

## **Lectionary 32 A 2020**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

November 8, 2020

Occasional: Election

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

You are familiar with the Old Testament. You may not have read much of it. You may not understand much of it. But you understand what it is. The Hebrew Bible. The *Jewish Bible*. We call it the Old Testament, which means the old *covenant*. The covenant that God made, the relationship that God established, with his chosen people, the Jews.

The Old Testament speaks passionately of God's relationship with those whom he has chosen. If they are faithful to him, he will bless them and defend them. If they turn away from him, he will punish them. *I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.* [Exodus 19:5-6] That's the God of the Old Testament. A specific God for a specific people living in a specific place.

That same God bore a son, a Jewish son, who opened up the possibility of a relationship with God to all people. Not just the Jews. The *new covenant*, which we call the New Testament. It has not always been obvious for Christians, the people of the New Testament, to understand or appreciate the rules and rituals of the Old Testament. Indeed, some early Christians rejected the Old Testament entirely. Others thought that it had something to say, even if the Jewish rules no longer applied to the people of the new covenant. Indeed, two Sundays ago, we remembered the Reformation with Paul's words: *For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.* [Romans 3:28]

After Luther, John Calvin and the Calvinists conceived of God as a God of covenants. Which gave new meaning to the old covenant, the Old Testament. And when Europeans began to colonize North America, one very specific group brought that way of thinking to the New World. The Puritans brought covenant theology. On the boat on the way across the Atlantic, John Winthrop told the Puritans that the promises and threats that God made to the Jews in the Old Testament were in effect for the new society that they were establishing. A Puritan society. A Puritan theocracy. One religion. One God. One people. One set of laws. Just like the Old Testament.

For such a small group, for such a tiny percentage of the Europeans who settled here, these Puritans had an oversized and lasting influence on the identity of the United States of America.

Their idea that they were God's special people, with a very special mission still exerts a powerful influence over America and Americans. And we see that in our politics. And by no means are the conservatives in this country the only ones who are held in thrall by the vision of a godly nation living according the precepts of the Old Testament. I sometimes think that even more than the conservatives, progressives derive their ideals and their sense of destiny from the Old Testament. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a magnificent preacher who channeled the majesty of Old Testament language into the moral and social challenges that King felt God had summoned this nation to address.

I am a Lutheran pastor. Not a Puritan. Lutherans, who arrived on the North American continent much later than the other Protestants, occasionally express skepticism about our nation's theological assumptions. Is America truly more Christian and more godly than Spain? More so than Germany? Is America truly the new Israel, and if so, what do Israelis have to say about that?

I hate to be a nasty, stinky thing floating in the American punch bowl. But I have questions to ask. The Abolitionists were Protestants who wanted to rid this country of the great moral scourge of slavery. Their leaders were, for the most part, preachers. It would seem that they were on the right side of history. We might even think that our preachers today need to model themselves on the great abolitionists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But I have questions to ask. Does anyone remember what the other great moral scourge was that the Abolitionists were trying to remove from America forever? The *other* threat to American morality and destiny? It was Catholicism. It was an anti-immigrant anti-Catholicism. And this week, the United States elected our second ever Roman Catholic president. And those abolitionists are spinning in their graves. Glory, glory, hallelujah indeed.

This fall, the United States is celebrating the right of women to vote. Achieved by the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to our constitution. You know what we're not celebrating? The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which gave us prohibition. It was passed about a year and a half before the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment. And it was the same forces, the same progressive forces and activists, who gave us both the right of women to vote AND the disaster of prohibition.

So I have questions to ask, confusion that needs clarification. History shows the godly zeal of the American people to create a godly society working on both the left end of the spectrum, and the right end of the spectrum. But I see it not working very well. Or very consistently. I see puritanical tendencies on both the right and the left, both among evangelical Christians who want to impose their beliefs by law, and among politically correct leftists who want to impose their ideology by force. They are very different. You'll find them polarized into the two political parties. But each of them has a lot of American history behind them. And not the good kind of history. It's the history of failed Puritanism, the temptation to purify society. From a Lutheran perspective, society is made of sinners, not saints. Ideals can be good things. But an angry zeal for purification is not a good thing.

Although votes are still being tabulated in Arizona and elsewhere, the conclusion to this long election season is a chance to pause, to rest, to reflect. What the Old Testament calls a sabbath, which might be one of the more healthy ideas of the Old Testament. Is the fervor of our political system really working for us? Are we getting things accomplished, the things that we can all agree upon? It doesn't look like it to me. Is individual emotional health and mental health flourishing? Because if so, the emails in my inbox do not reflect that. Maybe the United States has reached a moment where the motivation to work together can overcome the many temptations that pull us apart.

Lutheranism is a branch of Christianity that just flat out does not accept the perfectability of human beings and human society. In fact, Lutheranism would say that it is vain and dangerous to try to use the apparatus of government to perfect human nature. The role of the state, the role of government, is mostly to prevent harm and violence and exploitation. Not so much bringing about what is good as preventing what is evil.

That can be part of our witness in the world. That the desire to purify society may seem holy, but history shows that it often is unholy. What *IS* holy is Christian character. Paul wrote, "*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*" [Galatians 5:22] Maybe that ought to be the goal of every Christian living in this land. The fruits of the Spirit. Yoda, in the gospel according to Star Wars, says, *Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.* Politics and the mass media and social media profit from fear. Fear gets more clicks. Fear gets more votes. As long as you immerse yourself in those three things— mass media, politics, and social media— you are on the path to the dark side.

Disciples are made, they are not born. Character is formed, it doesn't just happen. If you are soaking yourself in politics, in social media, in mass media, your character is being shaped. Your emotions are being manipulated. Your soul is wasting away. Turn off the damn television. Read a book. Listen to some music. Work on your discipleship through Bible study, prayer, worship, and acts of charity. And instead of cultivating fear, cultivate the fruits of the Spirit. *Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.* I love how Paul says "there is no law against such things." I would slightly modify his words and say that there is no surplus of such things. America is not being overrun by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Christian character doesn't just fall out of the sky. It happens because you intentionally pursue it. Because you expose yourself to the right kinds of media instead of passively consuming the seductive kinds of media.

The citizens of our country have this moment to seek a better way. The Church can best help our society by being the Church. *Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. Amen.*