



"We Stand at a Crossroads"
Scripture – Mark 1:4-11
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 10, 2021

What just happened in our nation? Beginning a new year after one we desperately wanted to forget, we were celebrating the rebirth of hope. How quickly that was shattered on January 6. A few hours before Congress was to certify that Joe Biden had won the election, Donald Trump made a last ditch effort to pressure Vice President Pence into overturning the election results. When that effort failed, he left the White House to address a crowd of supporters gathered at the Ellipse. He told them to march to the Capitol to protest, and spelled out what he expected: "You will never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong."

His followers obeyed. We have watched and re-watched the footage of the mayhem as hundreds overran the undermanned police presence and broke into the Capitol. Members of Congress and their staffs were forced to flee and take cover for hours as these domestic terrorists roamed the House and Senate Chambers and broke into offices of our elected officials.

Many watched the television in disbelief. For them, it was an unimaginable scene. For others, it was the logical conclusion to the toxic brew the President had been concocting since his defeat at the polls.

What is apparent to all of us is the fragile nature of our democracy. Many of us live as if our way of life will keep bouncing along undeterred and cannot imagine the United States being listed alongside Turkey and Venezuela where political opponents are eliminated and checks on the power of the president disappear. It should be clear that if politicians are not held accountable for lying about elections and undermining the constitution, and if extremists – either from the right or the left – are permitted to disobey our laws, anarchy or dictatorship can capture the day.

As you know, Senator Tom Carper, is a member of our church family, and I applaud Senator Carper and his colleagues for their courage and determination to return to their chambers *that evening* to conduct the business they had set out to do. It was important for them to declare with their physical presence: "Rioters did not derail their work. They merely delayed it by a few hours."

If this were the end of the problem, we could all breathe easily and expect smooth sailing. However, we are well aware that deep divisions in our country persist. Too many politicians put self-interest before the nation's interests and too many people believe that truth is no more than their subjective choice. If a conspiracy theory – no matter how absurd – resonates with what someone *wants* to believe, many will cling to it as if it were valid.

We stand at a crossroads. We can continue to devolve by rewarding self-serving and destructive behavior, or we can pursue our better angels.

As people of faith, we are fortunate to live in a land in which the principles of our nation – justice, freedom, and concern for the common good – are founded on Biblical principles. Faithfully following the way of Jesus is not in opposition with being loyal to our country. Living as Jesus taught can both expand God's kingdom and strengthen our nation.

In the liturgical year, the Sunday following Epiphany – January 6 – is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. On this day each year, the gospel lectionary reading focuses on Jesus stepping into the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin John the Baptist. Scripture says that John proclaimed a baptism of repentance. That is, he was challenging people to cleanse their souls by changing the trajectory of their lives. John provoked a turning point for those who would heed him. It was a time to wash away the dishonesty, to rinse the malice from their minds, and to scrub the selfishness from their thoughts.

In addition to insisting that the people choose the more rewarding path of living in harmony with the ways of God, he announced that they were on the cusp of something monumental. Someone who will alter the course of the world was about to emerge. John said, "I baptize you with water, but he will infuse you with the Holy Spirit."

People began wading up to John to be baptized because they were ready to flourish. Then, apparently with no warning, John is face to face with Jesus. John baptizes him and the Gospel of Mark says that as Jesus "was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and (God's) Spirit descending like a dove on him. And Jesus heard a voice declare, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

Soon thereafter, Jesus began to attract followers and to teach them in both word and action to give their ultimate allegiance to God. We demonstrate such devotion by living according to the ways of God: love and justice, truth and respect, healing and peace.

We are grateful that the early church adopted the practice of baptism. It reminds us of our need to be cleansed from sin, to give our ultimate allegiance to God, and to live as Jesus lived and to love as Jesus loved. Surely our nation needs a cleansing of its soul. The venom that has been spewed, the lies that have been told, the character assassinations that have occurred have hammered the wedge deeper and deeper, dividing our nation into two.

Three years before the start of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was selected by his party to run for United States Senator from the state of Illinois. The overriding issue in the nation was what to do about slavery. Lincoln gave a speech in which he quoted from the third chapter of the Gospel of Mark. You know those famous words: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Tragically, those words were all too prophetic.

In 2021, if we fail to remember the wisdom of those words, our house could surely crumble. It is frightening that some are blind to the danger because their focus has narrowed to personal benefit alone.

It is clear that some members of Congress believe they can whip up a crowd for their advantage – claiming there was "fraud in the balloting, but never making a specific charge of wrongdoing"¹ – and then claim no responsibility when a mob takes them at their word.

While it is tragic that five people died and many were injured, we are fortunate that the insurrection did not become a bloodbath. While some of the rioters screamed they were going to kill certain politicians, they seemed to have no more of a plan than to break into the capitol and take selfies. Will the next set of domestic terrorists go further?

Can extremists who believe in an alternative reality – that President Trump lost because of widespread voter fraud – be reeled back into the real world?

If we are to fend off disaster and generate positive and lasting progress, there must be a conversion similar to what John the Baptist preached: a change in people's hearts, minds, and souls. People's hearts need to become more compassionate; people's minds need to be open to the wisdom of Scripture; and people need a transformation in their souls to recognize that all people are children of God and deserve dignity and respect.

Each of us can be one of many who recommit ourselves to embracing

- 1) the ideals of the prophets "to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;"
- 2) the ideals upon which our nation was founded: liberty and justice for all people; and
- 3) the ideals of Jesus to love your neighbor as yourself.

The way forward will be extremely difficult. We will face determined opposition. The deadly sins that have haunted our world from time immemorial will constantly rise to challenge God's law.

May you and I never forget that we are engaged in a battle for the soul of our nation. Will truth overcome lies, and facts prevail over fiction? Will greed be our guiding light, or will we seek a spirit of generosity? Will selfishness be our goal or will we put our energy into enhancing the common good?

While the day is dark and the events of the past few days are grim, as a follower of Jesus you and I cannot relinquish hope in a better day. We are called to partner with God in bringing light out of darkness, order out of mayhem, sanity out of madness, and civility out of contempt.

The light of hope begins to glimmer, when despite the surrounding darkness, people of goodwill focus their efforts on loving and serving and healing, and never relinquish their expectation of seeing a new dawn.

Following the way of Jesus and the prophets holds promise for repairing our nation and laying the foundation for a promising future. May each of us rededicate ourselves to God's blueprint for a better world.

NOTES

1. Catie Edmondson, "Hawley Faces Blowback for Role in Challenging Election Results," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2021.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Mighty God, we pause to pray for our nation caught in the anguish of dissension and turmoil. Watching an insurrection unfold at the urging of the President, security lines breached, legislators fleeing for safety, and our Capitol vandalized by malcontent rioters was shocking and frightening to behold. We hope that this is the apex of the assault on the fundamentals of our democracy, but fear that more attempts to destroy our country from within will ensue.

We do not pray for unanimity of thought; we do not pray for disagreements to be silenced or contrary views muzzled. However, we do pray that the citizens of our country will never forget our personal responsibility to support the principles of our Constitution and to extend basic decency to our fellow citizens.

God of Justice, we are deeply grateful for the law enforcement officers who courageously kept our leaders safe from the mob that stormed the Capitol. Despite the danger and despite bodily injury, officers did their best to deter the rioters. With deep sadness, we mourn the death of Officer Brian Sicknick, a man whose lifelong ambition was to serve and protect, but now has perished from injuries he suffered while attempting to keep the mob at bay. We pray for his family and friends who mourn their loss and now must walk such a sad and painful road. May those responsible for his death be brought to justice for their violent actions. May we remember and honor those who die in the line of duty.

Loving God, we are called to extend kindness to others, but not to allow evil to triumph. We pray that all will see kindness as strength and violence as weakness. Jesus and the prophets minced no words when it comes to which side of the line we are to stand. We are to plant our feet and our resolve firmly against selfishness and deception, greed and violence. And we are to promote justice and mercy, truth and peace.

Healing God, the tapestry of our nation is frayed and badly in need of mending. Remind each of us citizens of our duty to promote the general welfare, to secure the blessings of liberty for all, and to see to it that justice and compassion reign from sea to shining sea.

We have no illusion that the coming years will be without contention. There will surely be times of difficulty and temptations to despair. Grant us the strength and the will to build a better nation so that our children and grandchildren will reap the benefits of our labor. And now we join our voices as one and earnestly pray the prayer Jesus taught us, saying

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.