

January 10, 2021
 Farmville Baptist Church
 Psalm 46, Matthew 5:1-11.
 "Being Church in Turbulent Times."
 Tracy Hartman

Some of you may have seen the meme someone shared on Fb this week: "I'd like to cancel my subscription to 2021, I've experienced the 7 day free trial and I'm not interested." We knew that just because we turned the page on the calendar that things would not instantly improve, but between the sky-rocketing cases of COVID-19, and the events in Washington this week, the New Year has started out with a 1-2 punch that feels close to a knock-out. I've talked to a good number of you this week & we're tired, we're sad, we're angry. Many of us today, joined by fellow believers all across the nation are asking, "How can we live as Christians in the middle of all the turmoil?" "How can we be the church in these turbulent times?"

My short answer this morning is that now, more than ever, the church must fulfill her mission of being both pastoral *and* prophetic. We must be pastoral because many & if not all of us & are in need of an extra dose of care. By now we all know people who have had COVID, and many of us know people who have lost their lives. We can't gather to mourn our losses, just as we couldn't gather in traditional ways to celebrate the holidays with our family and friends. We're tired of wearing masks and being confined to our homes. We're tired of Zoom meetings and not being able to hug those we love. This week one of you said, "Even though my house is plenty large, this week I've felt like it's closing in on me." In addition, to COVID, we are all trying to process the tumultuous election season and the assault on the capital this week.

The first thing I want you to hear me say, is it is okay to name our pain & individually, as a congregation, and as a nation, and to mourn where we are. A few minutes ago, Sandy read the Sermon on the Mount for us. The second of the Beatitudes reminds us "Blessed are those who

mourn, for they will be comforted.ö The psalms can be extremely helpful to us during times like these. Some encourage us, like the one Jordan read earlier, öGod is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.ö Others help us own and give voice to our deepest fears, distress and discouragement. As I have read the psalms this week, I have been encouraged by the reminder that God hears our deepest cries, and that with God's help, others in Scripture have made it to the other side of incredibly dark times.

This has been true at points in our history as a nation as well. In the four months between Franklin Roosevelt's election and his 1933 inauguration, much of the world descended into chaos. Hitler took power in Germany and the Parliament building burned, Japan quit the league of nations and hundreds of US banks closed. Lynchings surged across the South. It was a dark time in our history, but it didn't destroy us. In fact, just the opposite occurred. Eleanor Roosevelt put it this way, öYou gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience where you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say, öI lived through this horror, I can take the next thing that comes along.ö

Helen Keller, another woman who endured incredible personal struggles, reminds us that although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it, and that while alone we can do so little, together we can do so much.

I agree with her on this, that we all need each other to navigate these days. We all need a safe place and people who love us to help us process what we are seeing and feeling. A ministry colleague wrote this week, our culture has few spaces where people of different political ideologies can exist together in community. Churches should be spaces where love of neighbor allows for free exchange of ideas and respectful disagreement; as well as places where we

encourage and walk alongside each other. Farmville has always been a diverse family that has taken care of each other. May we continue to commit ourselves to being this safe and caring place, not only for our members, but for our wider community as well.

The church needs to be pastoral so that we can all make it through this time, but we also need to support each other so that the church can have the strength and courage to exercise her prophetic voice. Reverend Chase Peeples reminds us that in these days, we must begin this process of exercising our prophetic voice by committing to humility and accountability in our search for truth. Two of the beatitudes we heard earlier tell us “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth and blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “In an age of “alternative facts” and “fake news,” Christians have an obligation to not only seek out truth but also to remain humble enough to remember we may always be wrong. In that spirit, we must refuse to spread on social media and email inuendos, half-truths, misrepresentations, and misleading images.

As we exercise our prophetic voices, Peeples reminds us that we must also lovingly hold one another accountable when our conceptions of God end up hurting other people and when our sense of what is right causes more harm than good. One of the things that disturbed me most about the events at the Capital this week were the number of signs and banners with Scripture or mentions of Jesus. Although civil disobedience is certainly appropriate for Christians when the state and biblical principles are at odds, Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” In his own ministry, Jesus modeled love, forgiveness and non-violence. We didn’t see much of that on Wednesday.

An important part of being prophetic means that we must speak truth to power. Of course there are both red and blue voters here this morning, but I hope that no matter how you lean, that we agree that a line was crossed in Washington this week. I have been grateful for the many faith leaders - pastors, denominational leaders ó both conservative and liberal who often agree on little, rabbis and imams who have had the courage to stand up against those who brought shame on our nation this week and to call out our nation's leaders who enabled and encouraged them. This is an important function of the truth, and I stand alongside them. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak, not to act is to act."

Another appropriate way for us to act as a faith community is to call for accountability from all who lead in in our community, our state and our nation. Peoples notes, "Setting aside partisanship, Christians have a role in calling leaders of all parties to work for the common good rather than their own political or financial gain." This week our daughter believed it was appropriate that the Senate and the House reconvened late Wednesday evening. For her, she appreciated that even the attack on the Capital couldn't stop the work of democracy. I agreed with her. Our son had a different take ó he said both the left and the right have had major protests this year, indicating that nobody is happy and that our system is terribly broken. He was appalled that our elected leaders on both sides of the aisle could go back to business as usual without acknowledging that they are a significant part of the problem. From very different perspectives, both of our young adult children recognized the need for our leaders to work for the common good. Although there are a variety of opinions about what constitutes the common good, and how we get there, we all need to be engaging in thoughtful and respectful dialogue and

action that benefits all who call this great nation home, and we need to hold those who lead accountable to the same.

As we exercise our prophetic voice, we must also remember that we are called to love God and to love our neighbors, all of them. Jesus commands us to pray for those we love as well as those we consider enemies. Whatever our political and religious beliefs, as Christians we must always view our thoughts, words and actions through the lens of love. Do our thoughts, words and actions align with the sacrificial love demonstrated by Jesus Christ? Do we listen to and respect others different from ourselves in the same way we expect to be listened to and respected? Christ is present even inside of people with whom we disagree or consider our enemies—so the love we offer to or withhold from others is the same as the love offered to or withheld from Christ.

I will be the first to admit how very hard all of this is, especially when we are already weary from all that 2020 brought our way. So friends, in our diversity let us continue to love one and encourage one another, to bear each other's burdens. Let us pray for one another, for our leaders old and anew, let us pray that God will heal our land. Let us continue to pray for an end to the pandemic and do our part to help us get there. Let us actively lean into the struggles we face as we are able, and let us give ourselves permission to step back and ask for help and care when we need it. And no matter where you find yourself today, whether you agree with my words or can't wait to send me an angry email, whether you need a hug or an action plan, know that you are loved—by God, by me, and by all the other faces you see on the screen this morning.

A friend shared this prayer with me this morning, I invite you to join your hearts together as we pray it now: "Lord this looks like a dead end, but so did the Red Sea. This looks too big to conquer, but so did Goliath. This looks like it's over, like insurmountable odds, like the end of the story" but so did the cross. I'm laying it at your feet and reminding my heart, This is Your story." Amen.

