant-owned businesses, and kidnapping patrons and employees alike. Yesterday they abducted two US citizen employees at a suburban Target, one who was begging them to allow him to go get his passport to show them.

- ICE is going door to door in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods, asking residents where their immigrant neighbors live. Read that again. If it sounds like something out of your high school history textbook, that's because it is.

- ICE is targeting schools and school buses. They pepper sprayed teenagers and abducted two school staff members at the high school up the street from me on Weds. Police are literally escorting school buses to ensure children can get to school and home safely. The Minneapolis Public Schools have moved to [optional] virtual learning for the next 4 weeks because it's unsafe for children or teachers to physically come to school.

- They are targeting hospitals and clinics. Patients are scared and are canceling their appointments or just not showing up. Kids are missing their checkups and vaccines, folks aren't getting their cancer care, etc.

- They are smashing windows in cars and homes.

- ICE is increasingly picking up Native Americans—again, targeting folks based on skin color alone.

- They are arresting and beating legal observers. A friend of a friend had her arm broken yesterday. Folks are showing up at local hospitals, brought in in ICE custody, with severe injuries that are absolutely inconsistent with mechanism of injury reported by ICE. (Think: patient appears to have been beaten unconscious, while ICE agent says he slipped and fell.) [Remember that Kacia is a doctor who can tell the difference.]

I can't emphasize enough that these ICE agents do not have warrants. There are 2,000+ agents here and they are simply hunting for anyone that's not white. It doesn't matter if you're a citizen or a green card holder, they will kidnap you first and ask questions later.

But the community is fighting back.

- Protests are happening every day.
- Community groups have been leading know-your-rights sessions for months, often to packed venues.
- Whistles are being distributed by the thousands, carried on keychains and worn on coat zippers, always at the ready to be blown in warning if ICE is spotted.
- Drivers are following ICE vehicles, blaring their horns in warning.
- Businesses are locking their doors even while open to keep employees and customers safe. As I type this, I'm standing guard at the locked door of our

neighborhood burrito joint while I wait for my takeout order, so the employees can focus on their jobs. The place is packed with neighbors supporting this small business.

- Anti-ICE signs are posted everywhere. The community is making it crystal clear that ICE is not welcome here.

- Parents and neighbors are standing guard outside schools, organizing carpools, and escorting kids to and from school on foot.

- Parents of kids in Spanish-immersion daycare (there are a LOT of these daycares here!) are keeping their kids home so the teachers don't have to take the risk of coming to work.

- Churches and community groups are holding fundraisers to buy and deliver groceries to families who don't feel safe leaving home.

- Mutual aid money is going out to folks who can't make rent because they can't work or because a breadwinner was abducted, or who need a warm place to stay after their home's windows were smashed.

THAT is what is happening here. This fight is ongoing and it's horrifying to watch. But we are not backing down. To my friends in other cities and states, don't think for a minute that this won't happen in your town. It will. Be ready. Learn from us, as we have learned from Portland and Chicago and New York. Fight back. Don't let us get to the last line of Martin Niemoller's poem.

Bless. In case you need a reminder of the poem that Kacia referenced in closing, it goes like this: First they came for the Communists/ And I did not speak out Because I was not a Communist/ Then they came for the Socialists/ And I did not speak out/ Because I was not a Socialist/ Then they came for the trade unionists/ And I did not speak out/ Because I was not a trade unionist/ Then they came for the Jews/ And I did not speak out/ Because I was not a Jew/ Then they came for me/ And there was no one left/ To speak out for me

Again, my friends, I am not trying proclaim the end times. But we are hearing of “wars and rumors of wars”; we know our world is full of famine. We cannot continue to pretend that our faith is simply intended to help us navigate the daily aggravations that tempt us to snap at our family members or cut someone off in traffic. We are, in fact, living in unprecedented times of biblical proportion. But the good news is that that means our faith has something to offer us for the challenge of this moment. That line about “wars and rumors of wars” is probably the most well known phrase from our reading from Matthew 24. But the line that really caught my attention came later. Did you hear when Jesus said “And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold”? That is the line that I think is for us today. It is tempting to throw up our hands and tune out. It would be easier to draw closer into our own cocoons and just pray mightily that these horrors won’t touch us and those we love. Unfortunately for many of us, it’s too late. Our loved ones have already been

impacted. Friends are already planning their days much more carefully, to avoid being out where they might be harassed or detained or shot. I hope that all of us will recognize that it's too late to pretend everything is fine. But we cannot let this "increase in lawlessness" make our love go cold. If the Christian tradition stands for anything, it is a centuries-long testimony that the claim of "might makes right" is a lie. We must stand up and say so. Because of love, with love, for those we love.

I'm not going to pretend it isn't terrifying, because it is. More people are going to die. More people are going to be hurt. More children are going to be traumatized. But honestly, proclaiming the world is ending is a cop-out. What we are called to instead is to take an active role in shaping what the world looks like next. We don't want to live in a world based on brute power. And so we must demonstrate the power of love, – creative love, courageous love, sacrificial love – unprecedented love of biblical proportion. There is no need to water down a flood; we need to liberate our scriptures to fill the world with their wisdom at full volume. Then we will be able to call upon these stories to help us meet the moment faithfully, with love. Hallelujah and Amen.