

Welcome

Can I tell you what frustrates me most about our politicized climate? (I know, welcome to church... right?) It's that nothing ever gets done.

Increasingly, politics has become about espousing the right positions. On fertility, on voting rights, on immigration, on pandemics. Our two party system reduces every issue to a strict binary. But more than that, it makes us feel that the most important thing is that we adhere to a particular perspective.

So, if I call myself a pro-life candidate, I don't have to actually be involved in the lives of pregnant women making difficult decisions about their future.

Or if I call myself pro-immigration, I don't have to actually know any immigrants, let alone do anything to help them make a life here.

Because I support the right candidate, and it's *their* job to do all that stuff. All I have to do is support them.

Is it any wonder nothing changes? By polarizing us, our system also paralyzes us.

And it's not like faith has been a big help in all this. In fact, Christianity has been coopted, swept into the polarization of our politics. In our culture, 'Christian' is synonymous with far-right candidates and policies.

Don't you wish it were different? I know I do. I hunger for a faith that steers my political engagement, not the other way around. I dream of a church where we're not afraid to get political, but where we ruthlessly refuse to be partisan.

I think we can be that church. Yes, it's hard - especially because we're pressing against the culture around us. But today I want to ask what it looks like for us to be a church that takes seriously our call to love our neighbors - the most provocative, political command in the Bible. How can we be faithful images of God in the world around us?

Message

Welcome to the season of Epiphany! This time in the church year, we ask who God is. Who is this one who came to us on Christmas?

This year, our series is called Deep Breaths. We're at the beginning of 2022, almost two full years into the COVID-19 pandemic. We're all tired. We're all wondering how many more variants we'll have to deal with, how much longer until we can relax a little.

The idea of *doing* more right now is exhausting. So we're not doing. We're resting - resting in who God is.

In both Greek and Hebrew, the same word means both 'breath' and 'spirit'. So as we breathe deeply here at the beginning of the year, we're also pausing to make space for God's Spirit to fill us.

Given the last couple of years, we could use some comfort, some of God's presence. And we all want to know: When is this going to be over?

We began last week where we should always begin: with an assurance that God is with us. We named our trauma and affirmed how important our gathering for worship is. Last week, Sonya helped us imagine how God calls us together for the good of our world.

Today, I want to explore another area that's caused innumerable hardships in the last few years - politics. There was a brief moment at the beginning of the pandemic where it seemed as though we might come together as a nation, across the social and cultural and political divides, to beat the virus. That hope didn't last long - soon response to the pandemic was politicized, with safety precautions and care for one's neighbor somehow becoming markers of party affiliation. So too the temporary unity around the condemnation of George Floyd's murder. And then came the election results and the insurrection, followed by the vaccine - all of which somehow became partisan issues.

Conversations that used to be friendly have become fraught. It's become trite to say we're more divided than ever, but those divisions are certainly more apparent than ever. And we really struggle to know how to navigate. Do we confront? Do we educate? Do we avoid, avoid, avoid?

More than that, we want to know how our faith plays into this divided world. And that's no easy question. As a rule, we don't tend to like Christians who are political. In fact, in a 2006 survey of non-Christians about what they don't like about Christians, Gabe Lyons of the Barna organization found that one of the top 6 turn-offs was that Christians are 'too political'.

But it feels harder and harder *not* to be political these days, especially when even your choice to get vaccinated, wear a mask or worship virtually gets labeled 'political'.

So how are a people of faith supposed to respond to a divided world?

Believe it or not, the answer is to get more political.

I know... wasn't that the problem? Well, it turns out... not exactly. If you're confused, don't worry. Let's turn to the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah prophesied in the southern Kingdom of Judah in the years before Assyria conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel. The main role of prophets in Isaiah's day was to be a check on the king, to speak God's will to the king's authority to ensure the king ruled as God desired. (Sort of an ancient checks-and-balances system.)

Isaiah began his ministry under King Uzziah, who was one of Judah's most powerful kings. He *officially* reigned for 52 years, though the last decade or so was... strange.

In his early years, Uzziah was amazing. He invested in infrastructure, built up Judah's economy and was faithful to God's way.

Then... something happened. We're not sure why, but Uzziah got cocky. He went into the temple and burned incense - which is a priestly duty. The priests understood this as an attempt to consolidate power - Uzziah wanted to be a king-priest. It would be like if our president tried to disband the Supreme Court and Congress.

Before anyone could figure out what to do, Uzziah was struck with leprosy. As a result, he had to spend the last decade or so of his reign in a separate living quarters, isolated from everyone else. His son took over and was a 'co-regent' with him.

I share all that because this scene we're witnessing from Isaiah takes place in the year King Uzziah died. So imagine the political turmoil in the nation. In recent memory, a ruler has tried to usurp more power than he has right to. And the new king is ruling, but the old king still has a lot of power even though he's in isolation and everyone really just wants to go back to the good times when the economy was strong and we could trust the king and everything was good.

So what does Isaiah see?

It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. -- Isaiah 6:1 (NLT)

How would you feel if you saw this vision? Excited? Relieved? Would you believe Isaiah felt terrified?

Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They were calling out to each other,

**"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Heaven's Armies!
The whole earth is filled with his glory!"**

Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke. -
- Isaiah 6:2–4 (NLT)

How would you feel if you saw this vision? Excited? Relieved? Would you believe Isaiah felt terrified?

Then I said, “It’s all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.” -- Isaiah 6:5 (NLT)

In seeing God’s transcendent holiness, Isaiah becomes painfully aware of how he doesn’t measure up. And not just him, but all of Judah. He says, “We’re a mess right now. No one has a clue what we’re doing. We’re not worthy of having you as our God!”

This is such a good, faith-filled and humble response. Notice Isaiah doesn’t rejoice that he was holy enough to enter God’s throne room. He doesn’t say, “Oh, see? I was right, so now God and I are going to judge all our enemies together!”

No, he says, “Wow. We’ve all missed it, and now that God is here, we’re all in trouble.”

I understand, following this impulse, that churches like ours have a tendency to want to be a sort of neutral harbor. Doesn’t matter if you’re red or blue, you’re welcome here. Doesn’t matter if you’re pro-science or anti-science, you’re welcome here. Doesn’t matter if you’re BLM or all lives matter, you’re welcome here.

We want to say, “Hey, we’re all wrong so let’s meet in the middle.”

But Ashley challenged us on that a couple of weeks ago - the Church isn’t called to be a place where we all put aside our differences and pretend to get along. God didn’t create us to ignore conflict. God created us to make peace. And - as we saw a few weeks ago - we can’t do that until we acknowledge that there’s not peace.

That’s hard for us to hear, but consider with me: faith in Jesus is built on confession and repentance. We acknowledge we’re sinners and we turn to God and change. This is what God calls us to do - it’s just that when it comes to politics, confession feels scary. And repentance - doing something different - feels like giving up.

But this is where any Christian engagement with politics has to begin: that God cares deeply about us, about our lived reality together. God does not exist in some mythical middle. God does not want us all simply to get along.

God is our king. God is our president and congress and court. God has a particular, specific vision for our world, and only God’s vision for us truly leads to flourishing for everyone.

And we’re not living up to God’s vision. This (gesturing around us) ain’t it.

That was true for Isaiah, and it’s true for us. So let’s see what happens next in Isaiah’s vision:

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with it and said, “See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven.”

Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?”

I said, “Here I am. Send me.” -- Isaiah 6:6–8 (NLT)

This is where our political engagement begins: not with our party affiliation. Not with a position on a particular issue. But with a return to God. We allow God to purify us, to show us God’s way and to make us holy.

You may remember last week when Sonya explored Jeremiah’s call with us. She observed that we have a tendency to read this individualistically rather than as a call for all God’s people. The same is true of this call. In fact, some scholars wonder whether this is actually a call story at all, given that Isaiah was already a prophet by the time Uzziah died.

What if, instead, this is a reminder to God’s people that we’ve always lived under bad rulers. Ineffectual rulers. Selfish rulers who exploit our systems for their own gain rather than the people they represent.

What we have to be careful of is not falling into the trap of placing our hope in these candidates or politicians. Rather, we must, like Isaiah, turn to God with a spirit of confession and repentance and ask for God’s healing. We know our only hope is to be a people engaged around God’s mission.

And that’s a lot easier said than done. Because there’s not a candidate or party who gets everything right. So it requires us to be attentive and wise. We have to come together and discuss the issues, the policies, the laws and candidates. It means we are going to disagree about the exact path forward.

But what can never be up for debate is that we’re all working together not to accomplish a partisan agenda, but to participate in God’s vision of flourishing for all peoples.

Communion + Examen

Jesus calls us together to become God’s people together.

How has your faith in Jesus shaped your political views?

How have your political views impacted your relationship with Jesus?

What does it look like for you to reject partisan politics in favor of Jesus’ way?

Where is God calling you at the beginning of this year?