



"Democracy Threatened"
Scripture – Psalm 23
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 17, 2021

When preparing to preach, a pastor usually studies a passage of Scripture and then reflects on how that passage connects with our lives today. Other times when epic events dominate the landscape the process is reversed. On these occasions, the pastor wrestles with what is monopolizing most people's thoughts and does his/her best to show some of the ways that our faith helps us to make sense of or to cope with what is happening. This second approach is the path I have chosen today. How does our faith help us handle the events of January 6th?

Pastor Jessica Tate lives in Washington near the Capitol building. Each weekday morning, she walks her two-year-old son to his child care center and each day they pause to look at the Capitol. It is so much a part of their ritual, that if she forgets, her young son will remind her to stop and stare. But last Wednesday afternoon when it was time to retrieve her son, she and her husband drove to the center. They had been watching the violent assault on our citadel of democracy, and realized it was far too dangerous to walk. They picked up their son, and on the way home in the car, he asked to see the Capitol building.

She found herself responding with things like, "There are people there who are really angry. They are being mean. They are breaking things. They aren't supposed to do that. It's not safe. Some of them believe that because of their white skin they are better than other people. And we know that's not true. People with all colors of skin are beautiful and should be treated with respect."

"After she finished what felt like an awkward response, her son replied, 'They are bad people.' And, as she always does in response to good/bad language, she said, 'No people are bad people. They are being mean and making bad choices.' But once those words tumbled out of her mouth, she questioned herself. 'Is that really true?' With the pictures from the day flooding her mind, she reflected on that notion: Are there no bad people? She constantly teaches her son that no one is inherently bad. She professes her faith that all people are created in the image of God and no one is beyond God's redeeming power."¹ I, too, believe that; but lately I find myself wavering.

When we commit ourselves to following Jesus, we declare that there is no part of our lives untouched by him. We declare that his teachings not only instruct us how to treat our fellow church members on Sunday, but also how we behave toward our family on Monday, and the way we interact with our co-workers on Tuesday, and how we relate to the grocery clerk on Wednesday, and how we treat our friends on Thursday, and how we look upon strangers on Friday, and how we serve our community on Saturday.

One of the grave mistakes that people of faith have made throughout the centuries is to imagine that God is only interested in our spiritual lives. Time and again people of faith have deluded themselves by imagining that faith is focused only on what we believe and how we worship, and not so much about how we treat others and where we place our allegiances. However, God does not divide the world between sacred and secular or religious and political. God is present everywhere and expects us to follow the way of Christ in all that we say and in all that we do. Numerous times God expressed divine anger through the prophets when people lived as if their devotion to God only pertained to one roped off compartment of their lives and was not reflected in the totality of their existence.

Aren't we fortunate to live in a nation that is founded on Biblical principles, so that following the way of Jesus not only expands God's realm, but also bolsters our nation? The importance of seeking the truth and speaking the truth has been writ large after watching how lies fueled domestic terrorists to assault our Capitol and threaten to kill Vice President Pence and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. The words we speak and the way we act have repercussions for good or ill. Undermine the truth, replace fact with fiction, and democracy can morph into totalitarianism.

I have been rattled by the many video clips showing the fury of the insurrectionists and the ease with which they overran the security and broke into the Capitol. I fear the rise of white supremacist groups. I fear the disinformation campaigns that some politicians use to further their personal ambitions. I fear the massive number of people who lack critical thinking skills and lap up lies on the internet. As one commentator wrote recently: "The violent Know-Nothingism, which has always coursed through American history, is once again a torrent, threatening more violence in the days ahead."²

Some of you have told me that you too have been unsettled by the events of January 6th. Can our faith help us cope with social upheaval that threatens our democracy in the midst of a pandemic?

There are no easy answers. There are no guarantees that life will regain its beauty in the near future. However, I believe our faith can help us cope with catastrophes.

The 23rd Psalm has been providing comfort to people in distress for 3,000 years. Even today, when most have not lived in a rural setting and have never seen a shepherd, the imagery communicates a powerful message. God loves and cares for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep. This simple, yet profound psalm, reveals the essence of God. God is loving and God is dependable. God is trustworthy and is with us come what may.

The 23rd Psalm does not promote the fantasy that you can skate through life unscathed. It acknowledges the reality that no one escapes anguish. We **will** experience dark times. The psalm does not say "**if**," but rather, "**even though** I walk through the darkest valley."

What makes the 23rd Psalm so vital to our wellbeing is not that it promises an easy path, but that it assures us that we do not face our trials alone. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley," or, as the New Jerusalem Bible translates this verse: "even when I walk through a ravine as dark as death, *God is with me.*" And that makes a difference. It can make the difference between giving up and hanging on a bit longer. It can make the difference between dissolving into despair and clenching your teeth, dead set on moving forward. It can be the difference between being overwhelmed by our fears and procuring enough courage to combat them.

Over the course of my life I have witnessed people survive the death of their only child and other awful tragedies because they trusted these words, that, with God at their side, they could survive.

Make no mistake, our democracy is in peril. For much of our lives we have taken our democracy for granted. Recent events have slapped us awake, reminding us that democracy is always vulnerable to demagogues who seek to control the news. We have watched people breaching our Capitol who are waving Confederate flags, wearing Nazi insignias, and touting the crazy conspiracy theories of QAnon.

Can we claw our way back to supporting true democratic principles?

Can we support the laws of our land, and when we have grievances with them, follow the legal path for changing them?

Can we remember that voting is the method for electing officials and changing laws, and therefore sometimes we will win and sometimes we will lose?

Can we remember that if we do not support the democratic process, we will become battling Neanderthals who resort to might makes right?

As people of faith, we are commanded to resist evil and injustice. Jesus called on his followers to become healers, and we are charged with the work of curing our toxic political environment.

Last Wednesday, after driving their son home from his child care center, his parents did what most parents would do. They diverted his attention from the events at the Capitol. At bedtime, they often read a story and their young son asked his mother to tell him the story they had been focusing on recently – the birth of Jesus. “She started to tell the story of the census and how Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem and how there was no room for them but then, her two-year-old interrupted and said, ‘Mama, I want you to say the part about the news.’ At that point she realized her jaw had been clinched all day. That her head was hurting from the ceaseless sirens and the afternoon punctuated with loud booms. Her eyes filled with tears as she told him that an angel appeared to the shepherds. And they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. Today, in the city of David, a savior is born, Christ the Lord.’”³

For a young child, these are words of comfort and assurance. It is the same for us, but also something more. It is a call to courage. Knowing that God is with us to strengthen us, we need to stand up for truth. We need to sound the trumpet of liberty and justice for all. And we need to do all we can to heal the wounds of our nation, so that our country can regain its position as a beacon of light.

NOTES

1. Shannon J. Kershner, “Never Too Late,” January 10, 2021.
2. David Brooks, “Trump Ignites a War within the Church,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 2021.
3. Shannon J. Kershner, “Never Too Late,” January 10, 2021.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Shepherding God —
our guardian, our guide,
our companion in dark valleys,
our host at the table of grace —
You are faithful to us.

You prepare a place for us and lavish us with love.
And now — especially now — we are eager to rest in your presence.
Gather us in this day and surround us with your mercy,
that we might find comfort in your embrace.

As this pandemic rages on,
as we grapple with distrust and division,
and the rancor that plague our land,
as we weather crisis after crisis,
we ache for greener pastures.
We long to sit beside still waters
and drink in the peace of pastoral places.
So many of us are weary;
so many of us are anxious;
so many of us are weighed down by grief.
But you, O God, know the concerns of our hearts.
You know the ways in which we need your tender care.
Attend to them, we pray.
Surround us with your love,
and shepherd us toward healing and wholeness.

With you beside us, we have nothing to fear.
You are our guardian and guide,
our refuge and strength –
a very-present help in trouble.
May your presence embolden us, O God.
Help us not to cower away from the shadowed valleys of this world,
but to traverse them with courage that is born of faith.
When we see suffering, stir our hearts toward compassion.
When we see injustice, make us thirst for righteousness.
When we become complacent with the way things are,
prod us toward right paths that lead to peace.
Shepherd us through these valleys, O God,
that we may bring comfort and hope to others.

We pray rejoicing in your abiding presence,
which has sustained us through all generations.
So we join our voices with the faithful of every time and place
to offer the prayer Christ taught us:

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.