



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

IN GOD WE TRUST?

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Acting Senior Minister

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Text: Psalm 78:1–7

Because we record this service on Thursday morning [November 4], the outcome of the election is still unknown and will be likely contested. Hopefully, by the time you hear this, you know more than we know today. But in any case, what this election has shown is how divided our country is. For people of faith, no matter who won the fraction of votes needed to be declared our president, we know how much work we have yet to do to create a country where all people feel respected and protected.

During the Civil War, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase instructed the treasury to start inscribing “In God We Trust” on our coins. His order said, “No nation can be strong except in the strength of God.” Chase was also trying to send a message to the South about whose side he thought God was on.

In 1955, President Eisenhower signed a law placing “In God We Trust” on our paper money as well. The Florida congressman who introduced the bill, citing the restrictions against religious practice in the Soviet Union, said that our national faith is a foundation of our freedom. It was also during the 1950s that “In God We Trust” become our official national motto, and “under God” was inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance. Eisenhower described our nation’s religious faith as “spiritual weapons which forever will be our country’s most powerful resource in peace and war.” Our religious faith is our spiritual weapon in peace and war?

In 2020, very few would make that claim. Participation in religious activities is declining. Belief in a traditional understanding of God would not be embraced by many, I think. We do not expect God to intervene and control history. We do not expect God to take sides. And yet, while I do not appreciate the militaristic language of Eisenhower’s quote, our faith in something greater than ourselves—and by any name, whether Yahweh, Allah, Great Spirit or Higher Power—our faith can be our most powerful resource. For our allegiance is to God, the divine source of sustaining love and life in the universe, not a government, not a political power or system.

Our scripture this morning comes from a psalm that is a 72-verse account of Israel’s history. It’s a long, dark psalm, and it’s not pretty. It tells tales of the underbelly of the Israelites, our spiritual ancestors. The psalm chronicles their complaints, their disillusionment, their injustices, their rebellion against their covenant with God. These stories are graphic and hard to hear, but the psalmist encourages parents to tell these stories to their children so that they will learn from them. So much of our sacred story is just that: wisdom shared from generation to generation to transform our lives. It’s wisdom about humanity that reveals truths about the human condition. We study history to learn from the past.

What history has shown us is that people aren’t much more different today than they were hundreds of years ago. It seems we are slow to make real change. I read once that historians look at graffiti from the past and find that it is almost the same as modern graffiti. Ancient dramas and plays have the same humor as modern comedies. Studying history reveals that people are fundamentally like each other, regardless of where and when they live, and that many differences arise because cultures adapted to different environments. This makes it easy to empathize with other cultures and can help people work with people

who come from different places. But I have been wondering why is it easier to have empathy for someone from another country but not someone from a differing political party.

I just started reading the book *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson. I highly recommend it. Like our psalm, it is a story of the underbelly of America. It is a story that needs to be told if we are to heal our nation.

Wilkerson describes the caste system as an artificial hierarchy that helps determine standing and respect, assumptions of beauty and competence, and even who gets benefit of the doubt and access to resources. She makes a strong case for a caste system she perceives exists here in the United States.

Caste, she says, “is the term that is more precise [than race]; it is more comprehensive, and it gets at the underlying infrastructure that often we cannot see, but that is there undergirding much of the inequality and injustices and disparities that we live with in this country.” I encourage you to pick up this book and think about where you fit in the American caste system. It will shed some light on the current divisions within our country.

As we struggle with the results of this election, whatever they may be, our eyes have been opened this year to many things: our self-centered and slow response to the pandemic, the ways we have dehumanized others to build this country, our continued misuse and abuse of natural resources.

You may be feeling overwhelmed. I know I do. Our country’s problems can seem terrifying and feel unsolvable. How do our politicians begin to reach across the aisle? How do we build bridges across the political chasms in our own families? How do we begin to reconcile our nation’s story of origin with the truth of the massacres and lynching and the continued white culture’s domination?

As the Psalmist says, we have much to learn from the stories of our past—in learning our history and vowing never to repeat it. Hard lessons learned after World War I led world leaders after World War II to work toward reconciliation and international aid to starving people overseas. Wars and conflicts, we know, become much more likely when essential supplies and resources become scarce. Working for peace by eradicating hunger and poverty and dismantling systemic racism is not a political issue. For people of faith, it is a spiritual one—for Democrats and Republicans alike. This is one place where we would do well to take our scriptures literally: in our compassion for the poor and in our work for justice, reconciliation and reparations.

My friends, putting our trust in God isn’t about being overly sentimental or naively doing nothing. It is about making the oftentimes difficult decision to let “God made flesh” look us directly in the eyes and help us release whatever fears we have and do the right thing. There is nothing sentimental or easy about the decision to let our hatred be transformed into love, our bitterness be transformed into healing, our fear be transformed into peace and generosity. It is, indeed, the work of a lifetime.

Yes, we are so divided in our country. Yes, we have problems, but we have faced harder times as a people. And when we begin to feel despair and question God for not intervening and doing things the way we would want, let us remember that God does not work that way. God works through us when our hearts are open to change. Let us commit to a humble trust that the future ultimately belongs to a loving God. Let us make a commitment to stay calm and connected and concentrated on what God wants to bring to life. In these troubled times, the world needs people of humble faith who model the loving way of God.

I close by sharing a prayer by Rev. Elizabeth Kaeton:

This new day has dawned with this country more divided than it has been since the days of the Civil War. Half of your people are rejoicing while the other half are stunned and sore afraid. What divided us then continues to tear at the seams of the fabric of this nation. We are a United Divided States.

Help us to remember that the experiment called democracy is not over; it is still being tested. After 240 years of existence, the final results are not yet in. We still have work to do. It stretches out before us, across wheat fields and deserts, from the mountains to the prairies, from sea to shining sea.

In the midst of our sense of victory, help us to remember your call to us to love one another as you love us.

In the midst of our sense of defeat, help us to remember that you still reign; you alone are worshiped; you alone are God.

Help us to put aside our own feelings—jumbled and confused as they may be at the moment—in service of others, our families and friends and neighbors—here and around the world.

Help us remember your high calling to us to be agents of forgiveness and reconciliation, love and peace, healing and hope in a world made dark by fear and hatred and brokenness.

Help us to rebuild this nation by seeking out your image in the face of others, finding the best in us to serve those who are the least, the lost and the lonely.

Help us to remember the words of one of your servants of old who reminded us that ‘perfect love casts out fear’. Help us perfect our love.

We are your people. You know us by many names. You are our God. We know you by many names.

May we find strength in our diversity and seek the courage to live into what is written on every piece of currency in this nation: In God we Trust. In God. We Trust.

For only in [God] can we live in safety. Only in [God] will we find justice. Only in [God] will we know the peace that passes all human understanding.¹

May it be so. Amen.

¹Rev. Elizabeth Kaeton, “A Prayer to Heal a Divided Nation,” *Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice*, <https://rcrc.org/a-prayer-to-heal-a-divided-nation/> (accessed November 12, 2020).