

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
Epiphany 1 2021

I would assume, I could be wrong, but I would assume that the political divide of St. John in the Wilderness is fairly even. I would assume that we are a rather purple congregation, in other words, probably divided about evenly between conservative minded folks and more liberal minded folks. My initial question for you this morning is, is that a good thing or a bad thing? When it comes to being the church, is it a good thing or a bad thing that we are a purple congregation? Think about that for a second.

What I would suggest is that, in fact, it's probably a good thing. I would suggest that probably it reflects more of the reality of the Kingdom of God that we have a diverse group of people coming together to be united as a church. Because the first job of the church, the first task of the church, is to make the world, the world. What I mean by that is that the first task of the church is to present a reality of living, a reality of organizing our lives that is distinct from the reality that we see in the world around us. When people look at the church, they should see, for example, people who have deep disagreements politically coming together for something far more important, to gather around One who is far more important, and to express loyalty to that One Jesus of Nazareth. The first job of the Church is to make the world, the world.

As the Church, we are ones who are constantly expressing and longing for and sharing this reality that Jesus brought into existence that we call the Kingdom of God. Take our Gospel reading as an example, John the Baptist in the wilderness. What in the world was he doing in the wilderness but preparing the way for the coming of Christ? But looking for, searching for, proclaiming God's way of living. John goes to the wilderness and invites people into this reality, saying look with me for the coming of the Messiah! Look for one who can actually save us, one who will bring a whole different reality into existence and will teach us what God has intended for us all along. And that in so many ways is the church's task. As we seek to be a distinct body of believers, a distinct way of organizing our lives, we are constantly longing for the Kingdom of God. We're searching for the Kingdom of God. We're looking for it. Do we have eyes to see it? Do we have ears to hear it? We're praying things like, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done," and in fact, the life that we share together gathered around word and sacrament is an experience and a foretaste of God's Kingdom. That is our reality, and we're always discerning it, always looking for it, always searching for the Kingdom of God, inviting it in and sharing it with the world around us.

Central to that task is looking at the world we live in that we are very much a part of and yet that is not our ultimate reality, the world that shapes us in many ways, and yet is not to define us entirely, looking at

that world and asking questions about it as to whether or not it's helping to bring in this way the wholeness that Jesus was all about. We do this in our relationships. We're constantly saying, God where are in this? God, what is your desire for me in this relationship, in this friendship, in this marriage, with this organization, as a parent, as a child, we're constantly asking God to be involved and to show us the way that God would have us to be in relationship. And we're doing that also with our culture, with our society. We're doing that with our nation, as well, constantly looking and wondering and asking hard questions as we discern whether or not the culture and the society around us has anything to do with the kingdom of God, whether it's shaping us in a dominant way or God's reality is our reality.

These are the questions that I've been asking myself since Wednesday of this past week, wondering what could God be up to here as people stormed the US Capitol building, bringing guns and bombs and occupying it to stop the democratic process. I've been asking God what is there for us here? How do we understand these activities in light of what you've given us in a loving relationship with Jesus Christ? What is the Church to do in these times? Who are we called to be as we seek to be your people? That's a hard conversation to have. It's a hard question to have, and yet we're constantly doing this work of discerning where God is in our world, how God is moving in our lives, and what it means to be citizens of the Kingdom of God.

There are a lot of stories which shape us. There are a lot of stories and narratives which mold us. And as we try to make sense of the world, we can return to these stories which tell us who we are and where we're going. That's what people were doing, going into the wilderness to see John, is they were trying to remember God's story for them, and that's what we can do now as we remember and look at the stories that shape who we are.

There are stories about what it means to be an American, stories which we revere, symbols which we hold as sacred. And what's so challenging about trying to make sense of the events of this last week is that they often bring out sides of the stories that we tell ourselves which we'd rather not look at. And again, trying not to make some sort of partisan political evaluation, but instead trying to take God's Kingdom and apply it as a lens to a world, I'm wondering about the stories that we hold dear as Americans, because there's no doubt in my mind that one of the foundational stories that we hold dear has to do with revolt, has to do with revolution, and that people took up arms, took up weapons, to throw off a foreign power as a way of establishing freedom. We hold this sacred story to be our story, because it's a way in which we make sense of the founding of this very country in which we live. But what do you do with that story when thousands of people try to enact it during the very democratic process that that initial revolution tried to establish, while that process is happening today? They tried to enact that story, and

they take it up as a patriotic task, as a mandate given to them to overthrow a government or to make sure that their leader stays in power. What do you do with that story now? What does God think about that story?

It's a hard truth to realize that God does not care what country you were born in. God does not care whether you're American or English or Costa Rican or Russian or Chinese. God doesn't care one bit about that citizenship. What God cares about is your citizenship in his Kingdom and whether your way of life reflects that reality for which God gave his only Son. And so again, what do you do with these recent events? What do you do with stories that we hold to be sacred that people tried to enact in a way that leads to bloodshed and that leads to death?

I think all that we can do, or perhaps the first thing that we must do, is to claim a different story for our lives as being the foundational one. We must realize that the most fundamental, formative, true story that we hold to carry with us is that of the love of God in Jesus Christ. That Jesus showed up proclaiming the reign of God, the Kingdom of God, and that our citizenship into that Kingdom is far more important than the citizenship of this world and the stories that we might even hold to be sacred. Jesus came offering us a different way of living, a way in which a group of people like those of St. John in the Wilderness can share life together, can experience the incredible joys of children coming into the

world together, can bury loved ones and mourn those who have died together. That we can eat together and sing together and go through the world as a community reflective of God's goodness, being ones who we call the very body of Christ, Jesus becoming alive through us, so that when people come in contact with us as a church community, they're made whole. They're experiencing God's love, and they're welcomed in, no matter what baggage they have, no matter what loyalties they've espoused, they're welcomed in to that reality.

And my friends, the thing about the Kingdom of God, the thing about this Jesus of Nazareth, is it's no spiritual thing alone. This is our political reality. This is our political existence first and foremost, that we have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and because of that, we spread God's love to places and to people who desperately need to know that God is with them. It's because of that reality that we can look at people like the Proud Boys, people who broke in to the US Capitol, and we can tell them God loves you. God forgives you, and we will do everything we can so that you know that we respect your dignity as children of God. We can even love those with whom we struggle, those who are enemies, those who we dislike, because we have a different sort of loyalty. We have a different politics here. The politics of Jesus are on the loose.

There are two hallmarks of the Kingdom of God that I would advise you, that I would suggest you pay attention to. Again, these statements are true today; they were true five years ago; and they will be true in the future. Nothing to do with the realities, not dependent on the realities that we struggle with today, far bigger than that.

The first one is that we pay attention to political idolatry. One of our parishioners here several months ago sent me a note, sent me a message that said, hey, I've been trying to figure out what it means to be a Christian in our current reality, our society, and I found this little essay that seems to have captured something about what I'm struggling with. It seems to be calling me to live into the Kingdom of God more deeply. And she said what do you think about this? She didn't know who wrote it; she just came across it, and she said I think this is talking about the Kingdom of God. This is explaining something about what I'm seeing in our society, as people seem to be more loyal to party than to country, and as people seem to be more loyal to winning than to loving. And so I looked it up, and this is written by Timothy Keller, a well-known Presbyterian minister, and this was written in 2009, 2009 in one of his books. And Timothy Keller says this. This is a long quote, but I ask you to listen to it carefully, to listen carefully to what it's saying.

One of the signs that an object is functioning as an idol is that fear becomes one of the chief characteristics of life. When we center

our lives on the idol, we become dependent on it. If our counterfeit god is threatened in any way, our response is complete panic. We do not say, 'What a shame, how difficult,' but rather 'This is the end! There's no hope!'

This may be a reason why so many people now respond to U.S. political trends in such an extreme way. When either party wins an election, a certain percentage of the losing side talks openly about leaving the country. They become agitated and fearful for the future. They have put the kind of hope in their political leaders and policies that once was reserved for God and the work of the gospel. When their political leaders are out of power, they experience a death. They believe that if their policies and people are not in power, everything will fall apart. They refuse to admit how much agreement they actually have with the other party, and instead focus on the points of disagreement. The points of contention overshadow everything else, and a poisonous environment is created.

Timothy Keller continues:

Another sign of idolatry in our politics is that opponents are not considered to be simply mistaken but to be evil. After the last presidential election, [and again, he's talking about 2008] my eighty-four-year-old mother observed, 'It used to be that whoever

was elected as your president, even if he wasn't the one you voted for, he was still your president. That doesn't seem to be the case any longer.' After each election, there is now a significant number of people who see the incoming president lacking moral legitimacy. The increasing political polarization and bitterness we see in U.S. politics today is a sign that we have made political activism into a form of religion. How does idolatry produce fear and demonization?

Dutch-Canadian philosopher Al Wolters taught that in the biblical view of things, the main problem in life is sin, and the only solution is God and his grace. The alternative to this view is to identify something besides sin as the main problem with the world and something besides God as the main remedy. That demonizes something that is not completely bad, and makes an idol out of something that cannot be the ultimate good.

...In political idolatry, we make a god out of having power.

My friends, beware of political idolatry. Beware of moments where we begin worshiping someone who is not God, placing all of our hopes and expectations on a human being rather than on the One whose love for us is complete, whose power is unsurpassed, and who promises us that he will be with us always. Beware of political idolatry.

The second warning has to do with the way in which we've gone to bed with violence, the way in which we have committed ourselves as Americans to violence being something that is redemptive. We tell these stories about the need for more violence in order to exist, and we have lost our capacity to just simply be honest about what violence is. Whenever a bullet is fired, whenever a bomb is dropped, the only response to it should be one of grief and sadness, and yet we've tried to glorify it, turn it into this ultimate sort of way of being powerful. We've put it in movies and films, we've asked people to commit it on our behalf, and we've thrown them parades. The only response when a bullet is fired or a bomb is dropped should be one of grief and sadness, because people are dying. That's what violence is. It's a way in which you dominate someone and take away their life, and the extent to which our American story has made a god out of violence or used violence to justify things is completely counter to the reality of God's Kingdom. Jesus of Nazareth is the Prince of Peace. Jesus of Nazareth is one who had every option for a violent revolt. People tried to take him by force to make him king. His disciples drew swords in Gethsemane in order to fight off the mob. They were constantly saying let's take over, let's do this, and every revolutionary before him and after him took on that sort of way of being. And yet Jesus instead walked to the cross and let the violence of the world be put on him in his body. All of the violence of our hearts, of the Roman empire, all of the violence of human history

was put on the Son of God. And from the cross he looked down to the people who killed him, and he said, “Forgive them Father, for they do not know what they are doing.” Because he’s the Prince of Peace. Because God took all of that anger and that hatred, all of that violence, and crucified it, put it to death, and then Jesus still came back to life and overcame all of that.

Followers of Jesus are not people of violence. We are peacemakers. You can bet as people went out to see John in the wilderness to be baptized by him that in order to wade into that river and to enter into those waters of baptism they had to take off layers and layers of shame and guilt. The text says that they confessed their sins so they could be made clean. And as they were stripping all of that away, you can bet they laid their swords down, too, down by the river. You can’t get baptized with a gun on your chest. You can’t get baptized with a sword on your hip. You’ve got to lay that down. You’ve got to lay that down, or it will drown you in the waters of baptism. You’ve got to let that go if you want to know who Jesus is and what he’s all about.

So, my friends, we try to make sense of this current world we’re living in, this reality, and we do it by studying and getting to know both our culture and our society, but also the Kingdom of God and the ways in which God is present to us in scripture and sacrament in the Body of Christ and in love, and we beware of anyone who we start to think of as

our idol, anyone whom we start to put our trust in. We beware of political idolatry, because we have a Savior already. We have a king already, and we walk away from violence. We turn the other cheek. We refuse to believe the myth that violence has saved us, because Jesus saved us when he took on all of that, when he took on all of the world's violence and hate. And I ask you to join with me as we seek to do this important work of being the Church, of asking hard questions about the world we live in, and for longing for the coming of God's Kingdom. Amen.