

Declaring Independence from Toxic Patriarchalism
Sunday, July 3, 2022, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength, our courage, and our freedom. Amen.

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.*

These words from the vision cast in 1938 by Langston Hughes echo with particular poignancy in this particular moment as we gather on the Sunday closest to Independence Day in 2022 -- a year when the aspirational values he extolled and we strive to live into as a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal are under assault -- both literally and figuratively in ways most of us never imagined we would see in our lifetime.

Now make no mistake about it:
A consistent part of our collective story is that the liberty and justice we espouse as a national value have always been aspirational values we are journeying toward rather than destinations we which have at some point arrived.

Author, historian and friend of All Saints Church James Carroll summarized that story with these words:

"America began ... as a half-formed and rough idea, but that idea became the meaning against which all life in this country has been measured ever since. And what is that idea? It comes to us by now as the brilliant cliché of the Fourth of July, but with stark simplicity it still defines the ground of our being: "All men are created equal." That the idea is dynamic, propelling a permanent social transformation, is evident even in the way that word "men" strikes the ear as anachronistic now ... reminding us that to be an American traditionalist -- and isn't this what we universally celebrate on the 4th of July? -- is to affirm the revolution."

To affirm the revolution

is to affirm that no one is truly free unless all of us are -- and living into the pledge to "liberty and justice for all" that began in 1776 continues today as it has throughout our history ...

two steps forward and one step back.

In this moment we are clearly in "step back" mode.
And the work of the church is to speak to that moment.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann famously said:
*"The prophetic tasks of the church
are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion,
to grieve in a society that practices denial,
and to express hope in a society that lives in despair."*

So let's start with the tell the truth part.

Part of the truth in this particular moment
as we gather as All Saints Church --
either in person here at 132 Euclid
or online via livestream, YouTube or Facebook --
is that we gather bearing the weight
of the ongoing global COVID endemic on our hearts
with the threat of global war in the headlines

while the existential threat
of the global climate crisis continues unabated
in the middle of congressional hearings
into the violent January 6th insurrection
which came perilously close to overturning
the cornerstone of our democratic election process

as White Supremacist Christian Nationalists continue to conspire
to replace the constitutional republic our founders envisioned
with a theocratic oligarchy in alignment with their patriarchal worldview ...

all in the wake of recent Supreme Court decisions
taking away the rights of states to regulate guns,
the right of the EPA to regulate air quality
and the rights of those who can become pregnant
from making health care decisions about their own bodies.

None of this happened overnight.
There are a complex set of factors
that lead to the rise of the populist, nationalist, sexist,
xenophobic, white supremacist, homo/transphobic toxins
that have contaminated our body politic

and dominated our public discourse.

But incubating those factors
into this particular set of toxins
requires a kind of cultural Petri dish
which will simultaneously provide
the nutrients necessary to nourish the toxic worldview
while protecting it from contaminants
like data, facts, diversity and multi-cultural competency.

And I am convinced that the biblical literalism
foundational to 21st century American Evangelicalism
does precisely that.

It feeds, waters and fertilizes exclusively male language for God --
marginalizing women and non-binary people,
fanning the fire of unexamined privilege
of toxic patriarchy which
prefers a Putin-style oligarchy
over a democracy where brown, black and queer people
have voice and power.

It creates a context where it is a very short journey
from “the Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it” to
“my country, love it or leave it” –
with a direct connection to the rise of nationalism, sexism,
white supremacy and the rest of the litany of isms
that plague our nation and our world:
the rise of the forces we struggle against daily
as we live out our baptismal promise to persevere in resisting evil.

And it is this fertile environment that becomes
a breeding ground for a population pre-programmed
to believe fact-based science is an enemy of faith.

It quite literally lays down neuron tracks in the brain
set up to reject as “fake news” the very science
that calls us to come together
to save what we can of this planet we have exploited
and the very evidence that proves the conspiratorial abuse of power
for personal and political gain
which led to the January 6th Insurrection.

To be clear: the beauty, power and importance of the First Amendment

is that it protects every last one of us
to freely exercise the religion of our choice –
including the freedom to exercise no religion at all.

And including the freedom to reject science,
fact and data and to believe whatever one chooses
about what God wills, blesses or condemns.

However – and it’s a big however – the First Amendment **does not** protect
the right to confuse the freedom to exercise religion
with the license to impose religion.

And the job of defending the Constitution against all enemies –
foreign and domestic – requires each and every one of us to do our part.

If we are going to save our nation
from devolving into a kind of theocratic oligarchy,
those who believe that science and data are things –
those who embrace the vision of a nation
where liberty and justice for all literally means all --
must provide an antidote to the toxins of ignorance and “alternative facts” threatening our
constitutional democracy with polarization and division.

To affirm rather than subvert the revolution we mark
on this Independence Day weekend
is to declare our **own** Independence
from Toxic Patriarchalism
and to raise our voices as people of faith --
offering a rebuttal to those who have
hijacked the Good News of God's inclusive love
proclaimed by the radical rabbi from Nazareth
and turned a Christian Nationalist
weapon of mass discrimination
deployed against anyone who looks, believes, loves, identifies
or votes differently than they do.

And a brief historical note here:
Revolution against patriarchalism isn't something
20th century feminists
came up in some think tank in the 70's ...

Patriarchalism is a political theory that arose in England
in the seventeenth century that defended the concept of absolute power
for the monarchy, through language that emphasized

the "paternal" power of the king over the state and his subjects.

Its defenders used genealogy as a way to legitimize kingship -- tracing the throne's origins back to the original "fatherly rule" of Adam.

I know. Right???

Patriarchalism is what John Locke and other Enlightenment philosophers wrote volumes about as they dismantled "the divine right of kings" and inspired the revolution that began with tea in the Boston Harbor and ended with framing of a Constitution ... and the historic exchange between Benjamin Franklin and Mrs. Powell of Philadelphia ... who asked Dr. Franklin what kind of government we'd ended up with to which Dr. Franklin famously replied "A republic, if you can keep it."

Whether or not we could keep it has -- at times -- been an open question.

And it's pretty clear
that this is one of those times
as we face down the dual threats
of biblical literalism and constitutional originalism
deployed in the service of Christian nationalism
which is antithetical to the core Christian values of love, justice and compassion
and the core American values of liberty and justice for all.

But don't just take my word for it. Listen to these words from Tim Whitaker, a founder of the New Evangelicals movement from a recent NPR interview:

"Ultimately Christian nationalism is not about democracy. It's really about theocracy ... White evangelicalism rejects pluralism – completely. They do not see themselves as coexisting with other religious views or other sexuality ethic views. They see it as a spiritual battle and they are on God's side. When they start getting a taste – a small taste – of just making room for other viewpoints, that's perceived as a loss of power. And that's what they run on."

But back to Walter Brueggemann and our job as church:

*"The prophetic tasks of the church
are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion,
to grieve in a society that practices denial,
and to express hope in a society that lives in despair."*

So let's get to the hope part.

For there are both words of hope and an example to follow in the words we heard this morning from President Abraham Lincoln.

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

That is the work we are to be about ... in our country and in our church. Binding up wounds. Caring for widows and orphans. Working for lasting peace.

That was a tall order for a president trying to heal a nation in 1865 and it is a tall order for us trying to heal the world in 2022.

And yet we belong to a God who tells us over and over again that nothing is impossible ... and as the inimitable Bishop Barbara Harris reminded us over and over again:

The power behind you is greater than the challenge ahead of you.

And the good news this morning is that we follow a Lord who loved us enough to become one of us to show us how to love one another. Even the people we're not interested in loving.

Listen again to these words from today's gospel:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Let the love you extend be full just as the love God extends is full.

Jesus also said "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me --

for my yoke is easy and my light" --

words of promise that there is nothing we have to bear by ourselves: nothing too heavy for Jesus to bear with us.

In a few moments we are going to baptize Miranda into the Body of Christ.

In the process we are going to renew our own baptismal covenant which includes these words:

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

And how we live out that baptismal promise is at the core of how we -- as people of faith -- live out what Walter Brueggemann names as "*hope in a society that lives in despair.*"

It is how we commit to making
liberty and justice for all not just a pledge we make
and thy kingdom come on earth not just a prayer we pray
but realities we live ...
realities that bring us closer to the unrealized dream
of the world Langston Hughes imagined America could be ...
a dream we claim as our own this morning:

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.*

Amen.