

## ***Christian Nationalism***

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Ancient Witness: Exodus 20:1-5a

When I put the title, “Christian Nationalism,” on my sermon schedule a few months ago, I had no idea. I had no idea we’d be facing what we’re now facing. This past week, we saw a series of disastrous Supreme Court decisions, it seems to me. One made being homeless a crime, punishable by fines or jail. Another made it extremely difficult to regulate corporations to address climate change and to protect the environment, consumers, workers and citizens. Now, we’ve seen other terrible Supreme Court decisions in recent years: severely limiting gun regulation (“Heller” 2008), letting corporations dump unlimited money into elections (“Citizens United” 2010), gutting the Voting Rights Act (“Shelby County” 2013), and overturning “Roe vs Wade” and the right to an abortion (“Dobbs” 2022). But on Monday with its decision of “Trump vs the United States,” the radical right-wing court granted any President of the United States almost unlimited immunity from criminal prosecution. In her extraordinary dissent, Justice Sonya Sotomayer wrote that after this decision “the President is now king above the law.”

*When [a president] uses his official powers in any way, under the majority's reasoning, he now will be insulated from criminal prosecution.  
Ordering the Navy's Seal Team 6 to assassinate a political rival? Immune. Organizing a military coup to hold onto power? Immune. Taking a bribe in exchange for a pardon? Immune. Immune, immune, immune.*

And she concludes, “With fear for our democracy, I dissent.”

Now, on January 6, 2021 when the anti-American mob stormed our nation’s capital building in a violent act of insurrection, we saw flags with the name of Trump and the name of Jesus. There were signs that said, “Trump is my president and Jesus is my savior.” We saw both a gallows and the cross erected. We saw an insurrectionist offer a prayer in the name of Jesus at the podium in the Senate chamber. Behind this attempt of a minority to seize control of the country is a Christian nationalism that is perverting the faith and subverting our democracy. And on this Independence Day weekend, it’s important to distinguish between true patriotism and ugly nationalism. I am reminded of that famous saying attributed to Sinclair Lewis: “When fascism comes to the United States, it will be wrapped in a flag and carrying a cross.”

A few years ago, a group of evangelical pastors and leaders issued a statement condemning Christian nationalism’s role in the January 6 insurrection. As a pastor, I also signed this statement. It said:

*We know from experts on radicalization that one of the key elements is a belief that your actions are “blessed by God” and ordained by your faith. This is what allows so many people who hold to a Christian Nationalism view to be radicalized.*

*While we come from varied backgrounds and political stances, we stand together against the perversion of the Christian faith as we saw on January 6, 2021. We also stand against the theology and the conditions that led to the insurrection.*

James Talarico, a remarkable, young Texas State Representative spoke at his church, and I knew his pastor, Jim Rigby. I want you to listen to what he said:

*The Bible doesn't mention abortion or gay marriage, but it goes on and on about forgiving debt, liberating the poor and healing the sick. Christian Nationalists like to say this is a Christian nation. Not only is that historically inaccurate, not only is that theologically blasphemous, but it's not true.*

*If this were truly a Christian nation, we would forgive student debt.*

*If this were truly a Christian nation, we would guarantee healthcare to every single person.*

*If this were truly a Christian nation, we would love all of our LGBTQ neighbors.*

*If this were truly a Christian nation, we would make sure every child in this country was housed, fed, clothed, educated and insured.*

*If this were truly a Christian nation, we would never make it a Christian nation, because we know the table of fellowship is open to everybody including our Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and atheist neighbors.*

*Jesus could have started a Christian theocracy, but love would never do that. The closest thing we have to the kingdom of heaven is a multiracial, multicultural democracy where power is truly shared among all people.*

Sadly, there has been a long history in this nation of this unholy alliance of the church and the state that was used to uphold white supremacy. It was used to justify “manifest destiny” and the slaughter of Native Americans. And it was used to brutalize and enslave Africans who were kidnapped, brought to this land and sold as property.

We remember how the KKK adopted the symbol of the Christian cross in an arrogant display of the sick fusion of religion and the power of the state. And we must say—loudly and clearly—that a commitment to the way of Jesus is incompatible with white Christian nationalism and its call to violence. Our churches cannot be neutral. We must take the side of democracy, equality for all people, anti-racism and the common good for all people.

In her book, *The Power Worshipers*, Katherine Stewart says that more than anything else, Christian nationalism is about the lust for power—power to conquer, control and dominate by any means necessary, including dismantling democracy. And because they worship power, Christian nationalism becomes this counterfeit, imposter Christianity that is antithetical to the message and spirit of Jesus.

Christian nationalists form these unholy alliances with billionaires, Supreme Court judges, Senators, Representatives who promise to legislate their terrible theology and force it upon everyone. And these billionaires, judges and politicians use the votes of the Christian nationalists to enact their agenda and pursue their power. These two groups use each other.

Stewart writes,

*The Christian nationalist movement is not a grassroots movement... It is a means through which a small number of people—quite a few of them residing in the Washington, D.C. area—harness the passions, resentments, and insecurities of a large and diverse population in their own quest for power. The leaders of the movement have quite consciously reframed the Christian religion itself to suit their political objectives and then promote this new reactionary religion as widely as possible, thus turning citizens into congregants and congregants into voters.*

You see this power alliance in the 900 page document called “Project 2025” put out by the Heritage Foundation that lays out a plan to take over the country facilitated by an authoritarian leader. Some of the goals are theocratic, such as anti-LGBTQ law, a total abortion ban, the repeal of same-sex marriage and the like. Some of the goals reflect the interests of billionaires such as tax cuts, privatizing education, defunding Social Security and deregulating corporations. This alliance between the Christian nationalists and the small group of powerful and billionaires is reflected in this nightmarish plan.

And so this is also how Christian nationalists can support Donald Trump, a man whose character is as un-Christian as one can get. It’s all about power. It’s all about getting your way by any means necessary. I’ve heard some Christian Nationalists view Trump as a modern-day King Cyrus. In 539 BCE, Persia defeated Babylon. Some Jews declared that the Persian King Cyrus, who defeated the Babylonians and allowed the exiled Jews to return to Judah, was the Messiah or God’s anointed one. So Christian Nationalists see Trump in the same way, a flawed, imperfect strongman who God will use to win victory. So Trump and the Christian Nationalists are using each other. Rachel Laser is President of American United for the separation of church and state. She said, “Trump is conferring unparalleled privilege on one narrow slice of religion. He confers privilege in exchange for constant loyalty at the ballot box, no matter what he does.”

We need to reject this white Nationalist Jesus and remember that the real Jesus was a person of color—a poor brown-skinned Jewish peasant living in a white, Roman-occupied land. And he was murdered by the state and a sycophantic religion because he proclaimed that in God’s kingdom the poor are blessed, not forgotten.

But we must be vigilant because this Christian Nationalism is insidious. It is trying to creep in and encroach upon the church. And so, we need to remember what worship is.

Worship is an essential aspect of the Christian faith. Worship is when we practice as a community putting God as number one in our lives and what that means, what that implies.

Now making God our ultimate priority, giving God our ultimate allegiance is a very, very difficult thing to do! It requires practice, commitment, determination—all that and much more. And yet it is the basic foundation of the religious life. It’s the first and second commandments.

*Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on earth beneath that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. (Exodus 20:1-5a)*

The first and second commandments are about worship, that is, it should be worship of God and God alone. It seems to me that this is so foundational, so basic that, it seems to me, we need to be very, very clear about this.

The question is not *if* we worship. The question is *what* we worship. We all have things to which we give our top allegiance. We each have our top priorities. To be human is to struggle with misplaced priorities. We all fall short at times. As individuals and as faith communities, we need continual reminding and encouragement to keep God number one.

When we worship God, we take an honest look at the world and ourselves. In worship we acknowledge and confess that we fall short, miss the mark, and are not perfect—as individuals, as a church, as a nation, and so on.

Jesus once said, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God. Only God is good.” And so worship acknowledges this. Only God is good. But that’s O.K. It’s more than O.K.; it’s fantastic. Because it is the love of God that heals us, makes us whole, comforts us, transforms us, and saves us and the entire universe! And so when we worship, this is what we are proclaiming—that God and only God is good, and that the unconditional acceptance and grace of God gives Life.

So, nationalism is a form of idolatry. It makes a particular view of the nation an object of worship, beyond criticism. We cannot question it, improve it or transform it. Nationalism is an instrument to silence others, cut off debate and keep its citizens in line. Its agenda is domination and violence. (See bulletin cover) True patriotism, on the other hand, sees the country serving a higher agenda.

William Sloane Coffin said it well:

*There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.*

It’s important to remember that the church’s confession, “Jesus is Lord” was actually a political statement and a direct challenge to supreme allegiance to both the empire and the emperor. Many of those early followers paid for their ultimate loyalty to Christ with their lives.

Friends, we are at a pivotal time in the history of this young nation. We are witnessing the growth of a counterfeit Christianity based not upon love and justice, but upon domination and control that is merged with people of power and wealth to dismantle democracy and rule this nation. They have Senators, Representatives, Judges and may succeed in getting the Presidency

with new king-like powers. These are scary times. I'd love to have our congregation set a goal of 100% of our membership voting. We can do other things, too.

But I like how a friend of mine put it. He said we now have an opportunity to take our love and faith into new dimensions. So, yes. Let us make the most of this opportunity.