

“You Are Light”
March 19, 2023
Scripture: Psalm 27; Ephesians 5:8-14

For the last several weeks a group of us have been meeting on Tuesday evenings to share a simple, delicious meal and take a deep dive into the phenomenon of the rise of white, Christian nationalism in our country to learn the threat it poses for democracy and for the church’s witness. We spent some time first learning about the prevalence of the views that compose this strange ideology. Based on a survey of a little over 6,000 people from across the country about 30% either believe or are sympathetic to the following five statements: “God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society;” “The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation;” “Being Christian is an important part of being truly American;” “If the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore;” and “U.S. laws should be based on Christian values.” The survey then uses various questions to tease out what’s meant by some of these claims and the demographic makeup of the people who hold them.

It’s an eye-opening survey and one that Christians who do not support those claims should be aware of. It represents what its authors say is the growth and influence of white Christian nationalism in all parts of the country. And the only people who are in a position to really challenge this phenomenon are other Christians, Christians who believe our country was founded on the principle of religious freedom and no single religious view should be given dominance or control. This has become an issue in recent years especially following the attack on the Capitol in Washington, D.C, on January 6, 2021. During that riot many people expressed their belief that God was on their side and they were there to take America back from people whom they believe God rejects. If you watched what happened that day, you know there were a lot of signs and t-shirts equating their actions with the call of Christ.

That episode and others since have exposed a deep division in our country among Christians. That’s nothing new, of course, there have always been differences of opinion among Christians, and there has always been this element of nationalism among Christians in the U.S. But in the past it hasn’t taken hold quite so strongly or become a majority view in a major political party. So, more mainline Christians, like our denomination, have been able to ignore it because its influence has been so limited. But we may have lost that luxury and have no choice but to confront it and find ways to express our understanding of the faith more clearly.

Finding ways to be true to our calling in a hostile environment is one of the themes of this letter to the Ephesians. As commentator Thomas B. Slater puts it, “The book of Ephesians was written to persuade its original readership that an ethnically inclusive church based on religious affiliation and faithfulness was part of God’s plan and that both Jew and Gentile were equal partners in the new religious commonwealth.” The purpose of this letter is to encourage the community to overcome its divisions and embrace a new way of living together. Earlier in the letter, the writer tells the people, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been

brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

For this writer the greatest threat to the church lies in their inability to let go of divisions and learn to accept one another in the rich diversity God has given them. In failing to do that they are denying their call. As we learn in the passage we heard today, “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.” They’re called on the one hand to regard one another with grace and compassion, and on the other hand to expose the practices and attitudes that can lead to destruction. They can’t ignore those who distort the gospel by insisting on division any more than we can. Just as we are today, the Ephesian community was called to be a source of hope and affirmation through inclusion in a world where social, ethnic and religious differences were used to keep people separate and create a hierarchy of value.

You see, this is what white Christian nationalism promotes in our time. It promotes a hierarchy of value among citizens with white Christians at the top. It’s a form of darkness, a distortion of the gospel of Christ, that needs to be exposed to the light. During our time together, the Tuesday night study group has heard from several speakers, on video, who have proposed various ways of defining white Christian nationalism. One of the clearest, I think, is from a sociologist named Samuel Perry who has studied it for several years. He suggests understanding it as three things: first, as an ideology rather than a religious expression; second, as a political strategy used by politicians to whip up support; and third as an identification, almost a political party. In my mind, Christian nationalism is to true Christianity what Isis is to true Islam. They both twist elements of the faith to serve their ideological ends. In one study of Christian nationalism the authors break down those ends as power, boundaries and order.

For the Christians in Ephesus their ability to affect their society was limited. The most they could hope for was to live in ways that provided an example of how people from different ethnic and social backgrounds could live in harmony with one another. But in our context we have a lot more power to wield. Last Tuesday we began thinking about how we can combat Christian nationalism and the speakers we heard from offered three tools we can use. The first is the gift of hospitality. By inviting a wider diversity and making room for those in our society who come from different cultural backgrounds we can learn new insights and perspectives that can challenge us and help us discover a deeper connection to one another. A second tool is our own testimony or witness. In his book *White Too Long*, Robert P. Jones founder of the Public Religion Research Institute, who conducted the survey I described earlier, tells his story of growing up in Mississippi and having the values of Christian nationalism instilled in him through school and church. He does a wonderful job of sharing how he came to understand that worldview as a distortion of the gospel and the transformation he went through in confronting it. The third tool is to engage the theological perspectives of other cultures, reading Black and Asian, Latinx and Native American theologians who offer different ways of encountering God and interpreting scripture. When we expose ourselves to new ideas we discover a breadth of wisdom that can change how we look at the world around us.

This is how we live as children of light, how we reveal what’s good and right and true. We are not powerless in the face of these forces that want to undermine the gospel’s power to transform the world. We can bring hope and healing and light. Now is the time to stand in the

breach and be fearless in our commitment to Christ. The voices of division and exclusion, of hatred and fear cannot have the final word. You are light! Let Christ shine through you.

Amen