

Make Me a Refugee in a Kingdom Governed by Love

Psalm 46
November 20, 2016

Sometimes the church calendar intersects with current events in a way that seems utterly uncanny. What curious and holy timing to be celebrating Christ the King Sunday—or, if you prefer, Reign of Christ Sunday—at a time when our nation has just elected a new and highly controversial President.

Those of us who have grown up in a country founded on rebellion against a king, those of us who have had a long, steady diet of democracy and “people power” tend not to relate very well to monarchy talk or royal imagery.

A number of years ago, Shane Claiborne wrote a book meant to help American Christians transcend the limits of “lord” and “king” language.

Shane is no stuffy academic on a linguistic mission. Instead, he’s a social justice-minded evangelical.

Shane dreams about and works for a life in these United States where, at every level of society—from the highly personal to neighborhoods to regions to our nation as a whole—our thoughts, conversations, decisions, and efforts are centered on the values and priorities so evident in Jesus of Nazareth.

What would life look like, Shane asks, if you and I and everyone else elected to place Jesus at the helm of our individual and collective lives. To explore this question, he wrote “Jesus for President.”

Think about how different Kennedy was from Nixon, Reagan was from Carter, Bush was from Obama. Think about the values that framed each man’s leadership. The initiatives and efforts he was most passionate about. The stances he took and the alliances he forged.

Then allow yourself to imagine what having Jesus in the Oval Office might look and feel like.

Who and what would be important to this President? What executive orders might he sign? Where would he go? With whom would he speak? What kind of vision would he hold out to us as a diverse people? What would a Jesus presidency be like?

Almost immediately after election results came in on November 8th, some took to the streets and took to their tweets with this resounding rejection: “Not My President.”

Within hours, online petitions were launched to implore the Electoral College to vote Hillary in and millions of citizens have signed on.

Those with means are looking into moving to another country. (I know three people who are

seriously doing this.)

Since the election, a wide variety of strategies have surfaced from those who are now broadly referring to themselves as “The Resistance.”

Not everyone has gnashed their teeth, though. Some are relieved Hillary didn’t win. Among those who have rejoiced in Trump’s win, the press is reporting that a concerning number of Americans have taken this victory to mean that xenophobia, racism, and misogyny too have won.

Wednesday morning, barely a week after our national election, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that more than 400 incidents of hateful harassment, intimidation, and even violence had occurred. This morning that number is over 700.

Heaven only knows how many micro aggressions have taken place, how many hurtful or hateful things have been said and done that have left people of color, differently abled, LGBTQ folk, Muslims, women, and others feeling not only vulnerable but at risk in the work place, on the street, even at home.

To this growing reality and its very dangerous trajectory, those who follow Jesus Way of Love are being called to respond. Not with “Not My President,” but with something more vital: “Not My America.”

Unlike the election, this, this trend is something you and I can do something about. And must. We can and must bring our prayers and our influence to bear to ensure that we remain a civil, respectful society.

Who and what has ultimate power over us? This was the question of Jesus’ day and it’s the question American Christians must now ask ourselves.

Who and what will govern us, as individuals and as a society? Who and what will govern us at the deepest levels of our souls, our relationships and interactions, and to the furthest reaches of our great nation?

The people have voted. Donald J. Trump cannot be un-elected. Unless the Electoral College should decide otherwise on December 19th, something that seems incredibly unlikely, Trump will hold the highest office in the land for the next four years.

And yet our new President does not need to hold the highest place in our lives. Stated more strongly: for people of faith, Donald Trump does not deserve to hold the highest place in our lives. No President does, no matter who he or she may be.

Perhaps what I am about to say is a function of age or simply a consequence of this incredibly trying election: I no longer believe that any elected official deserves a pedestal, a place in my life in which he or she is empowered to say directly or indirectly “I will save you. I will protect you. Stick with me and all will be well.”

Human nature and the nature of politics prevent any leader, no matter how gifted, from

guaranteeing my well-being or assuring that the best interests of all God's children will be protected and advanced under his or her leadership.

Our psalmist today rightly understood the limits of earthly power. "The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter. God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble."

What does that help look like in practical terms? The psalmist tells us: "He (our refuge and strength) makes wars to cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear."

This is so much more than a suppression of violence. It's what happens when Love Wins.

This is what happens when we heed the words of our psalm: Be still and know that I am God.

When we feel God—our strength, our refuge—with us any hour of the day or night, we experience the peace that has forever been trying to break into our lives and govern our thoughts and actions.

This peace first came into our lives gently, wrapped in swaddling clothes. This peace had no imperial entourage, just a ragtag group of friends. This peace rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. This peace refused from the cross to hurl insults but instead extended profound forgiveness. This peace was more powerful than death, and made its post-resurrection priority gifting failed, fearful friends with the safe refuge of peace.

Jesus did and said many scandalous things in his life. He refused to cater to or cave in to earthly power—religious or political. Jesus befriended all the wrong people. He made the least important people in the world his highest priority. He surrounded himself with men who lacked self discipline or sense. He refused to gather up an army or denounce his efforts to save his hide.

All of these are at odds with the way we humans go about things.

To my mind, perhaps the most scandalous of all the contrary things Jesus did or said was Jesus' firm insistence that his disciples would go on to do even greater things than he could ever accomplish.

What kind of King says this? What kind of President?

The power of love alive in him, Jesus insisted, would grow even more powerful in us. And thus would govern our choices, our priorities, our actions.

The morning after the election, a friend posted this comment on his Facebook page: the outcome was more than enough proof that God simply does not exist.

No, I quietly countered. God does not determine the outcomes of elections. God does not exert power over, only power with.

In all things God has given power to us, and has freed us to choose. Sometimes we make choices based on a love of power. And other times, we choose what we choose based on the power of love.

Love of power. Power of love. You know what side of this equation God is on.

What will the days, weeks, months, and years ahead hold? If the election season just past and each day's unfolding reports are any indication, all bets are off, all predictions are folly.

What we are left with is this: no matter who is in the White House, no matter who labors on Capitol Hill, Christ has placed his power in us.

Which is love.

It falls to us to elect how and if and when we will use this power. It falls to us to decide whether we will let it rise up and inform our thoughts, words, and actions as earthly power is transferred from the hands of one American President to that of another.

Since the election, I have taken extra time each morning to commune with the God who is my strength and refuge, and yours.

With an eye to the headlines and a heart broken open by the unloving choices ordinary Americans are making, my prayer is this:

O God, you who are my strength and my refuge, make me your refugee. A refugee in a realm governed not by love of power but by the power of love. Empower me by that love to do and say and be whatever advances that love, giving witness and honor to the One whose rule of love has no beginning and no end.

I trust this power. I take refuge in it. And I trust it to speak to the hearts of countless others who—no matter who is in office—yearn to be governed by love.

Amen.

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Community Spirit UCC
Montrose, CO