

“Weeping With Those Who Weep”

Ecclesiastes 3:16-17, 4:1-3; Job 2:11-13; John 15:9-1 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 10, 2024

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our unity in Christ might bind us together in gracious compassion and hope. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Ironically, I need to begin this sermon with some content warnings. First of all, I am aware that some of you may be offended by what I'm going to say today; you may find it veering too far from preaching the gospel into talking politics or even indulging in partisan propaganda. I hope that you won't turn off and stop listening right now. I need you to know that I am risking upsetting you today because I have a holy obligation to minister to others in the room who are hurting. I encourage you to listen closely and compassionately. My aim today is to delineate the Christian response to the current climate in our country. I cannot apologize for the political context that has formed that climate. If Christ has any claim on our hearts, it is our duty to listen to those who are suffering, regardless of our opinions about those causing the suffering.

Secondly, in order to be clear about what we're facing, I am going to have to bring up some truly ugly occurrences. I am guessing many of you have been limiting your exposure to the news over the past few days, and some of this may be new information that could hit you hard. I will try to be gentle. And if you need to tune out and flip through the Christmas carol section of the hymnal to fill out your request slip instead, I won't take it personally. Just don't turn pages so loud it distracts your neighbor!

Now that we know where we're going, I invite you to buckle up, because this may get bumpy!

I believe I can safely assume that we all know there was a presidential election on Tuesday, and that the results were not as expected. It's not that we were assuming the other side would win, but that conventional wisdom was saying it would be so close we might not know who won until a few days later. Instead, we saw a decisive victory for a candidate who has reveled in violating the norms of civil society, threatened to imprison all those who oppose him, and incited hatred and violence against multiple different groupings of our population. What we are left with is half a country deeply distressed by the willingness of their neighbors to go along with an agenda of such virulence and actively fearful about their lives and the lives of their loved ones. People in this room, people who people in this room love, people that you love. People are weeping.

While the new administration will not take charge until January, the plans they've been making – both for policies and for methods of making those policies real – have been publicized for months now, and they are chilling. Maya Angelou teaches us that when someone tells us who they are, we should believe them. If even half of the proposals of this agenda become reality, millions of people will be impacted in disastrous ways – family members deported, jobs lost, marriages invalidated, children forced to conform to standards imposed by narrow-minded strangers, women dead because of complications of pregnancies.

The reverberations of this election are already rippling through people's lives in damaging ways. The biggest headline on the front page of today's San Diego Union Tribune was "Fear grips migrant families on both sides of the border." A Christian interpretation of that headline could make it more succinct: "Fear Grips Families." Christians do not need to know what kind of families or where they are to love them and show sympathy for their fear. "Fear Grips Families" should be all we need to hear.

Earlier this week, hundreds of Black Americans – children, college students, elderly people – received anonymous texts ordering them to report to a bus that would take them to a plantation where they would be enslaved. Women and girls are being threatened by men and boys insisting that now it's "Your body, my choice," a new slogan from an extremist internet influencer that has already been printed on t-shirts.

People are terrified. Having heard the commentary certain Supreme Court Justices have unnecessarily added onto previous decisions, lesbian and gay couples are taking all the precautions they can to ensure the future legality of their marriages, since the Obergefell decision is in jeopardy. And it's not just gay marriage, as those same decisions also made reference to overturning Loving vs. Virginia, the Supreme Court decision that made inter-racial marriage the law of the land in 1967. I have lost count of the number of friends who have shared that they haven't slept all week because they can't stop crying.

So what is a Christian to do? What is the response that followers of Jesus must offer? The primary scripture for this sermon isn't even one we read today; it's the one

that went out on Friday in the devotional message: Romans 12:15: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Except that as I noted in that message, it’s extremely rude to tell jokes at a funeral. We don’t prioritize the rejoicing over the weeping, or even try to give them equal time. If the life and teachings of Jesus have taught us anything, it is that our primary calling as Christians is to listen to the suffering, to sit with them and do all we can to provide comfort and hope. There is a time for rejoicing, over all the various triumphs people within our community may experience, but this is not it. We may have all sorts of opinions about what happened and why and what people should be doing about it. But first the weeping.

I probably shouldn’t assume we all know the story of Job, so let me give a quick summary: All of his oxen and donkeys and sheep and camels were killed, along with the servants who were attending them. All of his children were killed when a house collapsed on them. And then to add insult to injury, his entire body was inflicted with “loathsome sores.” Things were bad. And Job’s friends came to visit him in his time of trouble. They had plenty to say, much of it not all that helpful, but before any of the talking began, what did they do? They wept with him. They tore their garments and mourned with him. They sat with him in silence for seven days. Weep with those who weep.

We don’t know what will happen. We don’t know which travesties of justice will erupt first or next or never. But we know that people are scared. We know that people are shattered by the choice of so many of our fellow citizens to turn back down a path of

hatred and destruction. As Christians, we are called to weep with those who weep. We are called to listen to the fears and pain of those who are suffering. Of young girls traumatized by classmates claiming authority over their bodies. Of immigrants – from those who are longstanding and legal to those still waiting for asylum hearings – who are now worried they may be deported to countries they barely remember or where the memories continue to haunt them in their nightmares. Weep with those who weep. There is no version of Christianity in which smugness is a virtue.

For some, the crisis is slightly less visceral and more philosophical. “My faith in the goodness of humanity is shattered,” said one. It’s funny to think of the book of Ecclesiastes as a source of comfort, but when we’re caught in a web of cynicism and despair, it can be nice to realize we’re not alone. The biblical witness has been there before, offering us this caustic preacher who insists “there is nothing new under the sun.” “The tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them!” Though we ought to know how to pursue justice, wickedness seems to dog our heels instead. It would be better not to have been born!

As I was reminded of Ecclesiastes’ insistence that there is nothing new under the sun, I was struck by how many anniversaries of notable events were this weekend. On November 10, 1898, the Wilmington Coup took place, in which “a mob of as many as 2000 white supremacists killed dozens of African-Americans, burned Black-owned businesses, and forced the mayor, police chief, and alderman to resign at gunpoint before installing their own mayor and City Council.” This weekend is also the 86th

anniversary of Kristallnacht, the prelude to the Holocaust also called the Night of Broken Glass, when mobs rampaged through Jewish neighborhoods smashing windows and demolished buildings. Over 7000 Jewish businesses and 267 synagogues were destroyed. What does it mean when we say there is nothing new under the sun? Will Christians always have to be weeping with those who weep?

We are called to love, and love sacrificially, if you take seriously the way Jesus describes it in this monologue from John 15. We are called to love and not count the cost. This weekend is also the anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1987. That which seemed impregnable, unchanging, eternal was suddenly crumbling under the power of the people's passion for liberation. This is also the anniversary of the first public celebration of the Eucharist in an Episcopal church that was led by a woman priest, one of the eleven who were "illegally" ordained earlier that summer in 1974. Disciples, of course, have had women in leadership all along, but this was a major breakthrough for equality in the church more broadly.

When we declare that there is nothing new under the sun, we may do it with cynicism, but the more honestly we remember our history, the more likely we are to discover a legacy of hope and resistance as well. Yes, there was weeping, so much weeping. But causes for rejoicing are always emerging from the ashes, if we can continue to love steadfastly and sacrificially.

This moment is fraught with complexity, uncertainty, and tension. We cannot shy away from the gospel call to meet the moment with compassion and courage. We must

take the time to weep with those who are weeping, to sit in silence with the suffering, till the time for talking returns. We must be willing to love like Jesus, to lay down our lives for the sake of the vulnerable and outcast, to proclaim good news to the poor and oppressed, and liberation to the captives. If one thing remains under the sun, let it be love. Hallelujah and Amen.