

Sermon: Consuming Zeal

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 3, 2024)

What is wisdom? How does wisdom manifest into right decisions made and righteous actions taken in one's life? Lately in the U.S. presidential election, or more precisely the nomination process of the Democratic Party, age has become a hot topic. It stems from the decision by the Special Counsel Robert Hur, not to bring criminal charges against President Joe Biden for retaining and sharing classified documents as a private citizen. The decision itself wasn't problematic, but rather it was the rationale behind it. The special counsel wrote in a report, "Mr. Biden would likely present himself to a jury, as he did during our interview of him, as a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory. Understandably, the White House was furious at this perceived shift in focus, from the lack of evidence against the sitting president, to his so-called cognitive decline, solely based on what the administration called "a commonplace occurrence among witnesses: a lack of recall of years-old event." Adding fuel to the fire, in a hastily called press conference, President Biden said, "My memory is fine." But in response to an impromptu question from a reporter about what was happening in Gaza, Biden went on to refer to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as the president of Mexico. In the days that followed, U.S. network replayed repeatedly clips of Biden's memory lapses of that and other occasions.

Hur's comment really highlighted an ongoing concern shared by an overwhelming majority of Americans, with a recent poll showing that 86 percent of respondents think President Biden, at the ripe old age of 81, is simply too old to serve another term. Not coincidentally, in the same poll, 62 percent think Donald Trump, who is 77, is also too old to serve. In the ensuing frenzy, which is still being played out, quite publicly, as some in the media is dubbing this as the 'Oldgate', one commentator I heard (and I can't remember who actually voiced out this bold statement, which I am paraphrasing), "Whichever party, the Democrats or the Republicans, be the first to dump their octogenarian leader, will be the one to win the U.S. presidential election!" Is this a simple case of ageism, an unfounded bias against leaders who happen to be seniors? Or is there a legitimate concern shown by the U.S. public, who will soon be asked to go to the poll to elect their president for the next four years?

This widespread concern does explain Biden's low approval rating, even within his own party. But it conveniently overlooks his first-term accomplishments, including a growing economy, low unemployment, lower drug prices, massive investment in infrastructure and green technology, and the strengthening of domestic supply chains to counter the Chinese hegemony through the CHIPS and Science Act. Biden's record does not tell a story of inability to govern, nor is there credible evidence that he is struggling behind closed doors with the job's demands.

Some have argue, especially those closest to the president, age should not be a determining factor. It is true that as we age, we are more likely to forget names and dates, and it does takes longer to process information. That maybe problematic for certain professions like an airline pilot, but is less so for an executive. Older leaders actually have the advantage of accumulated experience to spot the difference between important and unimportant ideas. They have the practical know-how to surround themselves with wise people, and have the time to become wise themselves. They may take more time to come to a decision, but the decision is more likely to be the right one. Should age alone disqualify a leader? Or as some have come to argue, in defence of the President, that aging leads actually to wisdom, which is sorely needed in the U.S. politics nowadays.

What then is wisdom? As the Apostle Paul asked in 1 Corinthians 1:20, "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age?" He then posited in a rhetorical fashion, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"

Take the case of the account of Jesus clearing the Temple, which is our Scriptural reading for today in John 2. It is an account recorded also in the other three Gospels, of Matthew 21, Mark 11 and Luke 19. The story at its core is simple enough: Jesus travelled to Jerusalem, as part of the Passover observance, which law abiding Jews practiced on an annual basis. Upon entering the Temple of the Lord, he saw what appears to be commercial activities transpiring on the holy ground. In an apparent rage, he protested by overturning tables and driving them all—sheep, cattle and money changers—out of the house of God.

The account recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke are shorter, more abbreviated. John's account differs from the other three in the mention of sheep, cattle and dove, the mention of the whip of cords, of money changer, of the scattering of coins and of the command by Jesus. More

importantly, John's account places this event at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, where as the other three put it at the end of his ministry, right before his passion, his journey to the cross.

Hold that thought, we will come back to that later. But first, I do want to say a few words about sheep, cattle and dove. The specificity in John is not a coincidence; they happen to coincide with the Torah's requirement for presenting sacrificial offerings. Those particular animals were sold to pilgrims as they come into the Temple, as a way of providing convenience, so they do not have to bring their own sacrifices as they travel from far away places. The money changers were there to provide also a vital service. During that time period, most used coinage were either Roman denarii or Attic drachmas. Due to the fact they both bear portraits of imperial rulers, and are considered by the Jewish religious authority as idolatrous, neither of them were permitted to be used in paying the temple tax. So pilgrims from the regions have no choice but to exchange their coins through money changers, into coinage acceptable to the temple.

In essence, the commercial activities witnessed by Jesus were, in fact, activities sanctioned by the religious authority, in aide of the overall worshipping experience of the worshippers. These activities were and had been practiced for quite some time—they were not new nor novel. The fact they also enriched the coffer of the said authority was, beside the point, moot, and hoped by the authority to never be brought up—wink wink, nudge nudge, say no more. But Jesus saw right through that facade, and as he was overturning the tables of the money changers, he told those who were selling the animals, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!".

Reflecting theologically on the action of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark alludes to words of Prophet Isaiah, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations" (Isaiah 56:7), and to the laments of Prophet Jeremiah, "But you have made it a den of robbers." (Jeremiah 7:11) Whereas John, the last of the Gospel writers, the oldest and perhaps wisest, points to Psalm 69:9, "Zeal for your house will consume me." In a passage that speaks about the suffering of the righteous sufferer. In essence, John was telling us how these seemingly innocuous commercial activities had hurt Jesus, had cut Jesus deep to the core that he had no choice but to protest, no choice but raise a hack, and to overturn all that are ungodly and unholy.

Let me come back to the point of when this story took place. The Gospel of Mark, Matthew and Luke all had placed this story at the tail end of the earthly ministry of Jesus. According to that chronology, one can argue that Jesus cleansed the Temple intentionally, sort of as a political theatre in order to trigger an inevitable confrontation with the religious authority, which inevitably lead to his betrayal, his trials, his crucifixion at the cross, and his eventual resurrection.

Whereas, John places that story early in Jesus' ministry. To John, theology, not chronology, is his main concern. Theologically speaking, John portrays Jesus as a man on a messianic mission, ever since the miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Jesus is on the move, he is cleansing the temple in zeal. When confronted by the Jews to provide a sign, a proof that he has authority to do this, Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."

Of course Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body. For John, the temple is not just a building, it is Jesus' resurrected body. John will later write the vision of the Apocalypse in Revelation, specifically in chapter 21, where there is to be no temple in the New Jerusalem, the Lord and the Lamb are its temple. John points to the fact that, the resurrected body of Christ is the place where people and God finally meet and have eternal fellowship in glory, where God shall finally proclaim, "They will be my people, I will be their God." John's age, his life experience, his devotion to God, the vision that God gifted him, all culminated into wisdom, not of this world, but of God.

I will leave you with this thought about President Biden. I must credit this to the opinion piece recently published from the editors of the Christian Century Magazine. Pulitzer Price winner, writer Marilynne Robinson, who is an octogenarian herself, told the *New York Times* she considers it "a kind of good fortune" that Biden, "someone with a strong institutional memory, who knows how things are supposed to work, who was habituated to their appropriate functioning, is president." Robinson said she considers him "a gift of God. All 81 years of him."

How old was John, the Apostle, when he wrote his Gospel? 85 years old. How old was he when he wrote Revelation, his last book, the last book of the Bible? 99 years old. That truly was a gift of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**