

## “I Will Praise the Lord as Long as I Live!”

Psalm 146

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25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

I want to begin a *very honest conversation* with you this morning. I try extremely hard to be honest with you every time I step up here; I spend a *lot* of time each week trying to ensure that I am not telling you anything that is misleading or untrue. I have never lied to you from this pulpit, and I swear to you that I never will. Today, I feel like I need to be even *more* honest and open than I normally am.

Our Psalm this morning begins with these words: “Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.” These are wonderful, joyful words of praise of God. But there’s a reality we need to face this morning: many people in this congregation are not feeling very joyful right now. Some of them may be having trouble praising God. Some of you were pleased with the outcome of the election; I have heard from many who were not. This has happened before – in 2008, in 2012, in 2016, and in 2020, each time, some people were feeling one thing and others were feeling something else. It’s different this time. I have never seen such a tremendous outpouring of *grief* after an election. One member left a message on my phone at 6:30 Wednesday morning *in tears*. A lot of people were in and out of the church on Wednesday; many expressed feelings of sadness, grief, frustration, anger, and more tears. Even many of the *children* were upset. It felt like someone had *died*. By the time I went home I felt like I had been at a funeral. Except it’s different, because at a funeral, everyone’s feeling pretty much the same way. People can express grief openly. On Wednesday, here at church, people couldn’t always do that. But we’re a *community*. We need to figure out how to honor one another’s grief, even when we’re not all feeling the same thing.

There are some legal limits on what pastors can and can’t say from the pulpit. Basically, it boils down to: I can talk about moral and ethical issues all I want, but I can’t tell you who to vote for. That law severely limited my ability to be fully honest with you prior to the election. There were a lot of things I wanted to say that I couldn’t say. Now that it’s all over, now that we know the results and nobody is contesting them, I can tell you that I’ve been *hurting*. I cannot stand up here and pretend that I’m *fine* when I’m not. That would be a lie. I’m one of those who’s having a hard time praising God right now. Since Wednesday, I have felt *profoundly* sad; at times I have felt *angry*; a few days ago I woke up in the middle of the night fretting about what will happen to the Environmental Protection Agency, to the Department of Education, to the Food and Drug Administration, to about twenty-five other federal agencies that do really important work, and to many groups of people. I’ve been shaky; my heart rate has been elevated; I’ve had a headache for days; my jaw hurts because I’ve been clenching my teeth. Every Presbyterian pastor I know is feeling similarly. One of my colleagues told me he is “grieving, angry, and scared.” Why are we hurting so much? What are we so worried about? I think it basically boils down to our feeling that what has just happened feels *tremendously* at odds with our beliefs and

values. I'm going to try to explain that, and I sincerely hope that this is *helpful*, both to those who feel like I do, and also to those who feel differently. I think it's time for us to be *honest* with one another.

Let me start by getting very personal. The outcome of this election impacts members of my family very directly. I have a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law who were adopted from South Korea, a brother-in-law who was born in India, two Asian American nieces, one adopted Hispanic niece, one Indian-American nephew, and one Indian-American niece. My extended family is pretty colorful. I am concerned about racism and targeting that some of them might experience because they are immigrants or children of immigrants. There was racist hate in my sister-in-law's neighborhood in 2020 that was a direct result of things our President was saying at the time. I also have a sister and her wife, a married couple. They have been together for 38 years, but have only able to be married for nine. I am fearful of policy decisions that might be made that would adversely impact them. I am worried for my family.

A friend of mine was talking with a young man on Wednesday. The young man is bi-racial, and he's gay, and – in tremendous despair – he said to my friend, “I feel like I don't exist right now.” There are a lot of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people across our country feeling very similarly. I hope you know this – honestly, I didn't fully understand it for a long time myself – sexual orientation really is *not* a choice. Current medical research indicates that sexual orientation appears to depend on (a) the level of hormones, specifically androgens, in a fetus's brain when it is developing, and (b) genetic factors. These are not things that people can *choose*. A lot of the targeting these days is against trans people; I hope you can try to understand that many trans people have felt *from very early ages* that they were in the wrong body. This isn't just a matter of wanting to dress up in clothes typically worn by the other gender, or wanting to play games typically played by the other gender. This is a matter of feeling that there's a mismatch between how they *look* and how they *feel*, a disconnect between their *body* and their *brain*. Jesus calls us *love all people*. That includes loving people whose lives and feelings are very different from our own. We shouldn't deny people services or rights just because they're different.

So I'm concerned for my family members, and I'm concerned for members of many minority groups. I am also having a tremendous amount of trouble accepting the reality that we have just elected – for the first time ever in our history – a convicted felon to the highest office in our land. I know, some of you may not want me to talk about this; I would ask you to hear me out. This man has also been convicted of sexual assault and defamation, and his company was found guilty of carrying out a 15-year-long criminal tax fraud scheme. There is also a tremendous amount of evidence that he is guilty of other major crimes, although those cases will probably now never go to trial. He claims these were all partisan witch hunts; they really weren't. Ten members of his own political party voted to impeach him. That's never happened before. Many Republicans who have served in significant positions of leadership – Senators, Representatives, a Governor, an Attorney General, a Director of National Intelligence, a Director of the FBI and CIA, another Director of the CIA, a U.S. Marine Corps General, an Ambassador to the United Nations, and hundreds of others, including people who worked directly for him in his previous administration – have publicly said that he “cannot be trusted to uphold our rule of law,” that he is “without a moral compass,” that “in our nation's 248-year history, there has never been an individual who is a greater threat to our republic,” and many other similar things. I really don't think all those people – all *members of his own party!* – are making those things up. The job of the President is to *preside* over the affairs of the nation. I just don't understand why we would give somebody with those characteristics *that much power*, including ultimate authority over the entire United States military. I've

heard the arguments; that it's about the economy, or immigration, or the need for a strong leader. I agree that all those issues are important. But I really don't understand how that justifies putting a man whom *we all know* is capable of *significant wrongdoing* in the Oval Office. How are we supposed to be able to *trust* him? Was this *really* the best possible candidate for this job? Seriously, if somebody could explain the logic to me, I would be grateful. Was the opposition really *that bad*? Several years ago I heard a member of this congregation refer to her as a "monster." *Really?* Why? What *evil* has she done? Please tell me. Show me the evidence. And since when is it okay for Christians to call people names?

I have heard some people admit that this man's behavior is bad but then say he's "just a sinner like the rest of us." Are you *sure* about that? I agree that we're all sinful; none of us are Jesus. But I also believe there's a big difference between a sinner who repents and a sinner who keeps on sinning. In the Bible, David is remembered as a good king, in part because he knew how to *repent*. He committed some *enormous* sins – he even arranged a murder! – but when confronted with the truth he didn't deny it, he didn't deflect, he didn't blame other people, he didn't play the victim, he didn't claim it was "fake news." He got down on his knees, deeply regretful of his actions, and he *prayed to God for forgiveness*. He faced the reality of his sins *head-on*, and he was willing to face the *consequences*. That's repentance. I don't think our President-Elect knows how to do that. For him, it's *always* someone else's fault.

In his victory speech Wednesday morning, the President-Elect said "We're going to help our country heal." He said "It's time to put the divisions of the past four years behind us. It's time to unite." Those words *sound* good. But it bothers me that he referred to the divisions of the past *four* years and not the divisions of the past *eight*. There are still a lot of people hurting from things that happened during his first administration. I would really like to hear some apologies for the lies, the divisive rhetoric, the racist and sexist and homophobic comments. I would sincerely like to hear some promises that he will peacefully leave office at the end of his term, that he will never order the military to use violence against peaceful protestors, and that he will, to the very best of his ability, honor his vow to preserve, protect, and defend our country's Constitution. I would like him to stop seeking retribution against his opponents – in *both* parties – and I earnestly hope that he will appoint leaders in his administration who actually have appropriate skills and credentials for those positions. I would sincerely like to hear him apologize publicly to the more-than-140 police officers who were injured during the violence on January 6 four years ago, especially the family of Brian Sicknick, who died from injuries sustained in the line of duty defending the Capital and the members of our Congress, and also to the families of the four police officers who also defended the Capital and Congress that day and who later committed suicide – Howard Charles Liebengood, Jeffrey Smith, Kyle Hendrik DeFreytag, and Gunther Paul Hashida. I also think he needs to publicly apologize to all the members of Congress whose lives were put in danger that day, especially his former Vice President; and that he needs to publicly apologize to the American public for all his claims of election fraud. When his 62 lawsuits went to court they were routinely dismissed or dropped for lack of evidence or lack of standing by judges (some of whom he himself had appointed) who described those lawsuits with words like "frivolous" or "without merit." A District Court judge here in Michigan ruled that the lawsuit that came to her desk was "a historic and profound abuse of the judicial process." A whole host of people in our country still, because of his lies, believe that the election was stolen. That has caused *so* much division. If he sincerely wants to *heal* this country, I think he needs to start by taking ownership for a lot of things he bears responsibility for. I doubt that he's going to do that. So his words about "healing" don't feel very genuine to me – and I'm tremendously fearful of *more* wounds yet to come over these next four years.

I've heard some people say they are voting for the *issues* or the *platform* and not the *person*. I really don't believe you can separate the two. Ballots often have a long list of names, and a short list of issues we get to vote on. Each name is attached to an agenda *and* a character – a set of goals *as well as* a set of values – a platform *and* a personality. There's no way to split those apart. Every leader *always* brings their *character*, their *values*, and their *personality* to the job. We are always voting for *both*.

I am truly baffled that the Republican Party allows this man so much power and condones so much bad behavior. The Republican Party I knew growing up would never have put up with this. To you who are Republicans, please help me understand: *what happened to your party?* It used to stand for conservative values, ethical standards, and fiscal responsibility. Now it seems to be about absolute fealty to an erratic, temperamental, cruel, and vindictive criminal who routinely tells us lies. *Why?* And what can *you* – as individual citizens – do about it? You know, it really is *very easy* to contact your elected representatives. You have a voice, and I would ask you to *use* it, for the good of your party, and for the good of our country. Stand up and tell your leaders: you don't want to put up with this any more.

I also find it very upsetting that some media outlets in our country *routinely* distort the truth to influence politics. The worst offender, in my opinion (and in the opinion of my colleagues) is Fox News, because of the enormous power Fox has over so much of the American public. We now know that Fox *knowingly* peddled a long stream of falsehoods about the 2020 election and the voting machines. Dominion Voting Systems brought a massive defamation lawsuit against Fox, and the depositions and documents that were gathered demonstrate *very clearly* that Fox's top executives and producers *knew* that the election hadn't been stolen, but deliberately chose to tell the public a different story. Fox was forced to confess. Fox has also grossly distorted the truth about climate change; 97% percent of climate scientists around the world agree that humans *are causing* global warming and climate change – but that's not what Fox tells you. I could go on. Fox is a conservative media outlet; that's fine – but when did *truth* stop being a conservative value? Why has an *agenda* become more important than *honesty*?

I want you to know that I will be praying for our President, every day, by name. I would encourage *all* of you to do the same. I will be praying for wisdom, good judgment, ethical behavior, and responsible leadership. Perhaps most importantly, I will be praying for spiritual discernment, that he will truly pray for guidance from God. He uses more overtly religious language than any other President in the last century, yet many pastors and Christian leaders have found it to be very self-serving and not truly reflective of the authentic Christian faith. I'm going to keep praying that he gets to know Jesus.

So that's where I am. I, like many others, am *heartsick* about the results of this election. Psalm 146 is really helpful. It reminds me that our hope, ultimately, is not “in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” Our hope is in *God*. It is *God* who “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.” It is *God* who “sets the prisoners free,” who “opens the eyes of the blind,” who “lifts up those who are bowed down,” who “loves the righteous.” It is *God* who “watches over the strangers” (that word really refers to *foreigners*, to *sojourners* from other countries), and it is *God* who “upholds the orphan and the widow.” It is also God who “brings to ruin” the “way of the wicked.” This is why God is still worthy of our praise. No matter what happens here on earth, no matter what human leaders we elect, *there is still a God in heaven who reigns, and who cares about people*. That hasn't changed – and it *never* will.

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