Rev. Kelly Ryan

Sermon Nov. 20, 2016

Reign of Christ Sunday

Psalm 46

“Love of Power/Power of Love”

One of my friends in college studied abroad in Mongolia. His residence for the duration of the semester was in a yurt village several hours away from the capital city of Ulaan Baatar.

There wasn’t a lot to do, there, in a Yurt village in 2007. The wifi was pretty spotty, to say the least. He read a lot, helped around the home, and went on a lot of walks.

As you can imagine, the horizon is quite vast in Mongolia. You could walk for hours, and he sometimes did. But there was a very important aspect to sauntering around the steppe—never loose your orientation. Know which direction you have been walking, so you know which way to go home.

Because the steppe there looks flat, but it’s not—it has very subtle undulations taking someone walking up and down very gradually, so gradually you may not be aware of the grade. This means that as you walk out in a straight path, you could turn around and not be able to see your village because you have actually gone up and down several low hills and are on the other side. It is very easy to become disoriented, and my friend cautioned against the panic response, which is to pivot around a lot trying to find anything that looks orienting or familiar. If you loose sight of where you came from, you have to be still, remember the direction you have been moving in, and steadily re-focus yourself to go back the way you came.

Many of the psalms are ones of orientation and disorientation, and this Psalm we read is an example. The first part depicts the calamities of the age; those things, that “threaten to undo us”. Even to this degree of trouble, even when it feels like the very ground beneath us cannot be depended upon and the structures of the universe crumble, the Psalm affirms that God is with us. These are considered “Psalms of refuge” and these psalms of refuge deny the power of those things that, as Walter Brueggemann says, “threaten to terrorize completely.”[[1]](#footnote-2) That there is a love undergirding our lives more powerful than all of these disorientations.

I know many of you, after this election, are feeling disoriented. Wondering, where do we go from here?

Like my friend counseled, when you’re disoriented, it is helpful to slow down and get your bearings. Stop moving. Breathe a few breaths to calm yourself. Keep yourself oriented to your path.

For many, there are a number of places we can put our energy. It may look more like organizing; it may look more like anxiety. This is a great time to tend our precious energy right now, and set our intention about how we will engage with this moment.

When we find ourselves in places that disorient or bewilder us, it can be helpful to embrace the moment: that this is where you are. This is where you are. And then set your intention about how you will be in this place. And this place of tension is where novelty, new possibilities, and new ideas can actually be best born.

So let’s consider setting our intentions in community. Who do you want to be right now? Who do you hope Bethel will be right now?

This Sunday is the Reign of Christ Sunday. The Sunday where we are reminded that the leader we follow does not wear a crown but dies on a cross. Who was so unwilling to condemn those who sought his blood that he begged to God to forgive them as he was in agony. Who was so unwilling to play nice with oppression that he was executed.

This Sunday invites us to critique whatever systems of power we have rooted our identity in—whether it’s nostalgia for a great again America, or whether it’s the political establishment, whether its a post-modern progressive platform—the ground of our being is not in any of those. We follow a leader whose grace was not easy or cheap, but led to public acts of costly vulnerability. We are grounded in a love that breaks down all the things we cling to, bears us to our vulnerabilities, and invites us to be present this way in our common life together. Present with a love that is not about positive feeling or being simply nice, I mean love that is resilient and public and creative. Love that is honest about how hard it is, but compels us to commit to it over and over to resist the temptation to hate or distance.

However you feel after this election, we can agree that our country has reeled in its wake. Enough so that true wisdom calls for asking good questions right now. Good questions and good listening involves some vulnerability—a willingness to soften our assumptions, to be generous, and be open to understanding. This sort of practice will strengthen our love.

The end of the Psalm, considering it is a psalm of refuge, is not so warm and fuzzy as you might think it would be. It describes God breaking the machines of war. Calling for dropping our weapons. The Hebrew is a bit strange in the words translated so gently as “be still”. The connotation of the word is not so much “be still” as “leave it alone” or “drop your weapons!”

A wise person said that war is not conflict—it’s the absence of conflict. Its the point where you’ve gone beyond being able to have conversations that can bear conflict, and you just want to stop talking and annihilate the other. This current cultural moment calls for us to drop our weapons, and learn how to have conflict and disagreement in healthy ways.

Listen, and seek to understand. Seek to understand where real suffering is, from people you talk to, and people who you don’t talk to as much. This election has revealed the depths of pain and fear across diverse communities in our country.

And in all of this, let us maintain our orientation in God, in Love, the Ground of our Being, whatever language you use. Let us keep our eyes and ears and hearts open so that when we are ready to move, we have gathered our energy to do so effectively.

Again, this doesn’t mean you stop having convictions and stay silent when you see horrible things. We also need to know when to put our foot down, and say “this is where we will not pass; this cannot happen and this cannot be us.” This is a time to have firm footing, but also to explore what breaches we can mend.

I saw the movie Arrival this weekend, and boy, I love the emerging genre of mind-blowing stories where science fiction meets the power of human love. Arrival is a story about a linguist who is called upon by the United States military to learn how to communicate with this alien vessel that has touched down on earth. This is also a story about our great potential when we can work together, and offers a much broader view of all of our conflicts.

Without spoiling too much, I want to talk about this moment in the movie where communication breaks down. Twelve different countries have been talking to each other about the alien vessels that have landed in their respective countries. They’ve been sharing what information they’ve each gathered, trying to make sense of this totally new arrival together. But at a stressful moment, they start panicking. Nothing has really happened, but tensions are so high in the face of this shocking inbreaking of extraterrestrial life forms that, when one thing surprises them, these smart and competent teams all start disconnecting from one another.

There’s this scene with a large set of 12 screens that all have a person’s face on them, videoconferencing in. And then, there’s the ripple of panic that comes through all of them. The other team members in their various locations start running around, more and more agitated. There’s yelling, a look of confusion, and that and then they start all flipping to black with the words “Disconnected”.

Friends, let’s not miss this moment to radically connect. Let’s keep ourselves oriented on who we are, and the world we want to be a part of.

Again, let me be very clear: this does not mean abandoning your convictions. This does not mean accepting any language, perspectives, or actions that dehumanizes others as a new normal. But it means having some spaces of humility, wherever you are right now and across the board.

And I hope we can, as a country, get to unity. Unity is an important goal, but unity is violent and hollow if it does not earnestly, honestly, and fearlessly listen to the cries of the frustrated and the fear of the vulnerable. I hope we can get to unity—but let’s not do it cheaply. Let’s not cut corners. We can seek to understand one another without having to agree with one another, and that is the first step of empathy.

One comment about this church, since we’re closing our Giving Campaign today: sacred spaces are places where we can practice and enact a microcosm of the world we want to see more broadly. This church already has good practices of listening built into our life together, such as asking good questions, sharing food together, and listening to one another as sacred practice in worship. How can we deepen our practice, and reach more widely? How can we multiply these practices for our community? How do we use our tools to build connections in this moment?

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*. Cascade Books, Eugene, OR. 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)