

March 8, 2020

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“Political Trauma and Bold Choices for Peace” **John 3:1-10**

Good morning Beloved, nothing like a sermon series on trauma combined with the threat of a national pandemic to get the blood moving on a Sunday morning.

When we set out to walk with Jesus this Lenten season exploring the very real presence of trauma in our lives, we had no way of knowing that as your pastor, I would be walking beside a parent who has spent more than two weeks in and out of the ICU and is still not in the clear, nor did we know that there would be an emergent outbreak of COVID-19 or that it would come as close to all of us as it has and still might. Surprise!

On today's agenda is political trauma and the options we have for choosing peace in the midst such strife. I considered changing course, in light of current events, but have decided to go forward because whatever is transpiring today is being layered on top of what is already present and what already is present is what for some time now has felt like an elephant in the room; political trauma.

As a nation, we are and have been enduring a hitherto unprecedented political trauma. We have put on brave faces, knitted millions of pink caps and taken to the street's month after dizzying month. We are now, quiet understandably, worn down and discouraged at the terrifying possibility that we may not have seen the worst of it yet.

I will say upfront that if you are a Trump supporter, I mean you no personal disrespect. I do, however, believe that there are certain things that need to be said both from a faith perspective and from this pulpit. These past four years have taken an unforgivable toll on the mental health of our nation in particular our young adults, communities of color, ethnic minorities, women, and members of the Queer community.

A growing body of research has tracked the detrimental impacts of Trump-related stress on broad segments of the American population. In a 2017 column, *Washington Post* columnist Dana Milbank outlined the symptoms of what some Psychiatrists refer to as “Trump Anxiety Disorder” or “Trump Hypertensive Disorder.” It looks like having any or all of these symptoms:

Overeating. Headaches. Fainting. Irregular heartbeat. Chronic neck pain. Depression. Irritable bowel syndrome. Tightness in the chest. Shortness of breath. Teeth grinding. Stomach ulcers. Indigestion. Shingles. Eye twitching. Nausea. Irritability. High blood sugar. Tinnitus. Reduced immunity. Racing pulse. Shaking limbs. Hair loss. Acid reflux. Deteriorating vision. Stroke or Heart attack.

I have heard it said over and over again that many of us with trepidation turn on the radio each morning with fear of what this president has undertaken to do or tweet while we were asleep. This particular kind of political unrest creates a constant environment of stress, one that "can have negative health effects on people who have been direct targets of hostility or discrimination and on individuals and communities who feel vulnerable because they belong to a stigmatized, marginalized, or targeted group," this according to a *New England Journal of Medicine*.

In a recent article in *Psychiatry Today* it was stated that more than 70,000 mental health professionals agree that the man currently in control of this nation suffers from a narcissistic personality disorder, making chaos and deliberate combativeness the new normal of White House operations, manifest in hostile briefings, high rates of staff turnover, and cultural exchanges that appear aimed at dividing the nation. While supporters of this president may be experiencing a boost in "psychological well-being, pride, and hope for the future," this presidency has been a pit of despair for everyone else.

I wish I could waive a magic wand and make it better, I wish that our country was feeling more confident about having a woman in office, obviously neither of those things are within my power to control, but I do have some thoughts about why we are where we are and my hope is that by wrapping our collective mind power around it we might be able to bend the arc back toward shared justice and the pursuit of equity.

The world around us has changed in the last fifty years in ways we can scarcely articulate. We shake our heads in wonderment that what used to work does not work anymore; things like a shared sense of civic responsibility, and agreement about the importance of investing in public

infrastructure like roads and libraries. Why exactly is it that our churches declining and political parties more divided than ever before?

I recently read an analysis of the shift our society is making from a **Convergent** to a **Divergent** Culture, which might help to lay a foundation for understanding the major shift we are experiencing. The research comes from economist and professor at the London School of Business Charles Handy who, for the last two decades, has sought to articulate the fundamental shift that makes organizational life more difficult than it has ever been.

He explains that we have made a fundamental shift from a world in which every problem we encountered had already been solved by someone, somewhere, to a world in which the problems we face currently have no known solutions. We can no longer rely on looking for what has already worked- we are dependent on that which has not yet been discovered, and the clock is ticking.

Most of the people in this room and in churches, boardrooms and businesses across this country grew up and learned to lead in a what Handy calls a **Convergent** culture, the problem being that those same people are now being asked to lead in a **Divergent** time when different skills are needed than the ones we came equipped to offer.

Convergence supports the certainty that exists when there is a **perceived right answer**, when that is the case the people bend collectively toward that perceived right answer. Convergence is when the question and the answer are the same for all concerned.

The period of time from the recovery of the Great Depression and World War II and leading up to the mid twentieth century created a bond of unity amongst Americans and formed a relatively cohesive national group because they shared a national and global agenda. Americans at that time lived with a shared sense of identity, with shared questions, shared convictions, shared expectations, and shared answers.

In a Convergent culture people lead with their sameness in a Divergent culture people lead with their differences; we are living now in a fully divergent time in history.

In a Divergent culture the question might be the same, but the answers are multiple and defined by the particular circumstances and needs of the individuals engaging that question.

- "Individual responses to sociopolitical events, like an election, are not distributed evenly across different groups of people,"

(Lindsay Hoyt, lead author of the *Psychoneuroendocrinology*)

"Overall, emotional and physiological responses are largely dependent upon gender, ethnicity/race, and political attitudes."

Divergence not only takes away certainty, it requires a willingness to admit, consult, and integrate multiple approaches and solutions. Some people are simply not able or not willing to allow for those adjustments.

Here is the good news: Jesus' message thrives in a Divergent culture.

Nicodemus, was a man who represented much of what Jesus opposed in religious hierarchy, he came to Jesus under a cloak of darkness.

Nicodemus was curious, he could see that there were changes afoot and he could not discern his place in the future unfolding before him so he came to ask some very vulnerable questions; like how much of what I know is about to change and will there be a place for me?

Of course, the conversation took place in metaphors of birth and rebirth, but I have always resonated with this passage because it is hardest to understand what is going on when we are standing smack in the middle of it. Nicodemus does not have the gift of foresight or hindsight and at this moment he is standing right in the middle of change, just as we are.

All change comes with a fair degree of grief, and uncertainty of having to shift from what we thought was right to finding our footing in the next right choice and the next right is often only as clear as mud, until it isn't.

So, we feel ya Nicodemus- what Jesus has to say to him and to us is consistent, out of death new life will come.

Out of death, new life will come.

The longtime Washington tradition of the National Prayer Breakfast brings together members of Congress from both political parties along with thousands of faith leaders, and every president since Dwight D. Eisenhower has attended. Sojourners Jim Wallace did not attend this year, but offered us this prayer instead, these are the words I'll leave you with today:

*In a culture increasingly ruled by conflict and polarization, (Holy One) teach us what it would mean and cost for us to follow Jesus who says, "Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." Help us to find the strength to be those children of God who show love and not contempt for our enemies and seek to resolve our deepening conflicts.*

*I pray for both parties to not be selective over who is entitled to life and dignity. Our theology of who bears the image of God must be consistent.*

*I pray for Christian believers to not put their political divisions first, but enter into a new conversation about Jesus — what he said, what he meant, and what that means now in our public life. Let us enter into those honest and vital conversations about who Jesus is and who he wants us to be, especially between our black, brown, and white churches.*

*I pray that citizens of different political persuasions refrain from attacking each other's character, but rather try to understand each other's deep concerns and hopes for their futures. In particular, help us to talk together about our hopes and fears for our children's lives and learn that we want the same things for our kids' futures.*

*I pray that religious believers in the United States put their faith over their politics, that citizens put their country over their political party, and that nobody in our country be exempt from the rule of law and the principles of our constitutional democracy.*

*In the midst of what is now a political, constitutional, moral, and spiritual crisis, with no certainty of how it will be resolved, we all pray, "Lord have mercy."*

*(God), replace our feelings of helplessness and hopelessness with a commitment to courageous action and the hope that we believe can only come from you.*

*"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1 Amen*