

Princes and Presidents

Text: Psalm 146; I Kings 3: 3-16; Romans 12: 9-21

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I'm worried. I've never started a sermon with those two words before, but it's true. I'm deeply worried. I'm worried about this election season, and about the erosion of civility in our democracy, and about the truthfulness of our political system, and about the world's perception of the chaos that has come to dominate the race for the most powerful job in the world.

I'm worried for my grandchildren, and I don't even have any yet! I'm worried about peace on the planet and the essential role that America in her best moments plays in providing both ballast and balance. I'm worried about the smoldering embers of isms and injustice in the land that I love. And my worry kicks in every single time I turn on the news to discover that the spiral we are in does not slow or stop.

My mentor in ministry, dear man, Tuck Gilbert, once told of visiting his stepmother toward the end of her life. She was in a hospital in Oberlin, Ohio at the time and on the verge of death, or what they thought was death, and Tuck's sister asked her, "Jo, is there anything you are feeling worried about?" She reflected for a moment and then replied, "I'm worried about the world."¹

And that's just it. Jo was worried about the world. I am too. And if I collate both the text and subtext of a good many conversations these days, so are many of you. Please: I don't want us to wallow in this or get us stuck mind you, but I do want us to be honest; because unless we can acknowledge what is so, we stand less than little chance of breaking free.

[Pause with me. Take a breath. I know some of you might be getting a bit uneasy, wondering what I am up to and what's really on my mind. Even more, about what I might have to say. But listen if you can with this assurance. You know me. I value the trust you place in me. This is not a partisan shot from the pulpit, not my style, or an argument meant to question any of the loyalties that are important to you.]

Still, it has to be said that things are pretty severely broken and off-course in this system of ours and this election season is confirming that in spades. The slippery slopes of prolonged negativity have revealed the lesser angels of fallible people behaving badly to the extent that our better angels have been eclipsed.

But at such a time as this our faith asks different and more of us. And the stories of faith that undergird us - from Genesis to Revelation - offer some places to stop and wonder; even some places to gain a bit of perspective and strength. They have

the capacity to lift us to the “meta-level” if you will; a view not from the sidewalks or the streets, but from an altitude that might enhance our ability to see larger and farther. Here are four of those glimpses for each of us to have and to hold this troubling season.

First. Remember that our days are not the only days, and our time is not the first time in human history, when political confusion and distortion has dominated. And, by the way, lots of times, it was plenty worse. Deadly worse. The stories of civilization, sometimes quite uncivilized, reveal some pretty outrageous and downright scary chapters and schemes. Maybe, in fact, at times like these we need to immerse ourselves in reading Jeremiah and Isaiah, prophets of hope in the midst of what seemed hopeless, was hopeless, in their day; and yet each with a vision to a better tomorrow.

Second. Mix in with that a phrase that’s tucked away in Psalm 146, which we heard moments ago. “Do not put your trust in Princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.” Let’s swap in the word President here. “And while surely we ought to want a President we feel we can trust, the Psalmist is saying something more here, something deeper. He’s saying something more on the order of ‘Do not put ultimate trust in any earthly ruler. Ultimate trust belongs to God.’”² Anything less will disappoint, and sometimes, badly so.

Third. Carry the prayer of Solomon with you from today all the way to the voting booth. Solomon followed his father, the great and incomparable King David to the throne. And he prayed that grieving and poignant day, as David went the way of all the earth, not for power or might, not for wealth or dominion, but in a spirit of true humility he prayed for wisdom, understanding and discernment. “O Lord my God, I am but a little child; I know not what to do. Give me an understanding mind that I might discern between good and evil.” Princes and Presidents - no less every single one of us - ought well pray for that every day.

And then fourth. Shift the language from the locker room echoes of this bazaar campaign to values that are higher. Values of the better way. Values of faith. Molly Phinney Baskette, Senior Pastor of the First Church in Berkley out in California that burned down last week, suggests that we make twitter worthy the campaign slogans of God.³ “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil (not who is evil), hold fast to what is good. Rejoice in hope. Persevere in prayer. Extend hospitality. In so far as you are able, work for peace. Live in harmony with one another. Do not claim to be wiser than you are.”

So maybe these four Biblical clues can at least be an antidote for each of us – whatever our party or candidate or perspective.

I'm still worried. But I feel better now. Preaching to myself like this does that sometimes! Talking about it releases the paralysis of being overcome by worry, and oddly it is empowering. It's like Bill Coffin once said, "Our faith should quell our worries and fears, but never *never* our courage."⁴

I need every to remind myself that I have a voice and a vote, a heart and a mind, a love for life and liberty and people. So do you. And though these days are steep, the love of God and the goodness of life outpace them every time I stop to think.

May it be so. Amen.

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¹ Chandler W. Gilbert. *When I Open My Window*. Grenfell Reading Center, 2001, p. 123.

² Anthony Robinson. "Of Princes and Presidents" in the *Still Speaking Writer's Devotional* (an online publication), June 5, 2016.

³ Molly Phinney Baskette. "God's Campaign Slogans" in the *Still Speaking Writer's Devotional* (an online publication), May 31, 2016.

⁴ William Sloane Coffin. *Creedo*. Westminster – John Knox Press, 2004, p. 71