

*A Reason to Get out of Bed*  
A Sermon on Matthew 3:13-17 by the Rev. Philip Major  
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ January 11, 2026

Every Sunday, I am glad for these hours we spend together in worship and fellowship. Some parts of life seem to get fragile or worn-out, but the words of Holy Scripture are never fragile, and the bread and wine of communion are never worn-out. We are strengthened and find guidance here, surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, also known as St. Paul's congregation.

At the same time, my heart is heavy with grief and fear. I am grieving the death of Renee Good, killed by an agent of the United States government on Wednesday. If you follow the news, you have heard the story of her killing, so I won't repeat the details here. Renee Good was shot on the same street where my brother used to live, one mile from where my niece lives today, so I have been paying extra attention. I have watched the videos taken of her killing and read newspaper accounts that give frame by frame explanations of the events. Someone pointed out that the frame by frame explanations are not really necessary, and are perhaps a distraction from the reality of our situation.

What is necessary is to understand that agents of the United States government are shooting and killing unarmed Americans for reasons that would never hold up in a court of law. It's necessary for us to understand that while officers of our local police forces face punishment if they break the rules, the agent who killed Renee Good may never be held accountable.

What is necessary is for us to understand that the killing of Renee Good was intentional. The bullets, the blood, the tears, and the death serve the purposes of the federal ICE agents. It's important for us to understand and remember that the point of sending thousands of troops into American cities is to create fear and conflict in our communities. It's important for us to understand that the intention of the federal government is domination and fear, domination and fear in our cities, domination and fear in Venezuela, domination and fear, even among the nations that fought alongside us after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Domination and fear is the point. It is a tragedy that the United States of America has fragmented and decayed to the point where mothers dropping their kids off at school should be fearful of being stopped by federal agents. It is a tragedy that several branches of our government seem to have the intention of returning the United States to a time when citizens were very correctly fearful of law enforcement agents. For most of the first 200 years of our history this kind of fear and domination was a real life, everyday experience for Americans with darker skin. Now it is a real life, everyday experience for all Americans.

Americans now have the opportunity to have a kind of fear of masked agents of the government like the fear experienced by the people of Poland, East Germany and Hungary during the 1950s and 1960s. Our federal government is using the power of the United States to dominate and intimidate foreign countries and to dominate and intimidate American citizens. Americans now have the opportunity to have a kind of fear like the fear experienced by native peoples when their lands were invaded by people with guns. Americans now have the opportunity to fear their government the same way the people of the Roman empire feared the rulers of the empire.

It shouldn't surprise us that many of the new building projects of the federal government bear a strong resemblance to the buildings of ancient Rome, because the values are the same. In using slave labor to build their massive structures with enormous stone columns, the ancient Romans were sending a message of strength and dominance. In the ancient Roman empire, domination was the point.

In ancient Rome, the common people faced harsh punishment for any transgressions, and there was no accountability for the powerful. Domination and fear was the point. In ancient Rome the emperor commanded that large arenas be built and that the people be invited into the arena for some sort of spectacle. The people came in great numbers, but this was not a gathering of equals. The emperor and his friends were seated in a special section, walled off from the others. The wealthy and

the powerful were also given good seats in a special section. The slaves were only permitted to be in the worst places, where you couldn't see anything. And everyone else sat somewhere in between.

The point of the large arenas and the spectacles was to show the dominance and power of the Roman emperor. The emperor was the person who decided at the last moment whether the Christian facing hungry lions would be allowed to live, or torn to pieces and eaten.

This was the world Jesus was born into. Jesus was born into a world much like our own. Jesus was born into a world where people were afraid of soldiers. Jesus was born into a world where armed agents of the government killed innocent people and were rewarded for their brutality. Jesus was born into a world where the Roman emperor and Roman governors sent thousands of troops into cities in order to dominate the people and strike fear into their hearts. Jesus was born into a world where there were laws and treaties between nations, but the laws and treaties didn't stand for much. The only things that made any difference were the wishes of the Emperor. Domination and fear was the point.

This was the world where Jesus was baptized. *And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

In the years following his baptism, Jesus showed exactly why God was so pleased. God was pleased because Jesus did not act in his own interests, but only to serve the people. God was pleased because Jesus healed the people. God was pleased because Jesus fed the hungry. God was pleased because Jesus treated each person with respect as a child of God. God was pleased because Jesus did not exclude women, or the poor, or those with physical disabilities.

God was pleased because Jesus helped people see that true leaders are people who are willing to act as servants. God was pleased because Jesus taught his disciples to not seek revenge, but to seek reconciliation. God was pleased because Jesus taught his disciples that their mission was to bring love to the world. God was pleased because Jesus loved the people so much, he was willing to give up his life for their sake.

God was pleased because Jesus brought a new way of being into the world. Jesus brought God's way of being into the world. That's why we call Jesus 'the Son of God'. It's why we call Jesus 'the Christ', which mean the one anointed by God.

The way of humility and reconciliation and equality and love brought by Jesus is completely opposite of the way of the Roman government of his time and it seems to be completely opposite of the purposes of the federal government of the United States in 2026. God's way is built on love, not domination. God's way is built on creating relationships of trust, not relationships of fear. God's way is built on leaders acting as servants, not as tyrants. God's way is built on restoring people to health, not killing them. God's way is built on taking care of children and families, not separating parents from their children. God's way is built on telling the truth, not on telling lies to protect those in power.

Jesus tells us we have to work for reconciliation between people, but the values Jesus brought into the world are irreconcilable with the values of domination and fear. There will never be any reconciliation between the values of domination and the values of love, which is why the leaders of the religious establishment colluded with the Roman government to kill Jesus. Jesus' death was not an accident. Jesus knew they would put him to death, not because he could foretell the future but because Jesus understood that God's way of love and reconciliation is directly contrary to the values of domination and fear.

This is why it is so very important for you to wake up tomorrow morning, and get out of bed, and do all of the things you normally do that bring goodness and love to the world. We live in a world and in a nation where those with power are using it to dominate others and provoke fear. The people of the world, and the people of our nation, and the people of our community

desperately need to come face to face with God's way of love and reconciliation. God's intention is that love and truth would be brought into the world through our actions.

You and I sometimes do not feel powerful, but God has given you the power to love. God has given you the power to act in ways that build trust. God has given you the power to use your mind to help other people. God has given you the power to lay aside your pride in order to serve others. God has given you the power to speak a kind word to another person.

Be fed by God's love. Be strengthened by the power of forgiveness. Be surrounded for a few hours by people who act in trustworthy ways. Then, empowered by God's grace, share the goodness, the love, and the joy you have been given with someone who needs it.