

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus sends out his earliest followers to proclaim that God's kingdom is near. For me, this story has always reinforced my understanding of good discipleship. A testimony that when we live into our call, rely on each other, and care for our neighbor, there is a mutual grace and healing through Christ that does spread – and make manifest - God's kingdom.

But as I prepared my sermon this week, I didn't get any of that. Instead, the story felt...forceful. Threatening. Coercive. Retributive. "Believe what we believe, do what we say, or else...in Jesus' name." In the aftermath of the recent Supreme Court rulings, which have their roots – and branches – in white Christian nationalism, I read this gospel and shuddered.

As Amanda Tyler, Executive Director of Christians Against Christian Nationalism says "Christian nationalism demeans Christianity by using it as a proxy for a set of political positions, and damages our political discourse by implying that one must subscribe to a certain set of Christian beliefs to be a 'true' American."<sup>1</sup>

Christians who openly support Christian nationalism are still a small though growing minority. But even if we don't support this ideology, as Christians in this country, especially mainstream white denominations, we have benefited from it throughout America's history. We have been complacent about it. We are complicit in it.

Last Thursday, the 20s/30s book group discussed a Rachel Held Evans essay about the Sabbath. One member of the group drew our attention to a part about undoing. It reads:

When Jesus healed on the Sabbath...what he was doing was entirely in keeping with the point of the Sabbath, which was to honor the beauty, dignity, and integrity of what God had made. What he was doing was in fact an *undoing*—undoing the dishonor that some humans had heaped upon other humans, undoing the disregard of our equal standing before God as God's creation, undoing the harm and the marginalization that had occurred when some humans centered themselves and their manmade hierarchies."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://baptistnews.com/article/georgia-representative-says-christian-nationalism-actually-is-a-good-thing/#.Yr9DxxPMK3I>

<sup>2</sup> Evans, Rachel Held; Chu, Jeff. Wholehearted Faith (pp. 172-173). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Holy undoing. I'm not talking about hunting for the golden age of Christendom or disregarding our tradition for some theological originalism. But, as our fellow parishioner said, so often when we encounter despair and difficulty, we try to barrel through instead of looking at all of the underlying parts. Parts that must be faced and undone.

Here's another line from Evans' essay. I have replaced Sabbath with sending out: "And if Christ's sending out is about wholeness and about the people whom God created us to be, equal and loved, thriving and flourishing, could there be anything more right than for him to heal on that holy day? Could there be anything more right than for us to turn wholeheartedly toward our own healing in this holy calling?"<sup>3</sup>

Too long we've assumed it was others who needed us to heal them. That we own God's healing and it is ours to give as we see fit. Christians in America have centered ourselves in the story of this country and the story of God's people. That is the underlying sin in these recent rulings and Christian nationalism in general. Nothing could be less Christ-like. Our certainty and superiority has made the Church sick and, in turn, we have made others sick too. We have hurt real people. We are hurting real people. We must face and undo the sickness that chooses Christian empire over and at the expense of the thriving and flourishing of God's creation.

I'd like us to look at our Old Testament reading for guidance, using Rev. Dr. Rachel Wren's amazing exploration of this text.<sup>4</sup>

Isaiah 66 is the last chapter of the Book of Isaiah. The people have returned to Jerusalem from exile, but things don't look like they expected. All is not well. In the midst of this, the prophet tries to help the people imagine that a different way is possible, *seemingly* through a nationalistic lens. Such that it could be a real preaching pitfall to focus on this text, especially in America where we always see ourselves as Jerusalem and especially on the weekend when America celebrates Independence Day. But the prophet is up to something here.

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<sup>3</sup> Same as above

<sup>4</sup> <https://firstreadingpodcast.com/> - This exegesis is almost verbatim from Wren on the podcast episode.

The imagery is unusual in that it is distinctly feminine. Not just when personifying a city, Jerusalem, but when describing God. Further, it's a passage focused on bodies, on women's bodies, in an unapologetically positive way.

Isaiah starts with the call to rejoice over Jerusalem and the way she, her body, shall be prospered and glorified through all nations:

“Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her, all you who love her;  
Exult, exult with her, all you who were mourning over her!  
Oh, that you may suckle fully of the milk of her comfort,  
that you may nurse with delight at her abundant breasts!”

These first three lines focus on Jerusalem. Then verse 13 shifts from Mother Jerusalem to Mother God: “as a mother comforts her child so will I comfort you; in Jerusalem you will find your comfort.”

With the shift in subject, the prophet shows the listeners that Jerusalem is the space where they are comforted. But Jerusalem is not the source. God is. God is the source.

What if the author is shifting from this original nationalistic idea of the prosperity of Jerusalem to, actually you know what, I think we need to be directing that attention to God?

Throughout *all* of this passage, there's a sustained focus on the bodies of the listeners. On their bodies' well-being. Not because of Jerusalem, but because of God: rejoice in God. Exult God. As one translation goes: Drink deeply from God.

“When you see this,” verse 14 reads, “your heart will rejoice, and your bodies will flourish like the grass.”

And that is the crux to this whole piece. Because, when you hear “the wealth of nations”, what do you think of?

Power. Controlling. Winning. Other countries (or parties) lining up to pay tribute.

But instead, what's emphasized after this big pivot is bodies. Bodies that are healthy and flourish like the grass. Bodies, not as some abstract metaphor used to tout your victory – no, it's actual flesh and bone bodies that the author cares about. It's actual embodied creation that God cares about.

God takes this image of the wealth of nations and says, it is not necessarily money or power, but health and healthy bodies. And if you turn your attention away from this nationalistic dream, and turn towards me and your ability to drink and desire and delight in me, then I will show you how to live, and this will be your sign: bodies will flourish in your community like the wealth of nations.

This provocative image stands quite simply for a flourishing healthy community full of flourishing healthy bodies. (Pause for people to hear that. God loves you. Cares about your bodies. Desires for them to flourish. To know love and care. To be healed. And to never feel alone in your pain.)

Flourishing bodies. That's it. And that's everything. Take eat. Take drink.

And God does not distinguish some bodies from others. The prophet isn't using wheat and chaff imagery, but a field of grass – it functions as a whole. And either the grass is healthy and living, or not. So what if the point of this passage is not some promise of a future national triumph over others that shows God is on your side? What if it's actual bodies right now. Even if you agree with the recent Supreme Court rulings, it is difficult to argue they will help bodies – help real people – flourish. They constrict. Strain. Cast aside. Control. What does it say that this is how you must achieve your goal? Supposedly please God? Christian nationalism disregards bodies. All in the name of a belief system to which the majority of people these rulings effect do not subscribe. The repercussions of this nationalist triumph will cause God's beloved to [wither](#).

As theologian and minister Dante Stewart says, "There is a difference between having Christian commitments and trying to create a Christian nation. Jesus desires the liberating kingdom of love not a Christian empire of domination. To be people of faith

means we join God and our neighbors in creating a more loving and liberating country for everyone.” May it be so. Amen.

## Quotes & Links

What is Christian nationalism? Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life. Christian nationalism contends that America has been and should always be distinctively “Christian” from top to bottom – in its self-identity, interpretations of its own history, sacred symbols, cherished values, and public policies – and it aims to keep it that way. But the “Christian” in Christian nationalism is more about identity than religion. It carries with it assumptions about nativism, white supremacy, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and militarism.

- Christians Against Christian Nationalism  
<https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org>

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