

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

Alive in Creation: What Do We Do Now?

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Psalm 146

Acts 1:1-11

So what do we do now? All the excitement is over. The future is uncertain. Our leader has left us. So what do we do now? I wonder if this is what the disciples were thinking to themselves as they once again watched Jesus be taken from them. Those men and women had been on a three-year campaign, where they crisscrossed the country, making friends, building coalitions and offering a new vision for the Kingdom of God. They had been there at the highs when Jesus entered Jerusalem. They had been there at the lows when Jesus had been arrested, tried and crucified. They were there at the highs when Jesus was resurrected and returned to them. Now, once again, they are at a crossroads. Excitedly they had asked Jesus if the moment had come to restore the kingdom. If the moment had come for God to make everything right in the world; to restore justice, to give sight to the blind and to let the prisoners go free. Jesus answer was, no, you have to wait. So what do they do now?

So what do we do now? What do we do now that the election is over, the votes are counted and there is a winner and a loser. What are we to do when there are protests in the streets, when there are youth at a middle school shouting, "Build a wall, build a wall", when there are people being beaten and kicked because they supported Trump? What do we do when the nation is divided into two almost equal camps? What are we supposed to do now? Fortunately, we can find our answer in the 146th Psalm.

In this Psalm, the writer offers us two things we ought to be doing. And here they are. First we are not to trust in princes. *"Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish"* (vs. 3-4). The context here is almost self-evident; that we are not to put our trust in leaders whose plans come and go. Now at least we as Americans get to vote people in and out of office. The psalmist had to wait for people to die for the prince and all of his plans to vanish. So we at least get to change administrations every once in a while. But the thought is clear that if we put all of our hope in a human being, sooner or later that human being is going to be out of office. And chances are so much of what they put into practice may just vanish and go away with them.

The subtext here is that we are never to see another human being as our savior. So often as we listen to what was said during this election period was the candidates being lifted up by their supporters as saviors of America. But this isn't new. This is what we always do. We always take these human beings and invest them with salvific powers. This person is going to save our city, our state, our nation, our world. But how many of you have ever been disappointed by someone you thought was going to be the savior. The subtext is that when we invest in people we will be disappointed because they are not our savior. During the campaign I had considered creating a t-shirt with pictures of Donald and Hillary on the front, with words that read, "I already have a savior and he is not either of these." I say that because they are human beings involved in a fallible system that never works everything out in the right ways. We are not to trust in princes because they will always disappoint us.

The second thing that the Psalmist teaches us, is that we are to get busy being the people of God. He does so by reminding us of what God does. God executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the strangers, upholds the orphan and widow. These are the things that God does. God doesn't do them by fiat. God doesn't do them magically. God does them through God's people. These are the things that the Torah commands God's people to do. That's how God accomplishes these things; through God's own people. These are the marching orders that God gave to the children of Israel and by the way are the marching orders that Jesus gave to his followers. We are to be about these things. Now I want to be very clear here. I am not saying that there is not a role for government because there are important things that the government can and should do. But there are things that the government can't do. It can't teach people to love. It can't teach people to be tolerant. It can't teach people to forgive. It can't teach people to be compassionate. It can't make sure that every child can have a quality education. It can't make sure every hungry person has something to eat, nor that every homeless person has a warm place to stay during the day in winter months. But you and I can and we are called to do these things. We are called to be light in the darkness. We are called to be a compassionate, loving, welcoming people. We are called to be that safe place in a dangerous and hurting world. We are to be God's people.

What do we do now? That was the question the disciples asked themselves when they watched Jesus, well, be taken up in a cloud. And what they were reminded of was what Jesus had taught them. First that John had baptized them with water but that the Spirit was coming and that the Spirit was going to touch you and empower you and make you into a different kind of community. And when it gets there you are to go and be witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And witnesses here which is not just about telling people who Jesus is, but being that kind of community that the Roman Empire had never seen before. That kind of community in which there were men and women, slave and free, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, as an inclusive community in which every child of God was welcomed in and cared for. And so they fed the hungry, they cared for one another so that no one was in need. Everyone had enough. And because of that people flocked to the church and the church changed the Roman Empire. It changed the world.

So what are we supposed to do now? Fortunately, we don't have to wait for the Spirit. The Spirit is here now. We are a Spirit filled community. We are not simply a community of likeminded people who get together for great music and to see our friends. We are a Spirit empowered community. The Spirit of God is in our midst. The Spirit of God is in each one of us. And the Spirit is bringing forth gifts in us, both individually and collectively for us to do the work of God in the world. And God does that so we can execute justice, feed the hungry, set the prisoners free, lift up those who are bowed down, watch over strangers and care for the orphan and widow. This is what you and I are called to be and to do. To be God's people as witnesses to the love and grace and mercy of God in the world.

This then is our challenge, to not get caught up in the hatred, the anger, the blaming and the recrimination. We are instead to be the hands, arms and voice of God in the world as together we help to change this city, this state, this nation and this world. My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I using my gifts to help change this world that it might look more and more like the Kingdom of God with each day that passes.