

## **And Justice for All!**

### **Isaiah 2:1-5**

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Dream and hope. Those are the primary themes that call to us this week as we celebrate Peace Sunday from the scripture from Isaiah. That reading from Isaiah centers on what is truly at stake for all creation, the hope for a new reality not only for Israel but for the whole world.

In the dream that is laid out in this text from Isaiah, there are still differences and conflict. What is radically different though in Isaiah's dream reality is that we do not solve conflicts with war; instead we seek out mediation as a pathway to peace. Isaiah proposes a reality where we 'shall never again know war'. That is the dream! Isaiah imagines a reality where we can differ and disagree and have conflicts and we can still know peace. Imagine that! The ability to differ and disagree and still have conflict and yet know peace! That is the dream that we find in this text from Isaiah.

Unfortunately, I think that dream is in serious jeopardy in our country right now. That dream is in danger from something that has been characterized as 'Christian nationalism'. This is the belief that our country, the United States, was established as an explicitly Christian nation and most alarming, that our country is a nation by and for Christians alone.

Now some of the things that Christian nationalists believe is that the close relationship between Christianity and the government needs to be protected at all costs. Also, that there is a God-given destiny for this country. Christian nationalism seeks to merge American and Christian identities and depends on an understanding of the United States as a "Christian nation," singled out for God's special favor.

Christian Nationalism demands that that Christianity be privileged in this country and implies that to be a good American, you have to be Christian. And it is often walking hand in hand with white supremacy. At its core, the principles and beliefs of Christian nationalism threaten the separation of church and state and have the potential to result in discrimination, and at times violence, against religious minorities and the nonreligious.

Christian nationalistic beliefs are showing up in many ways right now, from support for laws that codify specific interpretations of Christian morality (say around abortion, or use of the word 'gay' in schools) to the defense of religious displays on public property, to the support for public prayer in schools, to the crosses on display at the insurrection on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

Christian nationalism shows itself in a number of different ways, some more obviously harmful than others. The most violent expressions, such as what we saw at the January 6 insurrection, get

most of the attention. But the more subtle ones—like state legislative efforts to promote the teaching of the Bible in public schools or to require the posting of “In God We Trust” in public schools and other public places—are also dangerous in that they perpetuate the false narrative that to be a true American you have to be Christian—and often a very certain type of Christian.

History has shown us time and time again that when a nation becomes convinced that it is the government’s responsibility to carry out the mission of Christianity, it does **not** do that in the ways of the early church but in very governmental ways. This occurs mainly, by legislation, that often marginalizes the poor and dismantles perceived enemies. When a group is seen as a political and Christian “enemy” by the powers that be, the results can be tragic. What is worse though, is that these acts of violence can be incorrectly defined as sanctioned by God.

Now I want to be clear that what I am concerned with, Christian nationalism, is not the same thing as being highly religious, or having conservative beliefs. My concern here today is those understandings and practices where Christianity merges Christian and American identities and distorts both. I’m concerned with Christian Nationalists who seek to prioritize and privilege what they believe to be Christian norms and identities in order to separate out a special class of ‘true Americans’.

I’ll give you a very specific example. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, during the insurrection at our nation’s Capital, Jacob Chansley led a prayer on the Senate chamber using a megaphone. During the prayer Chansley thanks his “heavenly father” for the ability to: “send a message to all the tyrants, the communists, and the globalists, that this is our nation, not theirs, that we will not allow the America, the American way of the United States of America to go down.” He then continues: “Thank you divine, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent creator God for filling this chamber with your white light and love, with your white light of harmony. Thank you for filling this chamber with patriots that love you, and that love Christ.”

With this prayer on the Senate floor in the midst of an armed insurrection, we hear the call to reclaim Christianity’s rightful place in the heart of government and the call to restore the perceived proper order with patriots that love God and the desire to drive out those who have no right to claim this country as their own.

So why this topic on Peace Sunday? Why does it matter that I as a minister speak out against Christian nationalism? Why does it matter that we as a congregation speak out against Christian nationalism?

Because here’s what we all know about being Christian. We know that we are bound by faith and love and not citizenship to any country. We know that to follow the teachings of Jesus, that we are called into radical love, acceptance and welcome. We know that Jesus was a humble servant of the poorest of the poor and that he had an affinity for the outcast and the downtrodden.

We know that he lavished healing and mercy. And we know that nowhere in the New Testament is there any indication that Jesus would espouse specific governmental policies!

And here's what we know about being citizens in this country. We know that our founders wanted a clear separation between church and state. We know that people of all faiths and no faith at all have the right and responsibility to participate fully in what happens in this country. We know that we can be patriotic about our country and have faith traditions and beliefs.

We know that our religious affiliation (or lack of) should be irrelevant to our standing as a member of this national community, and we know that Government should not prefer one religion over another or religion over nonreligion. We also know that our country has a long and rich historic commitment to religious pluralism that supports religious communities living in harmony with each other without sacrificing what each believes.

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Because we follow the teachings of the one who preached radical welcome for all, who demonstrated gracious healing and transformation for all and who dreamed like Isaiah of a world where peace reigned. It's important for all who follow the teachings of Christ to be able to speak up in all manner of ways for the way of peace and justice.

The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr once wrote that 'the church must be reminded that it's not the master or the servant of the state but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state and never its tool.' So how do we as people of faith, guide the state?

I believe that we do that when we are cautious of anyone in authority who is stoking fear, hate and aggression against any group and that we seek out those who are instead advocating for love, kindness, and compassion while empowering the most vulnerable. It means that we Christians, we must stand up to Christian Nationalism, especially when it inspires acts of violence and intimidation.

It means that we care about not only the threat of Christian nationalism to American democracy but also its threat to Christianity as well. It means that we are called to honor all faith traditions and recognize that all are equal under the US Constitution and sacred in their own right. It means that we speak out and condemn Christian nationalism as a distortion of the teachings of Jesus.

And it means that we vote. It means that we serve in our local communities. It means that we find ways to demonstrate Christian beliefs and ideals of justice, peace, and love where we live. For me, that means that I serve on the Community and Health Services Advisory Board for my local municipality and that I vote in every election. Guiding the state as Martin Luther King Jr suggests means that Christians have a special responsibility and opportunity to both understand and dismantle Christian nationalism and demonstrate what Christ's teachings look like in our families and in our communities and in our world.

Over the coming months, our country will face an election and multiple Supreme Court rulings, all of which have the potential to impact the future of religious liberty in this country. Defending the separation of church and state is going to be critical regardless of how any of that comes down. We all have a role to play in doing our part to assure that the dream of peace and justice for all lives on in our families, our communities, and our world.

Dream and hope is what the Prophet Isaiah writes of when with the call to 'never again know war'. It is a call to resolve conflicts and to know peace for the whole world. A peace that isn't about not having conflict or disagreeing, but instead a peace built upon assuring that all voices are heard and honored. We all have a critical role to play in bringing that dream and hope of peace to fruition for all of God's creation.

I'll close today with Mahatma Gandhi's Prayer for Peace...

I offer you peace  
I offer you love  
I offer you friendship  
I see your beauty  
I hear your need  
I feel your feelings  
My wisdom flows from the highest source  
I salute that source in you  
Let us work together for unity and peace

Amen