

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Dayton, Ohio

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A Call to Reason Together

First Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 1:14-20

Second Scripture Lesson: Matthew 28:16-20

Focus: Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD—Isaiah 1:18 (KJV)

In other words, our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is.—Dwight D. Eisenhower, Address at the Freedoms Foundation, Waldorf-Astoria, New York City, New York, 12/22/52.

Anyone who puts politics first is not fit to be called a civilized human being let alone a Christian.—Lord Hailsham.

First Scripture Lesson

Our first Scripture Lesson is from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is just like all the other prophets . . . only more so.

As a prophet, he delivers the Word of God, a Word that challenges both the status quo and our complacency with it, in ways that can be discomfiting—even terrifying:

Listen up! God is not happy. You are not living as you should, as God wants—as God demands. The poor are oppressed, and the widow, the orphan, the foreigner in your midst—are ignored and trampled down. Your ways are corrupt, violent and divisive. Despite all your outward pretenses to religiosity, you forsake, justice, God's justice, and goodness, God's goodness. And God is not going to put up with this any longer.

And yet at the same time, almost in the same breath: “Comfort ye”—you know this, don't you? They're the opening lines from Handel's *Messiah*. John can you help me here? That's it: “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God, saith your God.”

Those words are also from the prophet Isaiah. Take comfort: God still loves you—God longs for you, God weeps for you: like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still. “Comfort ye, my people.”

In the passage I'm about to read, you can hear Isaiah starting with discomfort, shifting to comfort, and then, at the end, going back a little bit to discomfort. (I'll try to mark the shifts as we go.) Isaiah Chapter 1 verses 14-20. Listen now for God's Word to us. God speaking through the prophet Isaiah:

Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands,
 I will hide my eyes from you;
 even though you make many prayers,
 I will not listen;
 your hands are full of blood.
 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
 remove the evil of your doings
 from before my eyes;
 cease to do evil,
 learn to do good;
 seek justice,
 rescue the oppressed,
 defend the orphan,
 plead for the widow.

Come now, let us reason together,
 says the LORD:
 though your sins are like scarlet,
 they shall be like snow;
 though they are red like crimson,
 they shall become like wool.
 If you are willing and obedient,
 you shall eat the good of the land;
 but if you refuse and rebel,
 you shall be devoured by the sword;
 for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Second Scripture Lesson

When Jesus calls his disciples to do something, he challenges the status quo and their complacency with it, in ways that can be discomfoting, even terrifying:

“Listen up! I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves: Go, and proclaim the good news: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

“And as you do, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. But don’t take any gold, or silver, or copper with you; no bag for your journey, no second tunics, or sandals, or even a staff.

“And hear this: you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, and you will be hated because of my name.”

Discomfoting, to say the least. And yet at the same time, almost in the same breath, Jesus speaks words of comfort:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; so don’t worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. And the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Discomfort—a daunting challenge; and comfort—a reassurance of God’s abiding presence and love through that challenge; that’s what any call from God entails.

You can hear both in the passage I’m about to read, it’s the call of all calls, the calling that is ours too—the great commission at end of Matthew’s Gospel. I’ll try to mark both the daunting challenge and the comforting reassurance as I go—but I’m sure I don’t need to, you can hear them clearly enough. Matthew Chapter 28, verses 16-20. Listen now for God’s call to us:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; [right hand] but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. [left hand] And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Sermon

“Our form of government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what [faith] it is.”—so said Dwight D. Eisenhower, speaking to the Freedoms Foundation, in New York City, in December 1952, right after he was elected, but right before he was inaugurated, to be president.

And because Eisenhower didn’t care what faith it was . . . he became . . . a Presbyterian.

I’m not kidding: on February 1, 1953—just ten days into his presidency—Eisenhower was baptized by the Reverend Edward Elson—becoming the first, and still the only, US president to be baptized while in office, and thereafter he became a member and regular attendee at the National Presbyterian Church in Washington DC where Elson served as pastor.

But Eisenhower’s statement—“Our form of government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what faith it is”—I can think of no other statement that better captures the mid-20th century, post-World War II, American consensus about the role of religion in public life.

In it, you can hear not just an acceptance, but even an approval, of religious pluralism. And you can also hear a desire—a deep desire—to downplay religious differences; and beneath that, a fear—a fear that such differences can be divisive and even detrimental to civic cohesion and the common good. And above it all, you can hear the belief that, in the United States of America, religious faith can—and must—support the rule of law, neighborliness, and a commitment to the common good.

That last being a distinctively American emphasis, by no means unique to Eisenhower or mid-20th century America.

“America,” the Englishman GK Chesterton wrote in 1921 “is the only nation in the world founded on a creed . . . a nation [but] with the soul of a church.”

And to see that soul, all you have to do is look at the reform movements that have periodically swept across the nation—from the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries, to the effort to abolish slavery, to the fight to win the vote for women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to prohibition to the Civil Rights movement—one way or another, they were all religious in both origin and expression.

In 1957, for example, during Eisenhower's second administration, it was the REVEREND Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who helped to found the Southern CHRISTIAN Leadership Council, which was also an ecumenical movement.

And if you look across the sweep of all these movements in American history, there's much to be grateful for: evils were lessened, wrongs were righted, public health and education improved, the rule of law, neighborliness, and the commitment to the common good were all advanced.

And even when things didn't work out quite so well, as with the 18th Amendment and prohibition, which was, in large part, the work of the Women's CHRISTIAN Temperance Union, there's still something—much, in fact—to be admired.

Remember: Prohibition was in large part a feminist movement. It was motivated by faithful, brave, and committed women who saw the damage alcohol abuse and its accompanying evils brought not just to our democratic institutions, but also to families, especially to women and children, especially among the poor. They saw that, and they wanted to do something about it, and that's admirable.

With that sweep of American history in mind, you can see why Eisenhower said what he said, and why in his day and since, some have said that, when he joined the Presbyterian Church, he was “just being a politician.”

Indeed, during his presidential campaign, many of his advisors had urged him to join a church—any church—saying that the American electorate would never fully embrace a president who had no religious affiliation.

But it goes deeper than that. Although Eisenhower, the son of devout Mennonite parents, left off church-going during the early years of his military career, it never really left him.

Through the years, as he rose through the ranks, as Eisenhower witnessed the horrors of war—“I hate war,” he once said, “only as a soldier who has lived it can [hate it], only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity [can hate it]”—and as he bore the burdens of leadership in war, it seemed to evoke in him, if not an outward religious affiliation, then at least a respect for religion and even a religious sensibility: he would frequently quote the Bible when speaking to the troops and often attended non-denominational prayer services.

Later, Eisenhower, the politician, saw the benefit of joining the church. But Eisenhower, the human being, wouldn't do so until after he was elected, because to do so before would be to cheapen the faith in general and his faith in particular: it would make it seem like a mere means to a merely worldly, political end, namely, his presidential election.

And so really, if you think about it, Eisenhower himself represents the mid-20th century, post-World War II, American consensus about the role of religion: it's important, it matters personally, but don't wear it on your sleeve; downplay the differences among religious faiths, they're not really that important; and the

public role for religion is a kind of generic social and moral uplift: to bring us together, to promote the rule of law, neighborliness, and the common good.

But you had to know that, sooner or later, with time, the stresses and strains within that consensus were bound to appear.

Because, if you downplay all doctrinal differences—that is, all the things you actually believe, that actually move or motivate you, or at least you consign them entirely to the private realm—then the role of religion in public life can easily lapse into a bland, generic, deistic civic and national boosterism, one that is easily co-opted into preserving the status quo and our complacency with it.

And so you had to know that prophets would arise—because all the major, historical religions have their prophets and their prophetic traditions.

I know, because I was there. I was just a child, but I was there.

In 1972, the senior pastor, a World War II veteran, was a well-groomed, well-spoken, well-liked man in his late forties, who drove his Buick to Rotary and school board meetings.

But the new assistant pastor? Fresh out of seminary, he had a big bushy mustache and thick curly hair in the back—that's his car parked over there, the Volkswagen Beetle, the one with the peace sticker, and he was rumored to attend anti-war protests.

And so even as child, sitting between my two older sisters in church (“Would you, please, sit still!”), using that little pencil to diagram football plays in the margins of the bulletin, even then, I could still feel the discomfort: the clearing of throats and the shuffling of feet, someone getting up in the back, as the young assistant pastor—it was his week to preach—questioned the United States military involvement in Southeast Asia. I was young, but I could feel the discomfort.

The stresses and strains were bound to appear.

And yet whether it was 1952 or 1972 or even 1987 (fast forward 15 years, make the appropriate changes, and you can replay the same scene over US involvement in Central America), whether the call was for gradual civic improvement in the 50's or for dramatic prophetic change in the late 60's or early 70's—there was still an underlying consensus, a belief, largely unstated, that religion in general was a good thing to bring us together, to promote the rule of law, neighborliness, and commitment to the common good.

But I'm here to tell you today what I think you already know: it's not 1952 anymore; and it's not 1972 or even 1987. It's 2022, and we can no longer assume that consensus holds.

To show you this, I only have to talk about one word, a word that I still have a great affection for despite its recent wayward wanderings, a word that I very much want back, a word that, I know, when I say it, will frighten and upset many of you, but I'm going to say it anyway, and that word is . . . wait for it . . . wait for it . . . *evangelical*.

Now back in the 1970's and 80's, “evangelical” meant that big, new “non-denominational” church out near the mall, the members of which would stop you in the mall parking lot, pamphlets in hand, to ask whether

you had accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, to which my parents invariably—but politely—replied, “Thank you, but we’re Presbyterian.”

But “evangelical” goes back way farther than that: back to the New Testament, where the Greek word euangelion, literally means “Good News,” that is, the Good news of Jesus Christ, the news that Jesus sent his disciples out to proclaim (“the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”)

And in the 1500’s the Protestant Reformers adopted “evangelical” as a self-description in contradistinction to the church of their day, which, as they saw it, had abandoned Jesus’ call (“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”) for merely worldly, political ends.

But in 2022, “evangelical” has come to mean something different: It’s come to mean subscribing to a certain cultural mindset, affiliating with a particular political party, and even identifying with a single political figure.

So much so that pollsters have recently observed a surprising new phenomenon: when asked about their religious affiliation, people who have not been inside a church (denominational or non-denominational) for decades, who could not state a single teaching of any religious tradition to save their lives, will nonetheless identify as “evangelical” precisely and *only* because they subscribe to that mindset, affiliate with that party, and identify with that political figure—and they very much want the pollster to know it.

So I have to tell you: I want our word back. Yes, that’s right: our word, “evangelical,”—I want it back. Now of course other people can have it too, and use it however they choose. I’m not the language police—I get it: words have multiple meanings—meanings change and develop over time; not only do I get that, I enjoy it. But I want people to know about, at least to acknowledge, this older, deeper, and—dare I say?—truer meaning of our word, “evangelical.”

And so I have a plan—a plan I haven’t told anyone about yet, but one I thought I’d try it out this morning.

You ready?

I want to hang a big banner—a huge banner—outside, across the front of the church: “WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH: **THE** EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.”

You know, like: **THE** Ohio State University,” “**THE** EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

So whaddya think?

Now I see the worried look on your faces: “he’s just kidding . . . isn’t he?” And others: “we’ll talk to him about this later.” And still others: “We’ll talk to John or Nancy, or Anna, or Caitlin about this later, and they can talk to him.”

But I can tell you what John or Nancy or Anna or Caitlin are going to say, “Uh, Richard, you are aware, aren’t you, that this needs session approval?” And session will probably decide that we need to study it *just* a little more. Which is all well and good, probably wise, in fact.

But hear me out: Yes, some people might come in and be surprised: this isn’t what the sign led them to expect. But I assure you: this is NOT bait-and-switch. I want people to discover that you can be part of a

diverse, inclusive, welcoming, and loving congregation whose members do not all subscribe to a certain cultural mindset, affiliate with a particular political party, or identify with a single political figure, and be all the more evangelical for it.

I want them to discover that we are “evangelical” in the older, deeper, and truer sense of the word—because we share the love of our Lord, Jesus Christ. And because that is our highest good, we recognize that the faith should never be a mere means to any merely worldly political end.

And if we disagree on the political issues of the day? Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD. That (I think) is our calling in 2022.

Because in 2022, and we can no longer assume a shared consensus that religion in general is a good thing to bring us together. In fact, many people now see religion in general, and Christianity in particular, as divisive and even detrimental to civic cohesion and the common good—the very thing that Eisenhower and mid-20th century America feared most.

But we are part of, and inherit the blessings of, a tradition that says otherwise: a tradition through which evils have been lessened; wrongs, righted; public health and education improved; the rule of law, neighborliness, and commitment to the common good all advanced.

And in 2022, when the rule of law, neighborliness and commitment to the common good seem imperiled, we are called, as inheritors of that tradition, to show that we still can all reason together even when we disagree.

Yes, it’s a daunting, even discomfoting, calling. But when Jesus calls his disciples to do something, when he challenges the status quo and our complacency with it, he also promises his abiding presence and love: “Comfort ye, my people: and remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

And really, the longest journey begins with a single step.

I have a friend, a member of this church, who told me that during the last several weeks as the disturbing political postings have been piling up on her Facebook page—“Yes, I knew so-and-so had gone in that direction, but really? THIS IS CRAZY!”—She has employed the “Take a Break” button on Facebook: when you use it you’re still friends with the person—you don’t “unfriend” them, you don’t even “unfollow” them—you just “take a break”: and for as long as you “take a break,” you’re no longer able to see their postings, nor are they able to see yours.

It’s a good first step, one (I think) both eminently reasonable and Christ-like. And so a modest proposal: for one day, all Americans should “take a break” (or do whatever is the equivalent on other social media or for cable news): Get away from our screens, and talk to someone, face-to-face, for longer than 280 characters.

“America . . . the only nation in the world founded on a creed . . . a nation [but] with the soul of a church.”

Which means, Chesterton the Englishman observed, that sometimes Americans do heroic things, and other times “insane, unworkable or even unworthy” things. Why? Because we’re always trying to figure out what our creed means and how we live up to it.

In other words, America is great not for what she has been but for what we aspire to be.

But it also must be said, in the year 2022, that we do have the oldest existing constitutional government, with representatives elected by the people, in the world.

So, tomorrow on the Fourth of July, let's honor that—let's take a break and enjoy the fireworks; and then, the next day, let's remember the special meaning of the Fifth of July for our African-American brothers and sisters; and on all the days after that, let us honor our country by living up to our calling: "Come, let us reason together says the Lord."

"You have a republic," Benjamin Franklin said to Mrs. Elizabeth Willing Powel, who had inquired of him on the last day of the constitutional convention. And then he added: "if you can keep it."

Let's pray to God that we can.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.