

Foundations Week 2: Shaken Foundations - James 3:3-12 **David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (January 10, 2020)**

Hello everyone. I am thankful for the opportunity for us to gather today and pray that you are doing well today. It has been a difficult week for us as a nation, and a very troubling time. I've been very disturbed by the events of this week in our country.

We are on the second week of our sermon series on Foundations. Last week we considered the question in Psalm 11 that David asked when he felt his life was in danger: "when the foundations are shaken, what can the righteous do?" I feel like that is such an apt question to consider in light of the events of this past week and particularly the riots and protests that happened on Wednesday. I watched the news in shock and distress; I was appalled by the blatant disregard for law and order, and for our democracy as a nation.

I feel that in many ways our foundations as a nation were shaken this past week and that it is our duty as Christians to respond in a godly manner in condemning violence and calling out hatred that fuels such acts. The question of foundations is so important because it determines the integrity of what we are building and how well it will stand against challenges. And I believe that what happened on Wednesday was a great revelation on how poor foundations can bring a structure down.

But how does this happen? What leads to this? I've been thinking about different passages, and I'd invite you to read with me from James chapter 3.

³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵ Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Our words matter. Words have consequences. What we say can spark a fire that begins as a spark and burns down a whole forest, as we have witnessed here in California. This passage is pointing out the problem of hypocrisy, of inconsistency, and what happens when we praise God and then curse people. Sadly, this week we have witnessed a lot of false praise to God combined with violence and curses to people.

On Wednesday, there were people carrying crosses as they broke into the Capitol building. People waved a flag that said “In God We Trust”, our national motto, as they march to the capital. Some carried a sign saying “Jesus Saves”. Blowing prominently in the foreground as the mob kicked in a Capitol door was a red, white and blue flag that proclaimed, “Jesus is my savior” and “Trump is my President” on either sides of an elongated American flag.

(<https://religionunplugged.com/news/2021/1/6/some-history-behind-the-christian-flags-at-the-pro-trump-capitol-coup>)

I believe as Christians we have a responsibility to reject the type of language and the rhetoric that led to the damage and violence we witnessed on Wednesday. I believe that many Christians and Christian leaders in the United States have tolerated or even encouraged and participated in rhetoric over the few months, the last four years, and even before that, that has led to an embrace of conspiracy theories and a rejection of truth. I think some of this has led to a questioning of even the most basic reality, which is unfortunately what I see coming straight from the president. For a long time, I thought I don't need to address this directly, I can let it go. But now people have died, and the foundation of our democracy as a country is being attacked. I believe our Christian witness as an evangelical American Baptist church is being compromised. And I cannot stand by and let this proceed.

I'm not here to endorse any candidate, or campaign for any political party, I don't do that as a pastor, but I am here to condemn the rhetoric and inciteful language that led to the attack on the Capital on Wednesday, some of which came directly from the president. This didn't just happen: it was planned, it was called for, it was organized, and unfortunately some Christian leaders participated in the rally and speeches leading up to the violent attack on the Capital.

As I've read more and participated in more online forums, I continue to see links between some far-right ideology and Christian tradition and the harm done to black lives and other minority people. This week many people have highlighted the difference between how the rioters at the Capitol were treated, and how black protestors have been treated. To be a health, diverse church, I reject and condemn the ideology that continues to support white supremacy and to fuel white anger. This is a big and complex topic, but I feel that I must address it, as we did in some sermons last year. And I commit to continue to explore how we can be a church that models reconciliation and speaks out against racism and injustice. We need to keep having that discussion, and live it out as a church.

The leader of Sojourners, Jim Wallis, wrote this on Tue Jan 5, the day before the attack:

Trump's clear attempts to disenfranchise people of color are rooted in the sins of racism and white supremacy. Accepting or ignoring that reality is no longer possible for those who confess Christ as Lord. And the violence implicitly threatened in Trump's encouragement to his supporters to stage “wild” protests in conjunction with the Jan. 6 joint session of Congress to certify the result is absolutely inexcusable for followers of Jesus. This is no longer just politics, it is theological heresy, and one that needs to be exorcised from white Christianity in America.

Tragically we saw that violence lived out, it was no longer just words or threats, but it became a terrible reality.

I believe in a two-party system, and I believe in health dialogue, debate and discourse between both parties. I think it is this type of process and compromise that produced our constitution, our laws, our principles and has kept our country stable since it was formed. Over my life, I have been registered as a Republican, an Independent, and a Democrat (and not all the same time, because that would be fraud), and I've voted for both Republicans and Democrats. But I believe that what happened on Wednesday is a repudiation of everything that the Republican party has traditionally stood for. I applaud the many Republican and Christian leaders who have spoken out and condemned both what happened and the rhetoric and conspiracy theories that led to what happened, and I believe that in good conscience I must join them.

What does this mean for us? What can the righteous do when the foundations are being destroyed? Even as we “**remember that God’s foundation is unshaken, even when ours is destroyed,**” as we saw last week, and affirm and celebrate God’s continued authority over the world, I believe we also have a responsibility. My summary for today is this:

- **We have a responsibility to stand up for peace and truth.**

We are called to be light to the world, to be salt, and to be peace makers. That role is all the more important and necessary in times of crisis. And sometimes what that requires is that we speak out against what is wrong. We must reject and call out lies when we see them shared and validated.

I know we are a church of different and diverse political persuasions, and I celebrate that. If you are conservative, you belong here. If you're liberal or progressive, we affirm your place here. Republicans, Democrats, and Independents all belong at Pathway. But we cannot tolerate and must reject the abuse of Christianity along with political identity or goals as an excuse for hatred and violence. That we cannot allow, and that is a perversion of Christianity that denies the whole foundation of our salvation in Jesus and our Christian witness.

In Philippians 4, Paul wrote this:

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

These are the criteria that we must use as we engage in social media and with each other. What is true? That is a key question that we must continue to answer, and at times the very concept of truth and objective reality has come under attack. What is noble? What is right? What is pure? Let's think about those things, let's focus and elevate those things. Let's close in prayer.