

“Bracing for the Election”
October 27, 2024

Habakkuk 2:1-4
Philippians 2:12-13

There are weeks when, as Sunday approaches, I’m just not sure what I should preach about.

And then there are weeks when Sunday seems to offer too many possibilities—even *demands* for preaching.

This has been the second kind of week.

This is a second kind of Sunday.

It is Reformation Sunday, and I want to lift up the ways in which our Protestant heritage informs our faith and our action.

It is also the last Sunday of our stewardship emphasis and the members of the Stewardship Board are probably thinking: “O.K., Bill. Let’s bring it on home with a stirring call to give generously to support our ministry and mission in the coming year.

And Election Day looms over all of this.

So, let me start with the election and see if I can circle back around to some of those other concerns.

I know that several of you have already voted. That’s a good thing. In recent election cycles, Democrats have come out in great numbers for early voting. This year, Republicans are embracing the early voting that they once disparaged. Republicans. Democrats. We can all be glad in this: as UI professor of Political Science and Congregational UCC member, Caroline Tolbert, said some four years ago, it is good for democracy when people vote.

It’s *good* when people vote! In this very troubled and hurting world, voting is one of the most empowering, just, and peaceful actions we can take to make a difference.

They say that the election will be close. And as difficult as it is for me to accept, our nation seems about evenly divided in its choice for President. As someone said recently, about 50% of the people aren’t going to like the results of the election. I, of course, would like to be part of the happy 50%. My guess is that everyone would like to be part of the happy 50%.

The political process is not always easy and the results aren’t always what we would desire, but in the freedom that we create and protect, this is how we organize our common life, allocate our resources, and deal with shared problems.

As this election approaches, however, many fear that our democracy is near collapse—and, strangely, that fear is voiced by people on both the left and the right. An NBC News poll found that “80% of Democrats and Republicans believe the political opposition poses a threat that, if not stopped, will destroy America as we know it.”

You might feel that way.

Certainly, there are days when I worry. I worry that we are cut off—cut off from what decency we once had, cut off from common values and purposes, cut off from shared truth, cut off from the basic respect of one another that makes democracy possible. There are days when I worry that these wounds are mortal.

But, really, how bad can it get?

The psalmist tells us: *this bad*—

The earth changes

The mountains shake in the heart of the sea

The waters roar and foam

The mountains tremble

That's how bad it can get.

And if cosmic upheaval is not cause of enough distress, the psalmist reminds us of the human scale of our trouble as well: the nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter.

As the election approaches, many feel as though we are threatened from all sides.

This is where Reformation becomes important for us today. In difficult, challenging times, we need to remember both the No and the Yes that Protestantism speaks.

Paul Tillich told us that the “No” of Protestantism is important because it contains the divine and human protest against *any* absolute claim made for a relative reality.ⁱ Protestantism places restraints on the human tendency to deify any system or group or individual. When the state, the church, the economy, or anything else seeks to be absolute, we say: “No!”

The “No” of Protestantism is important and sometimes we must speak it loudly.

At the same time, Protestantism also has a “Yes.” By the grace of God—and by God’s grace alone—the unrighteous are made righteous, the sinner is justified (and, yes, I’m talking about you and me here). The word “protest” suggests this, as its first meaning is “to state positively, to affirm solemnly.” Out of the Protestant Reformation came key Western values—social reform, individual religious conviction, hard work, and the rejection of corruption, hypocrisy, and empty ritual.ⁱⁱ At our best, we are always looking for new ways of being faithful people in changing times.

We have a challenging and life-affirming tradition. We haven’t gotten it right at all times and in all places, but saying both No and Yes is an important part of who we are.

It is vitally important for the church and for individual congregations such as ours to raise our voices in the face of injustice, or actions that mar the image of God seen in human beings, or violence, or the other evils that we find in the world. Sometime we need to say “No!”

Even more often, I think, we need to find the “Yes” that is our hope and desire and give voice to it.

We keep our eyes open to the new ways in which God is working to reform us and to renew us. In faith, we glimpse the reality that human action and God’s actions are connected, intertwined.

So, Paul tells the Philippian Christians and tells us: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling”—and, yes, that can cause us some consternation. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Our actions have consequences. But we also believe that, as Paul reminds us, “it is God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.”

We each have our own work to do. Together as a congregation we have our larger work as well. And in all our work, God is seeking to do a greater work of love.

We are Protestants. Not only on this Reformation Sunday, but, really, throughout the year, we are those who *protest*, who say a strong “no” when necessary, so that our “yes” can be better heard.

I think that most of us recognize, however, just how difficult it is to live out this tradition of protest, of saying both “no” and “yes.” It’s easy to get stuck, to stay comfortably where we are instead of faithfully following where God might continue to lead us.

We constantly need help.

And this, I think is where giving comes in.

Our giving has a “No” and a “Yes” as well.

When we give, we say “no” to much of what we find in the world.

No to hunger, homelessness, and illness.

No to devastation and destruction.

No to isolation and loneliness.

No to nihilism and despair.

We even say “no” to ourselves in our giving. When we give, we set aside our own desires, our own interests—at least a little—so that something greater might be served, so that others can have what they need. By our giving we seek to live simply so that others can simply live.

Our protest must be loud and strong. By our giving we can say “no” to the myth of scarcity, “no” to the fear that there will not be enough.

And giving also says “Yes.” Our giving affirms that it is by God’s grace that life is given to us and it is by God’s grace that we are able to respond to that gift.

The *yes* of gratitude leads to a liberal sharing. Gratitude moves us toward a desire that an ever-expanding number of people would enjoy all the good things of life.

Let your giving be a protest of thanksgiving! Say “yes” and surprise yourself with your generosity in the year ahead.

In doing so, we might better hear the affirmation that when the world is falling apart, “God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.”

This bold affirmation of faith has been called “one of the most powerful and memorable lines in all the Psalms.” It rises out of a deep conviction that it is God who is the power behind the origin

and the continuing life of the universe. This is not a neutral power, however. The Hebrew reads something like “God is *for us* a refuge and strength.”

God is for us.

So stop! That is perhaps an even better way of rendering those beautiful, comforting words: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Stop! Throw down your weapons, your defenses. Depend on God even in the worst of times.

When we look at all the examples of justice denied, of rights restricted, of truth left in shambles by constant and growing lies, it is faith, not certainty, that first feels the reviving breath of God inspiring our renewed hope.

When we look at the racism and nationalism that encourage the fear of “others,” it is faith, not certainty, that first feels the reviving breath of God enabling us to act in new, life-giving ways.

There is One greater than the storms that rage.

There is One greater than the tumult of the nations.

There is One greater than us and our problems.

“God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.”

We live by faith, with confidence in God’s grace and merciful goodness. And so, we are those who cherish this life that we have been given; we are those who cherish the life that others have been given.

When we realize this—and that’s not always easy to do—we are able to move forward. It’s not that there is any less fear or uncertainty. But we recognize that there is something—Someone—greater than our fear; One who calls us out of fear into loving engagement with other people and with this hurting world.

As the prophet announced, we live by faith—confronting our fears even if we aren’t able to overcome them.

Will everything be all right?

I don’t know. No one does.

I only know that even now, especially now, we live by faith. All our struggles—to love our neighbors, our small efforts for peace and justice, our work to confront and overcome racism and hatred—all our struggles are not losing battles because we find our confidence in God’s grace working in us and through us.

Other people, other powers may condemn us, may struggle against us—but God justifies. There is only one God before whom we stand, to whom we are accountable. In the face of the ultimate forgiveness of God the condemnation of others pales.

The Reformation reminds us that the Christian faith is not the result of success and prosperity. It developed in a crucible of suffering. In this faith women and men have faced crisis and adversity with courage.

Since God is for us, even in desperate situations, even in this election and its aftermath—whatever that might be—we can attempt great things, we can pursue excellence in all that we do, and we can face the future with courage.

God is *for us* a refuge and a strength—a very present help in this present time of trouble.

We are Protestants. Let us continue to live by faith.

ⁱ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*

ⁱⁱ Back cover of *Protestants*, by Steven Ozment