

## Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent: John 2:13-22

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Y'all, I'm beat. I'm tired down in my bones, soul tired. Anyone else just plain wore out? Last week, after I preached on Nex Benedict's death, someone asked if I was ever going to stop preaching politics. It's a fair question. And I'll be honest, I don't particularly love preaching about that sort of stuff. But there's a deep need. If politicians would just stay out of religion, I'd be inclined to return the favor. But they just can't seem to help themselves. That said, there's a long tradition of our history tied up in that gunk, for better and definitely for worse. Skip all the way back to the beginning of our scriptures, and we're already in that milieu. Joseph guided Pharaoh, King David was the apple of God's eye, countless prophets sat on cabinets and took sides over divisive issues. The thing is, today's not quite the same thing. See, those folks lived in a theocracy or something very close to it. Their country was their faith. They believed all their national successes came from God, and all their national hardship, too. As the stories go, God won their battles, God enriched their palaces, God gave their laws. Of course their politics were interwoven with their faith.

By the time we get to Jesus, he's living in a world that's a little bit of both. Some of the rules were the law of the empire, some remained in the hands of the priests. Ultimately, Rome decided which ones mattered more, but even Rome had its own unique relationship to religion. Their pantheon of gods was one part deeply held faith and one part cosmic soap opera. When they conquered new lands, they were fine with letting the new subjects keep their own faith so long as they recognized Rome on top. The various uprisings in Jerusalem's history -- against the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, to name a few -- those uprisings were as much religious as they were political. The Temple in the middle of the city wasn't officially the seat of the government, though everyone knew that's where the real power lay. It was so obviously important even to outsiders that conquerors leveled it twice. When Jesus cleans out the Temple, it's a religious act, sort of re-purifying the sacred. But those in power see it as a political threat. It's a threat because it challenges how they do things, including how people make their money. Since we're in Lent, it probably bears repeating that when they bring charges against Jesus, the charge they bring isn't a religious one. It's political. "This man says he is the King" and then sorta under their breath "and he blasphemes, too."

I really wish religion and politics could stay separate. For what it's worth, Jesus never once said we should establish a government in his name. I remember my Civics classes. I remember how scary it gets when religion takes the reins of government. I suspect a lot of minds are going to modern examples. Maybe you've seen those pictures of Iran before and after the Revolution in 1979? The before pictures are colorful; their clothes were kinda mod; hairstyles looked like Hollywood; variety was everywhere. Now, the legally-mandated hijab hides hairstyles and women's individual choice gets subsumed by religious law.

Before you think this is just a Muslim problem, look to the British Empire. The monarch of England holds two roles: head of the nation and head of the church. These days, that's a little less of a problem, albeit the bishops of the church still automatically get seats in the legislature, but there was a time when religious fanaticism drove England's expansion and subsequent genocides on multiple continents, all in the name of claiming supposedly savage souls for the Christian God.

Modern-day Israel's another prime example. Now, before I go further, a quick word that feels absurd to have to say. This is not about Judaism. This is not about Jewish people. When we get further into Lent and Holy Week, we'll have to deal with our own religion's history with anti-semitism. This is about theocracy, and modern Israel is very much in that world. Terrible things have happened to them, and they continue to inhabit a very difficult geographical place in the modern world.

But what they are doing with Palestine is plain wrong. I know, they need to be able to defend themselves. I get that. But they've gone far beyond defense. And I know, back in October, the Hamas attack that killed 1,139 people was horrendous. For what it's worth, Hamas is a religious group with political power, too. But since then, the State of Israel has engaged in its own attacks on civilians. Just last Thursday, over one hundred Palestinians were killed and another 700 injured when they were trying to get food from an aid convoy. All told, roughly 1,400 Israelis have died in the conflict. Depending on who you ask, that number's between 12,000 and 30,000 for Palestinians. It seems there's no proportionality when you're fighting for God and Country. I know it's not as simple as religion or politics in that part of the world, but when countries use religion as a tool, attacks on civilians, children, the starving, they can claim it's not terrorism; it's a righteous and holy defense of God's people. It's incredible what you can justify when you hide behind God.

Ok, that was a lot. We all know the world is broken. We all know the Middle East is complicated. We all know religious extremism is bad. What's making me so tired these days is that we're being encouraged to see religious extremism everywhere in other people and other religions, while in a weird sort of double-speak, we're also being duped into believing that the religious extremism growing within Christianity is actually reasonable. There's some serious mental gymnastics there, but mouthpieces for those seeking power lead us down the garden path and all the way to the tomb. And there, they point to a stone not yet rolled away and tell us who they want us to believe put Jesus there. And no, it isn't the Romans. Sometimes they'll say the Jews, but usually they're a little more circumspect. No, it's the gays, or the poor, or the exorbitantly wealthy. It's foreigners, and people with brown skin, and children figuring out who they are. The empathetic, the loving, the honorable. These days, if you're anything like Jesus actually was, you can be blamed for crucifying that same Christ.

And y'all, it's easy to get sucked into that view. We come to church and hear lessons from scripture and a sometimes angry preacher, and then the entire rest of the week, we're bombarded with reasons all that we learned on Sunday gets it wrong. Just by sheer volume of information, Christians trying to get this whole love-your-neighbor thing right are fighting an overwhelming force. And then, when we push back to remind the world who Jesus was, then we're told we can't bring religion into politics. And that's so dang frustrating because I don't want religion in politics. I don't want anyone's there, including mine. CS Lewis himself said theocracy is the worst kind of government and works on people like an intoxicant. It's way too powerful and relies on the desires and prejudices of those wielding it. It's not unreasonable or extremist to recognize that.

I don't know about y'all, but I get lambasted for reminding folks of this danger. How can I possibly be a good Christian and not want a Christian Nation? I don't want a Christian Nation because I remember my history. I know what Christians do with power. I know what religions do with power. I also know which Christians (and which religious people) long for power and take it. I'll give ya a hint: it's not the reasonable that make a theocracy; it's fanatics. And my Lord do they wield power. And they wield it most effectively through their followers. I ran into a quote the other day that says "The road to fascism is lined with people telling you to stop overreacting." I can't tell you how often I've been called paranoid or even anti-Christian because of this stuff. Must just be my imagination or some overly-apocalyptic fear of a future that hasn't happened yet; surely all these Christians couldn't get it wrong.

Y'all. I'm so tired of this, and I know this year's only going to get worse until the polls close. I doubt it'll stop then, but at least we might get a chance to catch our breath. I think part of what's so exhausting is it feels inevitable, like trying to save a town from flooding with nothing but a mop bucket and a desire to preserve the precious gifts we have. The group The Compassionate Conservative Revival warns, "Christian Nationalism seeks supremacy over all else; whereas our Lord never did. Our nation is a country founded for religious

freedom—for all religions—even those we don't agree with. ... Christian Nationalism not only threatens our republic, it belittles our faith. It is a fixture of the empire, not of [God's] Kingdom.”

“Christian Nationalism” is an oxymoron. It neither benefits Christianity nor the Nation. I’ll set the Nation stuff aside; we’ll get enough of that the rest of the week. But looking at the Christian stuff, there are over 45,000 denominations of Christianity worldwide. But when Christianity gets tied up with the political sphere, we don’t get breadth. We tend to get a single option, and it tends to be the least Christ-like of ‘em all. Those that don’t subscribe to that one option get punished, often horribly. Read up on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s story of trying to keep Christ-like Christianity alive in 1940s Germany. He was hanged for his teaching by “Christian Nationalists.” And he’s far from alone. History’s riddled with horrendous acts done by nations hiding behind the vestments of Christendom.

Christianity today needs a good ol’ fashioned Temple Cleansing. I don’t want Jesus as President, but I’d love for him to show up with his whip and flip some hypocritical tables. I’m sure there’s some he’d find to flip in my soul, too, and much as I might hate it, I need it. And so do our churches. Do not let the “Christian” in “Christian Nationalism” fool you. It’s a misnomer, and it’s intentional. It is fascism first, and “Christian” only when it needs a cudgel. My siblings in Christ, Lent is about a lot of things. Top of that list is purgation. We desperately need this season to purge what needs purging in our tired hearts, tired bones, and tired souls. Some of that’s highly personal. You do you. But some of that’s collective, and our communal body has work to do. Stay alert, keep watch for wolves in sheep’s clothing, and remember that when we ask “What would Jesus do?” flipping tables remains an option...for now.