

God is Still Speaking through Politics

Matthew 2:1-18

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From the very beginning of Jesus' life, he was enmeshed in the challenging and cruel political life of his era. The story we heard from the Bible today paints the messy picture, a story we only usually hear at Christmas up to verse 12, when the Magi left for home by another road. King Herod, we are told, was "frightened" by the news of a new king being born, because his wives had not given birth lately. He decided pretty quickly to eliminate this possible usurper of his rule, but the Magi tried to thwart his plan, revealed to them in a spiritual vision, by becoming the first people to do an act of civil disobedience in the name of Jesus. They refused to tell the King they had found the child. Not to be daunted, and in the tradition of cruel rulers from ancient times to today, he decided to harm the innocent, the children, and their parents, to make sure no one could threaten his control. Jesus and his family had to flee, to become political refugees in Egypt, until Herod died.

God's entry into the world human form started out with exposure to politics at its worst. Then, as an adult, from dealing with the death of his cousin John the Baptist (by a different Herod) to the political machinations that resulted in his own death, Jesus continued to challenge the prevailing values of those who had political control over people who were often voiceless and powerless.

His disciples, including the apostle Paul, continued that tradition, which is why so many of them were killed by politicians and rulers.

Our own ancestors in faith here, the Puritans, came to this land because they challenged the politics of church and state in

England. Sadly, when they came here many of them sought to erect similarly exclusive power arrangements that, this time, benefitted them, claiming God had chosen them to set up a “city on a hill.” And they were challenged by people of faith like Anne Hutchison and Roger Williams and the Quakers.

The churches of today have also been politically involved, in all parts of the U.S. political spectrum. Some of you will remember “the Moral Majority.” There are churches and clergy today who somehow are claiming that God set up this country to be for white people only, or at least ruled over by white people only, actually white men only.

There are churches and clergy today who challenge this ideology, who have been down at the border reaching out to those seeking refuge here, who find in their faith God calling them to reach out, as Jesus did, to those who are outsiders, oppressed, hurting, and rejected by those in political power. And some of them are being prosecuted, persecuted, by our government, despite the 1st amendment.

Throughout the history of Christianity, our faith has been used by rulers and the ruled, by cruel tyrants and their victims, by those seeking to score political points on all sides with sound bites of scripture taken out of context.

As the story of Jesus’ temptation shows us, the devil can quote Scripture to its own ends, and often does.

So, our faith has always propelled us into the political realm. But we have to be careful how we exercise our faith in the political realm. That doesn’t mean we don’t do it. It means we listen and discern and test where God is speaking. It means we find a sacred center in the words and actions of Jesus to help us see where we need to come as people of faith to say that something is wrong.

Here's a place to start. Love one another, Jesus said, as I have loved you. At the other end of Matthew's gospel from the story we read earlier, we find Jesus detailing what this looks like: The blessed ones of God did this "When I was hungry, you gave me food. When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. Now it gets political. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me. When I was naked, you gave me clothing. When I was sick, you took care of me. And again, political. When I was in prison, you visited me. Whenever you did this to one of the least of my family, you did it to me." Charity and Justice form the core of love in the way of Christ.

When our nation persecutes people who try to do these things, exercising their faith, as they did to people bringing water to refugees in the desert, then people of faith are called to action. When our leaders promote hate and exclusion rather than love and inclusion, you really have to do some mental and spiritual gymnastics to say that you are following Jesus. Sometimes politics is messy and murky and it's hard to know what is right. Sometimes what is right is very clear. Let us work harder to act with the clarity of love as people freely exercising our religious faith. Our rights of conscience cannot be infringed upon by the state. (That was in the original wording of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, but it was removed in favor of "free exercise of religion.") Where are you being called to work with people of faith to redress some grievances? After we sing, three members of Center Church's Core team for the new faith-based community organizing group in Hartford (Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance or GHIAA) will share some testimonies about the possibilities in this new work! Amen.