



“TRUST FACTOR”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 65: 17-25; LUKE 21: 5-19
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
November 13, 2017, 10:30am Service
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

When I was a little girl, I had big plans.

I wanted to be President of the United States.

I wanted to make an impact on the questions that mattered—racism, nuclear disarmament, economic justice. I wanted to make the world a better place.

At some point, I decided I didn’t want to spend my life arguing with people and positioning myself against people. And I really didn’t want to spend my life making promises that I couldn’t or wouldn’t keep.

If I am going to ask people to trust me, then I want it to be in a context in which I can keep my promises.

When I was installed a few months ago as your pastor, I promised to serve this church with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love and to be in prayer about how to do that.

I have been on my knees this week praying for the energy to be present to each of you in all your different feelings and perspectives. And God has given me that energy. It has been an honor to walk alongside those of you who have trusted me to do so this week.

I have been on my knees praying for the intelligence to parse out how to engage scripture and experience and context responsibly, truthfully, and yes, prophetically. This is not the time for me to sugar coat what the Gospel is calling us to be and to do.

I have been on my knees asking God to open up my imagination so that I can glimpse a better world, a way for human beings to be together with dignity, with respect, with tenderness, with room for each and every person to truly be well.

And I have been on my knees asking God to help me share my love for you in ways that you can feel, in ways that touch you and bring you relief, insight, and courage to face what is happening around us.

Everything I am about to say to you comes from those prayers—everything because I love you, I love God, and yes, I love this country, and I love this world.

I am asking you to trust my love for you. And I am asking you to extend love to me. I will not say everything you want or even need to hear. I can’t promise that some

things I say won't be difficult for you to hear. These are difficult times in our country—and there is no way to speak the Gospel into these realities and not trouble our souls—mine included.

I invite you to take a deep breath—notice what that feels like. And take a minute to surface where you are feeling raw and reactive. The things you are bracing yourself for when you got to church today—the words you really don't want to hear, the words you will be mad if you don't hear.

Promise me that you will let yourself bring those things into your awareness, and that if your trigger is tripped; you will take a deep breath and resolve to stay connected. You are loved, fiercely, every single one of you. And we need each other right now. We need to support each other in all of our variety, in all of our complexity.

The lectionary sure did tee us preachers up with some challenging words this week—a providential twist to this post-election Sunday to be sure. Isaiah's vision of the new heaven and a new earth—that calls us to imagine a world with no more weeping, no more cries of distress, no more tragedies. "They will neither harm nor destroy on my Holy Mountain" --sounds so far away from where we are today.

People are crying out—people of all different perspectives and experiences, and people of faith are called to be present to these lamentations. Whether you see things differently than those lamenting, or you are lamenting and feel misunderstood or dismissed, we are called to be present in this painful moment. It is not our place to say whether protests or pain is valid—it is our place to listen, to be present, and to be honest about where each of us is in the midst of it all.

People of faith should feel a magnetic pull toward the world's pain, not to the world's power.

And we do that with Isaiah's vision in mind, with this mysterious and potent aspiration that God will make a way for even natural enemies to co-exist.

The peaceable kingdom is not within our reach today. The peaceable kingdom is not ours to achieve. God is making the way where we see no way. God is at work creating the conditions for something new to come into its own.

No politician makes that happen, no government program makes that happen, no election makes that happen. The church's moral compass is not set by political power or influence. God is our true north—Jesus is the magnetic pull that shapes our aspirations, our perseverance, and our courage to believe in a better world.

Luke sharpens the language of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in comparison to the other gospels. He talks of revolutions (instead of rumors of wars), false prophets, nation against nation, earthquakes and famine, dreadful portents and signs from heaven. And that before these things will happen, those who follow Jesus will be persecuted and suffer greatly.

In the wisdom of the lectionary, we get an apocalyptic picture—just what we need right now, right? Just what we were hoping for today? More reasons to feel concerned about the future, more reasons to feel insecure.

But, keep reading—Luke’s message is what we need to hear more than anything else today.

Because these trials, this suffering, this confusion, being called before those with power because we hold them to account—this is our chance to testify! Get ready he says. It will probably be a pretty rough ride—your own family may reject you, but this is your chance—this is when your faith gets to really show its true colors.

It is our endurance that will heal our souls.

This passage does not give us license to speculate on the fulfillment of Jesus’ words in our contemporary moment. What this passage does is make our marching orders pretty darn clear—BE FAITHFUL!!! And faithful people endure, faithful people don’t flinch when the powers and principalities disappoint or even harm us.

Faithful people will experience suffering, that’s part of the deal. We bear witness when we put our shoulders back, take a deep breath, and say what we believe in the face of oppression, injustice, hatred, and greed.

That has always been our call as Jesus followers. That has not changed. It has only been amplified by this entire election season, and even before that, and in its aftermath.

There is a lot I don’t know, brothers and sisters. And I feel sure you will give me grace in the midst of my human limitations.

But this I do know—Jesus is calling us to follow him, to be his hands and feet, his very heart and soul in this world.

- And it doesn’t look anything like a KKK parade
- It doesn’t look anything like sexual assault or a concentration camp
- It doesn’t look like people sleeping under bridges or in their cars because they have no where else to go
- It doesn’t look like mass deportations or walls

- Or like harassment and intimidation of LGBTQ people.

Brothers and sisters—what we do here, who we are here does not resemble the cowardice of any politician or public official who set their sites solely on reelection or garnering power or securing donors.

We are not trying to win a contest or win the favor of adoring fans or followers.

We are here to make the world more like the Kingdom of God, than the survival of the fittest.

It has never been the job of the church to prop of politicians or pander to powerbrokers.

It is time for the church to be the church.

We are the institution that is supposed to have the moral compass to move through these stormy waters without flinching.

I don't care who you voted for—that is Tuesday's news. I care what you stand for today. And I want to trust that everyone who calls this church home unambiguously rejects racism, misogyny, homophobia, Islamaphobia, xenophobia, and blind nationalism.

This country is no more racist today than it was on Monday of this week. We just see it out in the open, we just hear it said out-loud in ways we wanted to think were gone.

When President Obama was elected in 2008 the number of hate groups grew at an alarming rate. After leveling off in 2011, they have begun to grow again. Since 2014 anti-Muslim groups are up by 46%. The Ku Klux Klan has 190 active chapters. As of Friday, the Southern Poverty Law Center reports over 201 acts of election related harassment that were anti-black, anti-woman, anti-LGBTQ, anti-Muslim, or Anti-Semitic.

Anyone who works on racism is not surprised by what we are seeing. Many people of color have said publically, that they are not surprised by what we are seeing.

As a woman, I am not surprised that misogyny is alive and well in this country. I could have told you that on Monday.

Whether our new president is racist is not the burning question for us today.

Racism is a part of our country's DNA. That is not news. The deep and violent divisions in our country filled with what can seem like intractable hatred, is not news.

These afflictions have been stoked by the fires of greed and mythologies of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality that have served to concentrate wealth among the very few for generations.

That didn't start this week. That didn't start a few years ago. That started in colonial Maryland and Virginia when laws codifying whites only marriage laws and property rights first showed up in our legal systems.

And racism and any kind of isms, are not about partisan politics either. These collective diseases go way deeper than that. And party politics have atrophied in their ability to give the American people candidates who are equipped and empowered to truly address the way racism functions in our country. Even our current President has not been able to achieve that.

Politics will not heal this country's racial wounds; politics will not cure our collective disease. People of faith must not tire from holding our politicians to account. People of faith must not mistake politicians for the answer to our prayers.

Who is better positioned to help change people's hearts from hate to love than Jesus' own followers. This may or may not sound like Good News to you, but it is how the Gospel calls us to witness to the world in turbulent times.

I don't know what is going to happen from here, brothers and sisters in Christ. But I do know who we are called to be no matter what the future holds.

Grace Covenant, this is our time to stand up and be the courageous people of faith God is calling us to be. Can we trust each other? Can we trust God's movement in our midst?

We have the trust factor necessary for what lies ahead. Nothing that is happening in our country right now is new, but the challenge before us has never been so pressing. The world needs the church to be the church—and the world needs you and me to show them what beloved community looks like, feels like, and acts like.

We need each other and our community needs us, indeed our world needs us, to live up to the promises we make when we say "they will know we are Christians by our love."

We are called to trust, we are called to be trustworthy. This is our time, Grace Covenant, our time to be who we say we are and not just say who we would like to be.

We have so much to be thankful for here at Grace Covenant, so much to celebrate in this difficult and divided time in the United States of America.

In a minute, turn to your neighbor and tell them you love them. If you don't know them ask them their name. If you do know their name, greet them that way. Tell them that you aren't going anywhere. Tell them that you promise to stay right here so that the church can be the church—because the world needs us to make promises and keep our promises more than ever.

Thanks be to God.