

God is in Charge, But We Have Work to Do

There is a big elephant in the room, and in this case, I am actually speaking about an elephant: Tuesday's election results. This particular election seems important to address, both because all elections are important--for what are we doing as Christians if we are not concerned about how we all live together, not only in our churches but in our neighborhoods and workplaces and world--and because this election has proved particularly fraught. Some of us are celebrating, some are lamenting, and some are downright confused, scared, or unsure. Hatred, intolerance, and division appear in nearly every corner of the Internet and our country, and right now I would guess that I am not alone in wondering how in the world we are ever going to find common ground again.

Some public leaders have called upon Americans to be the compassionate, respectful citizens this great country has historically known and to focus upon the work that lies ahead. Indeed, we each have questions to ask ourselves about what our responsibilities are as Americans, yes, but first and foremost as Christians. God calls us to respond faithfully to this time. We are always asked to be agents of healing and hope, but that call takes on concrete form now more than ever.

Our country did not become so deeply divided overnight, nor will we all come together overnight. But as Christians, we commit to gathering around the table in Jesus' name despite our differences--and in fact, we believe we are enriched by those differences. We in the church can model what it looks like to live in community with those with whom we disagree and even do not like. We may not eradicate our differences but we can seek understanding. God does not promise that we will come to one common mind but we might come to one common heart.

We can start small. Perhaps a few of us have a discussion this morning at coffee hour, or at our next Bible study. Imagine if churches all around the country tried this experiment. Perhaps then we try these same hard but oh-so-vital discussions with our neighbors and co-workers that display signs for political candidates we would never dream of supporting. This is not quick or superficial healing. It will take time, energy, courage, and for some, permission to express hurt and anger--respectfully. Conversation by conversation, encounter by encounter, we seek to see the love motivating each other's beliefs. Or, to use the words of our baptismal covenant, we seek to see Jesus Christ in every person.

The lectionary readings today are actually perfect. Although they were not selected to coincide with the election, God sometimes has a beautiful way of working the timing out just so. We are wrapping up this year in the church calendar and looking towards Advent, which begins in two weeks. During Advent, we anticipate Christ's coming into the world and search for the light God brings into the darkness and chaos. We remember how much we need God and how God is in charge. Isaiah says it best:

Surely, it is God who saves me;
I will trust in him and not be afraid.
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, *
and he will be my Savior.

Love our President-Elect, hate him--although try to work on the hate--or feel totally indifferent, God is still at work, and God is bigger than the President and America and this world. Always. As today's gospel makes clear, following in Jesus' footsteps is not easy, but we never need be afraid. If we seek to shine Christ's light in the world, and to find Christ in every person, we can be certain that slowly but surely, God is building a new world, one defined by love, not hate or apathy, joy not pain, laughter, not weeping, peace not war.

Let us never lose sight of Christ's light and its power.

<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/4390/worship-for-kids-november-13-2016>

What we have long known was confirmed again early on Wednesday morning: we are a sharply polarized and divided nation. Some are rejoicing over the result of the election, others are in mourning, and still others are simply confused. The people in our pews will represent all of these responses - and more. No congregation is monolithic. Every congregation will include people who voted for Trump side by side with people who voted for Clinton side by side with people who voted for a third party candidate and those who did not vote at all.

So how do we preach in this context? How do we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of this reality?

I share with you these 12 brief thoughts in the hope that one or two might be helpful to you as you prepare to proclaim the Gospel this Sunday and in the weeks and months to come.

1. Everyone who comes to worship on Sunday will be coming with the same news on their hearts and minds, even though they will have different perspectives about it. The election results are our common context right now. Not to address that context in the light of the Gospel will leave us seeming out of touch. In other words, I think we as preachers have got at least to mention the election.
2. The preacher may have strong feelings about the outcome of the election. We will do well to work out those feelings with spouses or friends or colleagues or spiritual directors - before we preach. The pulpit is not the place for me to work out my feelings; the congregation is not my therapist. I can be honest about what I am feeling, but the sermon is not about me - it is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
3. Speak the truth - the Gospel truth. Not the truth of one political candidate or another, not the preacher's own truth. Proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of God in Christ.
4. Speak the truth courageously. Whatever we say, someone in the congregation will be offended. If our goal is to preach in such a way that no one will take issue with anything we've said, then we will miss the mark and stray far from the challenging, world-changing words of Christ. So preach courageously. We bishops will have your back on this. We will back you up when you go out on a limb to speak the truth. Just go wisely as well as courageously.
5. Speak the truth in love. In love. Although the readings for Sunday could be heard to be all about burning up and tearing down, the Gospel is about building up the kingdom of God.
6. Speak the truth in the public square. Plenty of people will say, "keep politics out of the church." I think what that usually means is that people in the congregation really like each other and don't want to risk becoming divided by talking about politics. But politics at heart is all about how we

live together in society. The Gospel is about how we love God and love one another. So politics and faith overlap; they have much in common.

7. Hold fast to the promises we made in the baptismal covenant, the promises we renew regularly. Ponder and hold up before others these questions in particular: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being?
8. Hold up the importance of prayer. Start praying publically at every service for Donald, our President-elect.
9. Hold up hope for healing. The reading from Malachi says, "But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." What does healing look like right now? How do we as preachers invite people to be agents of healing in this divided nation, even when emotions might be raw?
10. Remember that the readings appointed for Sunday come up every three years. They were not selected as a response to the context in which we find ourselves. It may help our congregations to know that the preacher did not choose the readings.
11. Every year as the Church year draws toward its close, we have eschatological readings. They can be hard to understand in any year. This year, in our particular context, the readings may draw us into Advent a bit early - into the hope and darkness, into the "already but not yet" of Advent. Remember that one of the points of this kind of literature is that God is in control. God is the One who does the tearing down and burning up, not us. God calls us to see glimpses of the Kingdom here and now, and to point out to others where we see the Kingdom springing up. Where are those places now?
12. Be kind toward yourself and toward your congregation as you prepare your sermon and as you preach. Be gentle especially toward those in your congregation whose voting choice you might not understand right now.

In sum, to use St. Paul's words, be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Let's use social media to get a conversation going about these and other points as we strive to be faithful preachers this week.

Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD--
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent-- its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

Surely, it is God who saves me; *
I will trust in him and not be afraid.
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, *
and he will be my Savior.

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom

against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."