

Future Tense

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 21:5-19

When I titled this sermon some weeks ago, I knew that it would be happening on the Sunday following this presidential election. Nonetheless, I did not mean to imply that the future would be tense. It may be, but that was not my intention then. My intention was to remind us – today through the vision of the prophet Isaiah and the words of Jesus about the days to come – that God is a God of forward movement, of making things new, of renewal, of reformation and transformation. God is rarely satisfied with how things are, and is always reminding us of what might be. My mother taught grammar – “future tense” is a verb tense that leads us forward, that points to the future.

Anything I say about the election is said with some trepidation and hesitance. It will be political, because as Presbyterians we care about the body politic, what happens in the world beyond these four walls as well as what happens within them. Political yes, and pastoral, I hope. Maybe even a little prophetic – who can tell. But I hope not partisan. What I said several weeks ago is something I believe firmly, with our theological forbears, that “God alone is Lord of the conscience.” Anyone, let alone me, telling you how to vote, is presumptive, as is failing to remember the breadth of diversity on many things that resides in this congregation. So allow me to apologize in advance if my efforts at differentiation fail, or if I slide into unintended partisanship.

I would have said something today no matter what, because the nature of this campaign, and what this election exposed about the deep divisions not only in political perspective but existential reality, demands a faith response. So because the rhetoric was so severe, and the outcome such a surprise, welcome to some, unwelcome to others, perhaps just a word, that serves as an invitation to deeper and sustained conversation about our communal response. Future tense about a future that might indeed be tense.

We are reminded in Deuteronomy to “love God with heart and soul and mind.”

- To love God with *heart*, now, is to be pastoral, to be compassionate and caring for those responding so profoundly. To provide safe space. To listen: to children, to women, to racial minorities and religious minorities and sexual minorities. To take fear seriously. To comfort when comfort is needed, as long as it does not dismiss real concern and

anxiety. “It *will* be all right,” because God *is* God, but that word can ring hollow if it is not accompanied by other words and actions. These past months produced wounds, and one of our chief tasks is to bind up the wounded, to be God’s healing presence wherever healing is needed.

- To love God with *soul, now*, is to claim the values and vision of our faith. Third Church will mark its 190th anniversary next year. On our agenda for nearly two centuries has been the anti-slavery movement, anti-war efforts, women’s rights, civil rights, LGBTQ rights, educational reform, efforts at alleviating poverty, hunger and homelessness. Let us remember that history – it *is* our future. Those faith commitments remain, regardless of who resides in the White House or who presides at City Hall or current church policies.

We live our faith in season and out of season. Words like justice and righteousness and peace and love and, this year, reconciliation, always have a context and are never easy. Unity, a faith value as well as a civic one, must be authentic unity, with integrity. Unity is a far different thing than uniformity. Our forbear John Calvin insisted that we pray for and support the magistrate, any magistrate, and at the same time to make that magistrate accountable. That remains our calling.

- To love God with *mind, now*, to move beyond the easy headline and to think. Think deeply about the “*why’s*” of this election. Not to dismiss out of hand someone who voted in a way you didn’t, not to paint with a broad brush a whole category of people, not to impugn or malign. To move beyond the easy divisiveness of our typical Facebook feeds and to think more deeply about the root causes of what got us where we are, and to address them intelligently as well as compassionately. To be supportive when support is called for, to be vigilant and resistant when vigilance and resistance is called for.

Love God with *heart, soul and mind* – a complex, even paradoxical dance.

Our faith is forward looking, but it is often fueled by resources from the past. Tradition, not traditionalism.

Our Brief Statement of Faith, not so old, written in the 1980’s, reminds us of our calling:

“In a broken and fearful world/ the Spirit gives us courage/to pray without ceasing,/ to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,/to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,/ to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,/and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.”

And our Confession of 1967, written in the extraordinarily turbulent 1960's, turbulent in church and culture, sets this all in proper context:

“With an urgency born of this hope, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God.”

As I said, if I have veered into partisanship, I apologize. I would have planned to say something regardless of the outcome of this past Tuesday. But it was a particular outcome, in a particular context, and has impacted people I care deeply about, including the women in my life, including many of you, in particular ways.

In our tradition, a sanctuary is not intended to protect us from the world, nor does faith function as insulation or inoculation. Rather, a sanctuary is a place where we come – at times to be comforted, at times to be provoked – but always to be fortified to live in the world. We gather in order to be dispersed. That was true on November 7, November 8, November 9, November 13 – and every day to follow.

As I said, the sermon title was chosen weeks ago. The lectionary passages – from Isaiah and Luke – were chosen decades ago, by a committee of all things, and on this occasion, perhaps with an ever-present sense of the future, the committee got it right.

The crowd is asking Jesus about the future. He is stark, if not downright harsh. You see this temple. It will fall. Wars and other horrific things will happen, he says. Do not be terrified. You may even suffer for your faith, a prospect we in the U.S. rarely encounter. But even in the face of that, I will be with you, with my wisdom. I will be with you. Might we seek, count on, rely on, that presence, that wisdom now, when *our* own wisdom seems so thin.

And then Jesus tells us “by your endurance you will gain your souls.” Persist in hope, not to smooth over hardship or erase fear, but to contextualize them within the confines of God’s providence.

All of which echoes Isaiah's articulation of God’s vision – worth rehearsing today and always. New heavens. New earth. The former things shall not be remembered. “No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,/or the cry of distress.” Again, not empty piety or hollow comfort. No pious platitudes, but God’s steadfast promise, a promise to which we cling today. “Before they call I will answer,/while they are yet speaking I will hear.”

Reinhold Niebuhr was a pastor, theological ethicist, cultural commentator, most prominent in the U.S. coming out of World War II and throughout the Cold War. Niebuhr singularly

understood our capacity for doing good, and our almost paradoxical capacity for sin, both as people of faith and as citizens.

In the middle of the Cold War, Niebuhr wrote:

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.” (*The Irony of American History*)

Hope, faith, love, forgiveness. Timeless values and gifts of faith, to be applied now, in such a time as this, and in every future moment, in the name of God, who makes all things new. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Lynette K. Sparks

Gracious and merciful God,
We praise you for your unfailing love.
We remember your acts of salvation
on behalf of your people throughout history.
We cling to the assurance of what you have done before
as a foretaste of what you will do again.
We hold fast to your promises of life.
Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to care,
and the strength to work toward your beloved kingdom of grace and mercy.

For our illusions of a united nation are shattered.
We are a people more broken
than we want to admit.
We pray for all who have been elected
And all who will serve in the new administration.
We pray that every decision, every policy,
every action, every word spoken

will be one borne of justice and fairness, of humility, and concern
for the ones who society has forgotten, left behind, and oppressed.

Help all of us to do the hard, hard work
Of seeing that which we have ignored,
Of hearing the cries of silent desperation,
Of speaking out with prophetic voices on behalf
Of every injustice that does violence,
Of reaching out and touching even our enemies.

Protect and uphold those who live in fear.
Silence the rhetoric of hatred
That gives rise to more hatred.
Show us how to overcome every prejudice
that demeans your beloved children.

Give hope to our daughters and sons.
Grant a spirit of gentleness with ourselves
As we seek to heal and recover from our own woundedness.

And let us be repairers of the breach,
In our families, in our communities, around our nation, and in the world.
This day we give thanks for those who have sacrificed
to protect and serve our country,
and who carry scars both seen and unseen.
And even as we seek wholeness for our beloved homeland,
We also seek peace and wholeness in every country around the world.

For those who are experiencing profound grief from death and loss this day,
wipe their tears.
For those who are in their final days on this earth,
grant peace.
Heal the ones who are ill in body, mind, or spirit.
Restore this earth and its climate to health and life.

And in all these things,
Renew your church to be who you have called us to be—
a light to the world,
a balm to the wounded,
hope to the hopeless,
agents of justice,
and bearers of your kingdom.

We pray fervently for the needs we have voiced aloud,
for the silent pleas of our hearts,
and on behalf of those who cannot pray themselves.
We pray in the name of Jesus,
who makes us one...