



ONE SERVICE ONLY AT 11 AM CT

# *REST OF THE STORY*

DECEMBER 28 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

As I was going over and over that second reading, it just got darker and darker, so I want to apologize to those who had that final two lines, and just went, whoa, what is T.J. Up to? Sometimes I don't know. But how's the holiday season treating everyone? So so? Good? Fair to middling? Interesting? Oh God, God bless you, whoever said interesting. You can yell and scream about it if you want, or maybe why don't we just take a collective big breath in... There. There we go. That's it, have a good day. That's all we got. You did it. No, no, we get it here, we hear from you all, we know, we know so much of what's going on. So much about this time of year for me, and I'm guessing for a lot of you. Though, I think it's one of the good things and the bad things about this time of year is the familiarity.

The same old stories, the same old travels, the same old things we do can be calming and can be good sometimes, and other times it can be upsetting, and yet I'm doing this again, and has this feeling of old patterns. It's this strange feeling of this same old story. So, I want to thank Kirk and Ray for being here and their music again. I encourage you to take your order of service with you because on the back of it is long stories about the beautiful music you're hearing, and I think it's nice to have that because it's part of what we're talking about in worship today, the ways we can treasure this distance that things have come, like melodies have come, have been played and shared through generations, through time, and arrive here in the sanctuary today. Kind of folk music, some might say.

A friend of mine, when I asked him once, he's a producer and a writer of music, and I asked, "Well, what's folk music really?" And he said, "Everything's folk music, it just depends on what folk you're talking about." Right? That's right. Yeah. Now, music isn't the only thing that comes to us like this, meandering its way through generations to carry a message to us. In many churches at the end of the calendar year that we're coming up to and when we think about new life that enters this world, like

we've just done through Christmas, they hold and consider this reading from Revelation that I shared with you. In the reading we hear about this loud voice proclaiming themselves and the alpha and the omega, the beginning, and the end, and ushering in a new world, a new heaven, a new earth, where God dwells among humans, as we've just heard, and wipes away every tear.

The lectionary version is what I read, and the lectionary for those who don't know is the order and the set of readings that Christian churches around the world all use in roughly the same order, to keep people, if not on the same page, on the actual same chapter and verse. Right. Now, in that version, it stops halfway through a verse in the chapter. Now, I don't know about you, but when I see someone stops mid-sentence before they're about to say something else, I think whatever the something else is, is a lot more interesting. And I want to hear that. Because the reading ends so lovely and hopeful, but here's the rest. "Those who conquer will inherit these things and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the sexually immoral, the sorcerers..." That was a surprise, those sorcerers out there. "The idolaters and the liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

It's worse than the chicken and the feathers, guys, see? It's not just me, it's not just me, there's all these things out here. It all seems so lovely and good, but if you don't follow the rules according to this, into the fire and sulfur you go.

Sorry. We had Siri interrupt us last Sunday, it's all right. Now, the entire Book of Revelation goes on and on after this to disclose a lot of potent images like this. Revelation's the last in the library of books, I always like to remind everyone the Bible is a library, it is not a book. It is a library of books. And it's thought with modern scholarship to be written by a man named John. For years, they thought this was actually the same John who was a disciple, or maybe John the evangelist who wrote or was credited with writing one of the gospels, but actually scholarship shows this was a different John.

This is John of Patmos, who was exiled on an island in the Aegean Sea, off the coast of Greece. And many look at this book as prophetic writing, and it is to an extent of what might be in store for the Earth when God comes back, but scholars, and in particular, my professor of New Testament in seminary has found that this text actually is rife with highly topical, specific, and political satire and criticism of the time in which it was written in the outskirts of the Roman Empire. It's laced with harsh critique of the Roman imperial rule that is stalking and ravaging the lives of the lands that it is encroaching, the lands that it's reaching, and singling out many of the worst examples of emperors and failures of governance for opulent displays of wealth, cynical, political maneuvers, exploitive use of power, and renaming cultural centers after themselves.

I got confused there for a second. Chicken and feathers and... Yeah. See, the details of John of Patmos's critique, the targets of his rage and warning today are hard to distinguish because they were so specific to the time. We have only some of the most lasting and terrifying images here in the Bible, and to me, actually, that makes sense because when danger or politically charged fear run rampant in the street and the psyche of a people, the effect is nightmare-ish, is wholly terrifying. And evokes some of the hardest images we face as a nation, that we have this year as a city, as a people, as a

state, as a church, as individuals, as families, as all of the forms of social cohesion we may have, feeling frayed at this time. But dread and stress over the state of our lives and those parts of it out of our control is a tale as old as human history.

Andrea Cohen's poem evokes characters from stories older than the Bible. Some don't know this. They come from the fables of the Aesop, who was a Greek slave. Five centuries before the birth of Jesus, he walked the Earth at the time of the Buddha. And yet we have these stars from these fables who've had long and storied careers deciding together to maybe go on strike, to stop so much meaning and having so much to say all the time. We have our chicken who gets in on the act and who meets the end of their story with the fox. Now, as I said, it's a darker message than I even thought as I was writing, and one that echoes though the eternal wisdom I think we all need to always be reminded of periodically from Maya Angelou, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time."

Yeah. And I know I've told this story before, but I've given that advice to someone before and they're like, "Yeah, when someone tells you who they are," it's like, no, no, no, no, no. "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time." People can change, yes, of this, I'm certain, but there ain't nothing wrong with waiting for the evidence first. That they've started a new story with their lives, please, before turning our lives over to theirs. There's nothing wrong with wanting to see the rest of the story, and one of the places I strongly believe is ready for a new story is right here in Dallas, fricking Texas. This month, our church welcomed the preeminent historian and movement builder, Jerry Hawkins, onto its staff. For those of you who don't know, Jerry Hawkins is now on staff. Yeah, you can...

Jerry's an Emmy award-winning documentary producer and historian about the history of Dallas in particular and the racial components of that history. And his work in the church and in the community as a historian and a colleague, he will help us to understand more about the history of Dallas, yes, about the role this church and its members played in that history, yes, but also, also to challenge us to look at those things in our system, in our church, and even in ourselves that might make us uncomfortable in doing this work. Yes, are we ready for that?

Yes. All of this, all of this to write the rest of this church's history, friends. There is no reason that in a city like Dallas, in a state like Texas, with all of the advantages it has, should still be mired in inequity that cuts across perceived racial and economic lines, whether disparity is the point of the policies or whether it is the result, the story is the same old story, this country, this state has been telling for too long, and this year we will try to write a new page in the rest of this story together.

Right. Along with the work of racial equity, your congregants here and your friends are also headlong, though you may not know it, into the fight for religious freedom in the state of Texas. A family of this church just less than two weeks ago actually joined as lead plaintiffs in a suit brought by the ACLU of Texas to enjoin this state from enforcing the display of the 10 Commandments in classrooms in their district. And their attorneys said that their case as practicing Unitarian universalists is actually one of

the strongest among all the plaintiffs. Yeah. I'm not going to name check them there, but I want them to hear that whatever that family needs to know of support, whatever happens, whatever they need from their church, we are here with them until the end of that story. Let them hear it. Yeah.

They're a formidable family, yet still, all the help that they can get, we will give. Now, some of you may have seen that in coordination with Dallas Area Interfaith we have launched, our own church has launched a Know Your Rights website in Spanish and English. Has everyone seen this? You haven't? I apologize now for my Spanish, if you saw that part of it, I did my best. But speaking about legal rights in Spanish wasn't what I was trained to do in my Spanish language. But there are complete resources or a beginning of resources to help those in need of assistance on this site, has up-to-date information about the availability of representation in their needs, and what to expect in the coming changing landscapes of immigration in our city and in our state.

And hot off the press today, actually, are what now are these white cards, you'll see them as you exit the sanctuary on the tables out there, these are in English and in Spanish, they're from Dallas Area Interfaith and they have the Fourth and Fifth Amendment on one side, but on the other side are actual good, trusted lawyers to call, and other resources to answer, to help with food, to help with clothing, to help with real resources. Please, we want to run out of these, so just take them when you leave today, we will order more. We got it. So, we're on it. Now, you can visit Dallas Immigration Watch. That's the site, [Dallasimmigrationwatch.com](http://Dallasimmigrationwatch.com). And email me with comments. This is a growing learning process. We want more information, better information, we're going to update it. Just feel free to email me them, this is a public service to all. The story of immigration, let us not forget, is the trampling of rights of immigrants, that is the story over and over.

The demonization of immigrants for a society's ills as scapegoats is a story we must not relive in this place, in this time, in our lives, our society must not cave to history's terrible fables that warn us about what comes with the separation and this demonization. The rest of the story must be constitutional due process at best, and common sense at least, right?

Right. Now, in addition to all of these things, I got a list, I'm not going to stop until you stop me. You may have noticed some construction here around campus, some tearing up of our beautiful landscaping, and I'm just going to have to be okay with that until it's all fixed. But it is here for a reason because the roofs of our buildings will shortly be equipped with solar panels to help these facilities be powered in large part by solar energy. Now, we know that the commitment to the environment and doing our part to protect it is something that members of longstanding of this church have been doing long before it was cool, long before Subarus existed.

We were in this fight. And we are glad to be in it still, and the story will continue on. But I need to say this, friends, you need to hear, that in the coming years, I think we should take a wider and a more clear view, a more broad view about what this shared Earth really means to us as we build the beloved community. We do not profess that a coming of a savior will wipe away this Earth, as much as Revelation says it will. That will whisk away some of us and send others to a sulfur sea. We leave that to the professors at Dallas Theological who've made a lot of money on their... What is that?

What's the series that he wrote? Left Behind. Yeah. If you didn't know, our neighbor wrote that right down the street. We are much closer to the belief if not us, who? If not now, when? Right? If not us, who? If not now, when? How we treat our global neighbors is at the core of many of the things that we've actually already discussed today. When we think of the environment, we can certainly be proud of the solar panels on the roof, but we also must be clear that environmental justice is racial justice, is immigration justice, and is tied to religious freedom. Cancer occurrence and survivability when not accounting for solely genetic factors in Dallas County is markedly more determined by environmental factors than by any personal choice. Hear that, right? And our neighbors in West Dallas experience significantly higher respiratory ailments related to the industries there than any other part of the Dallas area.

It's happening right in our backyards, friends. How will we in the year to come be the kinds of partners our neighbors can count on to show up beside them? These are the questions we will answer this year. How will we write the rest of this story? I remember the golden age, I call it, of NPR. This isn't in the sermon, I can't help it. Who remembers Paul Harvey? Can I get a... There's this... For those of you who don't know, I'm so sorry. But Paul Harvey would come on and he'd tell us part of the story, right? And then he'd go away and we'd hear about the news or something awful, or fundraising, which you never hear about here. So, that's good. Then he'd come back and he'd tell what?

Yeah. I just wanted to be sure I was in the right place. I got you. And I don't know for sure how we are going to tell the rest of the story, but this I know. When people got concerned that your ministers were calling out elected officials for their fascist and authoritarian conduct, someone got worried. I think I said fascist in a sermon about, I was going to check with Daniel, about 50 times a few months ago and I got some very concerned emails. So, we went to a constitutional lawyer to be sure we were all safe. And that you are all safe. We appreciate your concern. And do you want to know with that constitutional scholar, do you want to know what they told us about calling out inequity and maternal mortality? What they said about helping people in the immigration process?

Do you want to know what their legal advice was to us all, not just to ministers about facing down injustice with our words and our deeds, and standing up for our faith and religious liberty for all? Do you want to know what they actually said? "They said the closer your words and deeds are to your closely held religious beliefs, the more protected are your words and your deeds." "The closer your words and deeds are to your closely held religious beliefs, the more protected are those words and deeds." And they said to start using sentences like this, "My religion tells me, my faith compels me, and it is in the name of all I hold holy..." That you cannot change the name of institutions like that.

Anyway, God dang it. I swear this is water. These are just the beginnings of sentences we all got to start using. Hear me church. Not only because they tie more closely our actions to our faith, but because it's literally safer and more protected to do so. To live out our faith, to proclaim our belief in this way, in this world, then to stay quiet, it's not only safer legally, it is safer for our neighbors, and what is safer for our neighbors is safer for who?

Right. My religion tells me to love others as myself. My faith compels me to act in accordance with justice, and with equity, and is in the name of all I hold holy, that no one should suffer because of inequities imposed upon them by how they look, who they love, or where they live, right? And it is right. It's with these beliefs that we must and we will help to write a story of liberation, the tale of overcoming seemingly incredible odds, the fable of the way a little church that would not give up the ghost, no matter how dark it was before the dawn. This is how we can, this is how we will, this is how we must work together to right.