

Election Sermon Series
What the Bible Says about...What's Next – John 17
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So...how was your week? When I was preparing this sermon series a few months back, I was operating under the assumption that, on this Sunday after the election, we wouldn't know who our president-elect would be. I knew this week would be fraught with anxiety, which is why I only half-chuckled at late night talk show host, Seth Myers, quoted in the New York Times, when he said, "Tomorrow is Election Day and 'Late Night' is officially endorsing Xanax 0.5 milligram, twice a day as needed." A few months back, I expected this week to contain a lot of contention and divisiveness and finger-pointing, which is which why I chose the passage I just read, in which Jesus prayed to God to help God's people be one.

That prayer is still a valid one, maybe now more than ever. But, as is often the case, I was wrong about this week. On this Sunday after the election, we do know who the president-elect is, and that has stirred up a lot of big emotions for people. For those who are pleased with the result, there is optimism and excitement about the future. For those who are distressed by the result, there is despair and hopelessness and, maybe the most pervasive feeling of all, fear.

So, I'd like to read a second scripture passage, one that speaks to my heart today. I give thanks to columnist Paul Prather for suggesting this text from Mark's gospel: On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"³⁹ And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"⁴¹ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

For many of us, this week has felt like a storm has swept into our lives and washed away many of the principles and values that are important to us. While some of us are delighted, others are disillusioned. While some of us look forward, others lament. While some of us see smooth sailing ahead, others anticipate a storm. And no matter who we voted for, we know that Jesus' prayer that we "all be one" is not attainable anytime soon. So...what's next?

I spent much of Wednesday scrolling through social media to gauge the general mood after the election. As you probably saw, reactions were just as varied as they were extreme. I found solace in several of the memes people posted and ended up screen-shotting about a dozen of them. When a church member reached out to me for a word of comfort, I just bombarded her phone with all these memes.

Interestingly, several of them came from "The Lord of the Rings" books. Like when Frodo asks Sam, "What are we holding onto?" and Sam responds, "That there is some good in the world, Mr. Frodo. And it's worth fighting for." Or when Gandalf the wizard says, "Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love." Leave it to art to speak a word more powerful than any political pundit or preacher.

In his article this past Thursday, titled "And now this word to America post-election: 'Peace! Be still,'" Herald-Leader religious columnist Paul Prather made a simple but profound

point: “God never panics.” I remember when I was kid, I was out to dinner with my mom and stepfather. We were at a Mr. Gatti’s pizza joint in Louisville when a real gully-washer of a storm rolled in. Thunder, lightning, flickering lights, the whole works. I started to have a panic attack, worried that we were in danger, when my stepfather looked me in the eyes and said, “Kory, it’s going to be OK. I’ll make you a deal. When I’m afraid, you can be afraid. But I’m not afraid yet.” Despite how we may feel about the election, God is not afraid.

“Peace! Be still.” “God doesn’t panic.” I love that message. That speaks to me. But today, that’s not enough. Because in my privilege as a straight white man whose rights aren’t being threatened and whose place in this country isn’t being jeopardized, I have the luxury of not panicking as the extent of my reaction. But I don’t believe God is calling me to only look out for myself these days. In fact, my faith in Jesus Christ, who was always caring about “the least of these,” compels me to ask, not just for myself but for others, “What’s next?”

In one of those memes I sent, a daughter asks her mother, “But what if your candidate loses?” and the mother responds, “Then we keep fighting for the rights of all people.” The daughter says, “And if they win?” and the mom says, “Oh, dear girl, it’s the same answer.” If we take a moment to be still, I believe we’ll hear that the call God is placing on our hearts in the face of a Trump presidency is the same call God would have placed on our hearts in the face of a Harris presidency. Keeping putting our faith into action.

One of my friends said to his fearful daughter, “Remember, our capacity and ability to love hasn’t changed. What’s changed is the environment in which we live that out.” A few weeks back, I preached a sermon series on the letter of James, one of the most practical books in the Bible that calls us to be doers of the word, to put our faith into action every day in service to others and to God’s kin-dom. What does that look like in the wake of this election?

We are called to have big ears, to listen to each other, to try and understand why the results make us feel the way we feel. We are called to be attuned to each other, to hold space for each other, to truly listen and pay attention, especially to those who are hurting. This is not at time for gloating or for demonizing. A lot of us are in pain right now, but that’s not an excuse to be cruel or lash out. Peace! Be still. Listen.

We are called to have broken hearts for those who are the most afraid, those who fear they may lose their rights, their homes, their dignity. Regardless of policy stances, statements have been made by the president-elect which, if carried through, could hurt the most vulnerable among us. Our hearts should break for those who are in pain and are fearful, regardless of the role politics has played, because God’s love knows no boundaries.

We are called to have pierced tongues, to refrain from language that casts brothers and sisters as “others,” that perpetuates the divide already present. I know many of us struggle with how people who know and love voted the way they did, and our initial reaction is one of anger. But staying mad is a soul-sucking place to be, so we are called to use our tongues to speak peace.

We are called to have rough knees, as we recommit ourselves to praying for our leaders, our country, and all those who seek to good of this nation. James promises us that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective, so, regardless of how we feel about the next four years, prayer is the most powerful tool at our disposal.

And we’re called to have dirty hands, hands calloused from working for God’s kin-dom here on earth. For me, this is the most poignant call that James offers us. Our capacity and ability to love hasn’t changed, and neither has the call to put that love into action for those who need to feel it the most. There may be plenty of reasons to be afraid right now, and it’s OK to sit with that for a moment, but that’s not where we are called to stay. Albert Camus wrote:

“In the midst of hate, I found there was, within me, an invincible love.
In the midst of tears, I found there was, within me, an invincible smile.
In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm.

I realized, through it all, that...

In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.
And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me,
within me, there's something stronger – something better, pushing right back.”

You may have voted the way you did because you wanted something better. Or you may feel now that the world is pushing against you, against those you love, against the things you value. Putting God's love into action means pushing back against the hate, against the tears, against the chaos. We can't just stay in despair or hopelessness. As people of faith, that's not who we are. This is the moment when the church can show the world who we really are.

Sorry for bombarding you with quotes today, but there are a lot of people in this world today saying more meaningful things than me, and I find hope in them. So, let me offer one more, a poem from African American writer Venice Williams, that truly spoke to me about what's next:

You are awakening to the same country you fell asleep to. The very same country. Pull yourself together. And, when you see me, do not ask me "What do we do now? How do we get through the next four years?" Some of my Ancestors dealt with at least 400 years of this under worse conditions. Continue to do the good work. Continue to build bridges not walls. Continue to lead with compassion. Continue the demanding work of liberation for all. Continue to dismantle broken systems, large and small. Continue to set the best example for the children. Continue to be a vessel of nourishing joy. Continue right where you are. Right where you live into your days. Do so in the name of The Creator who expects nothing less from each of us. And if you are not "continuing" ALL of the above, in community, partnership, collaboration? What is it you have been doing? What is it you are waiting for?"

Are you happy with the results of the election? Olay. Continuing doing God's work. Are you unhappy with the results of the election? Okay. Continuing doing God's work. God is not afraid. God hasn't panicked. God hasn't changed. And neither has our call, to be the good news in this broken world. The election is over. A candidate won and a candidate lost. It's time to get to work.