



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE TWENTY-FIFTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST**

NOVEMBER 10, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

When our new presiding bishop rose to give his first sermon as presiding bishop last Saturday, he made the same gesture. He has never seen me preach, so there was no flattery by imitation possible. But most of us, including me, always saw that gesture as a courtesy: Sit down, get comfortable, it's the sermon.

But in watching the "PB" as we affectionately call our presiding bishops, I was struck by a theological insight that never had occurred to me. That simple hand gesture is a mark of humility. It says "You do not have to stand for me. I am just a messenger." When the cross is raised in the procession, stand for that, stand to honor Christ's supreme sacrifice. When the Gospel is proclaimed, stand for that because the Gospel is the word of God and the good news of Jesus Christ. But I am just a preacher hoping the words of my lips somehow will bring you closer to God. So, good, you are already seated. And that's the way it should be.

The reading from the Gospel according to Mark this morning is about money and power, and prestige. So let's talk about something that has nothing to do with any of those: The election last Tuesday.

When I began to prepare this sermon on Monday, I had no idea who would prevail. I could not even be sure that we would know today who prevailed. But we knew as of 4:32 a.m. Central Time Wednesday morning, and the requisite concession and congratulations were done by noon. On one side, relief, excitement, and anticipation. On the other despair, despondency, and depression. On one side the transition began in earnest. On the other, the recriminations and regrets began just as quickly. But let's debrief the election and where we as followers of Christ go from here from a purely theological perspective.

One of my personal laments about the election: Candidates so rarely appealed to our better angels. So often they appealed to our economic self-interest. Our greed. Our fears. Our anxieties. But never our desire to do the right thing. Why couldn't they expect more of us? Why are we so anxious to

be a Christian nation, but then so easily leave our basic Christian values out of electoral politics?

Now we might not expect candidates to base their positions on our Baptismal Covenant, but, perhaps, at least to our basic values like loving our neighbors, promoting justice, caring for widows and orphans, showing hospitality to strangers. Why not call us to be our better selves? Why not hold their positions – and our votes – up to a yardstick that has some moral or ethical foundation? Why not embrace that we are by-and-large a God-fearing nation and honor the trust in God we proclaim on our currency and license plates?

I lament even more so, perhaps, that each side has convinced its followers that those who disagree with them are essentially evil, if not also stupid, and/or at least ill-informed, misinformed, and or disinformed. Consequently, they suggest, that if the other side has prevailed, then the country as we know and love it will disintegrate and be lost forever. Maybe that is a bit hyperbolic. But had we ever been as anxious as we have been about an election? And now about half of us are now even more anxious. But we all still have to live with each other. As one columnist promised:

I will share Thanksgiving with relatives, even if I think they're nuts. There's too much division in America, and we hang out too much with people who think just as we do. So if you're debating whether to break bread with family members whose politics you can't stand, go for it. Don't let [the election] get between you and your family or friendships.¹

Let us remember that in the midst of political division and discord, we all are first and foremost children of the same God and before any other loyalty or royalty, we are subjects of God's Kingdom, which transcends any earthly kingdom or nation.

That is something to hold on to that never will disappoint. That gives us a framework or perspective that will never be dismantled or corrupted. That demands that we not ask whether God is on our side but rather enables us

¹ Nicholas Kristof, "My Manifesto for Despairing Democrats," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/06/opinion/trump-democrats-loss.html> (accessed November 6, 2024).

to determine whether we are on God's side?" That allows us to know what we mean when we say God Bless our United States of America.

To bless is to impart God's love and favor. It is to lay upon us God's vision. To call us to the realization not of any earthly kingdom, but of the Kingdom of God. When a nation begins to resemble the Kingdom of God, then we might have some confidence that we are as a nation, indeed, on God's side. And Jesus in the beatitudes leaves no doubt about what God's Kingdom will look like.

Indeed, beatitude comes from the Latin *beatitudo*, which means blessedness. So what does a blessed nation look like? How might we envision a nation that aspires to embody that Kingdom of God? What standards do the beatitudes suggest we hold our nation up to?

It is a nation that is poor in spirit. It humbly acknowledges its need for God. It is a nation that mourns its systemic evils and repents.

It is a nation that is meek, a nation that is humble, whose vision is not clouded by arrogance or self-righteousness.

It is a nation that instead yearns for righteousness.

It is a nation that lusts for reconciliation through mercy and forgiveness.

It is a nation that sees and gets beyond its mixed motives and rationalizations.

It is a nation that not only desires peace, but also works for it and works at it.

It is a nation that is willing to suffer to accomplish what is right.

Whether we are inclined to endorse the new administration or resist it, let us call upon our better angels. Let us reorient our hearts and minds to the Kingdom of God. Because that is what we really say we want. And that is where we will find that peace of God that surpasses human understanding. That is where we can be the blessing on our nation and our communities and our families that Christ calls us to be, regardless of our political party or ideology. Let us learn from the story of the widow's mite, from her contribution of all she had to live on, that when it comes to the Kingdom of God, we have to be all in.

That's my lament. That our better angels are lost in a haze of anger and greed and fear on the campaign trail. But the campaign is over.

Two weeks ago the sermon urged us to take Jesus into the voting booth with us. Today, the message is don't leave him there.