

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 10, 2021 (Baptism of Our Lord)*

When I was on sabbatical a couple years ago, I visited a coffee farm in El Salvador, high up in the hills near Santa Ana. The farm had been in the same family for generations and it was a beautiful piece of property with coffee plants growing under canopies of banana trees.

At one time there was a grand manor house on the plantation, but now all that remained were the ruins. It had been destroyed in the Salvadoran Civil War that started in the late 1970s. I ran my hand along exterior walls that were still pockmarked by bullet holes. It was difficult to imagine the violence and bloodshed that had taken place just a few decades before, as I stood in front of that bombed out shell of a home, one that still echoed with grace and splendor, on a peaceful and bright spring morning in Central America.

As I watched, along with all of you, the images from our nation's capital this past week, it was hard not to think about that day in El Salvador. Civil war, political violence, the inciting of riots, reckless rhetoric, armed gunmen, the destruction of property. All of these are things which I never thought could take place here. In our country. In our Capitol. Not because we're better than anyone else — we surely are not — but because mob violence unleashed in the halls of Congress is inconsistent with the yearning for a more just and perfect Union. The cognitive dissonance between the rhetoric of our stated values and the reality of what we witnessed was striking. And heartbreaking.

Collectively, we watched the violation of a treasured national symbol, albeit one built by slaves, unfold in real time. The place where, most recently, John Lewis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, George Herbert Walker Bush and John McCain had lain in state, was desecrated by rioters, conspiracy theorists, white nationalists, and insurrectionists, some bearing Confederate flags and others wearing t-shirts with anti-semitic slogans. It was hard to watch.

Many of you have visited the Capitol as tourists or on school trips and have stared in wonder up at the Capitol dome from inside the rotunda. As a college student, I interned on Capitol Hill for a Maryland senator one summer and regularly walked those very halls. We all have connections to this place that is the symbolic seat of our representative government. Last Wednesday was a sad day, a frustrating day, a rage-inducing day on so many levels.

Today in the church calendar, we mark the baptism of Jesus and encounter John the Baptist along the banks of the Jordan River. One of the things I love about John the Baptist is his unvarnished and prophetic truth telling. He's not afraid to ruffle some feathers. He doesn't even care if anyone's listening — nothing will deter him from sharing his message. His is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, pointing to the one who is to come, loudly and boldly proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John the Baptist is the polar opposite of a smooth-talking politician. He'd never get elected, because rather than telling people what they *want* to hear, he tells them what they *need* to hear. In other words, he tells them the truth. And in this way John takes his place in the long tradition of Hebrew prophets. Men and women who were accountable only to the God's honest truth. Voices that called out leaders who had lost their way, who had been seduced by love of money or love of self. Leaders who trampled upon their own people in order to satisfy their own needs. Leaders who preyed upon the vulnerable rather than caring for them with compassion. Leaders who had gone astray by failing to keep God at the center of their lives.

Now, this was not an easy path. The average life expectancy for a prophet was rather short. John the Baptist literally lost his head for telling the truth. Truth telling won't necessarily get you reelected or make you popular with your base. And yet, if there is anything this country needs right now, it's more truth-tellers. Leaders with the courage to stand up, despite the political winds, and tell people the truth. Without spin or bias or personal interest. We need less flag waving — whether that's an American flag or a flag emblazoned with the name of a particular candidate — and more truth telling. We need courageous truth tellers to hold us all accountable when we stray from our national ideals, just as we need prophets to point us back to relationship with God.

And the first truth that John the Baptist voices is a call to repent. Everything will unfold in its own time, but first get down on your knees and repent. Admit your sinful nature, admit your complicity in the trampling down of the less fortunate, admit your lack of faithfulness. Repent of the demonization of others, repent of the false narratives, repent of the violence. Repent first, and then we can move forward.

Because repentance is not just about looking back, a way of dwelling on the sins of the past. Rather, repentance looks forward, it envisions a new way of life. It involves a turning of the heart toward the future, a future dripping with hope and possibility and expectation and new life.

There's another truth teller I've been thinking about this week, a modern day prophet. When I was on that coffee farm, I met the owner of the property. He was a gracious host and was proud to lead our small tour. Over lunch I asked him about Oscar Romero,

the former archbishop of El Salvador. I figured maybe he'd encountered him at some point and had a story to share about this saintly soul who risked everything to lift up his country's poor and vulnerable populations.

But at the first mention of Romero's name, the man's face clouded over. The charm dripped away into an icy stare and it dawned on me that, while I naively assumed everyone in the country loved and admired Romero and treasured him as a national hero, the ruling class did not. It was the rebels that had destroyed the family home. The monied class was strongly allied with the repressive military regime against which Romero had railed. Romero was a truth teller, an advocate for social justice, an ally of the oppressed, one who condemned violence and torture, and a man whose vision of equality for all people contrasted sharply with the ideology and practices of a power hungry dictator.

The day after preaching a sermon in which he called on all soldiers, as Christians, to stop carrying out the government's orders to violate its citizens' basic human rights, Oscar Romero was assassinated while standing at the altar celebrating mass; martyred for telling the truth.

I'm not sure what our collective future holds as a nation. But I do know that we can disagree without demonizing one another. That we can seek truth rather than spreading falsehood. That we can repent for the ways in which we have not lived up to our values. That what we witnessed last week wasn't merely an aberration, it was a reflection of America in 2021. And that if the bodies of those who stormed the Capitol building had been black and brown rather than white, those hallways would have been stained with blood. In the spirit of John the Baptist and Oscar Romero, we need to hear the uncomfortable truths. Only then can we begin to embody hope rather than despair.

That old bullet-riddled manor house in El Salvador had since been converted into an open-air nursery. Gardeners tended the young coffee plants that would soon be placed deep into the farm's rich soil. Out of destruction, injustice, and violence, the seeds of new life and growth are literally being sown.