

On Election Fears & Anxieties [Pt 2 of God's Separation of C&S] (Mk 6:30-44)

There's been a lot going on in the world and particularly in our nation of late. And I'd imagine it's been hard for many of us not to feel pretty consumed about it at times. So what I'm wondering today is how many of us have felt *fear or anxiety* about certain possible results of the national election in November, whether Biden or Trump, or even some replacement for Biden, who knows? Has anyone been carrying around anxiety in your body or fear in your heart about any of these potential results in November? Well, no matter who you might be hoping for or prefer, I believe the good news I want to share will be an encouragement to everyone; that's certainly *my hope and aim this morning*, as I proclaim the good news that while we can certainly care and have preferences about political outcomes (and specific convictions about party platforms and leaders) we need not fear *any outcome* - we need not pin our serenity on the circumstances and changes of (this) empire - but rather trust Christ alone with our God-given needs for security, belonging, and significance. And Jesus will prove Himself faithful when we put that faith in Him.

And this may take a tad longer than usual for me to explain today. But last Sunday, I waded into the topic of Separation of Church & State from the side of being a Christian disciple, which was a little more about being discerning about the dramatic shortcomings of worldly parties & figures in contrast to Christ and His kingdom, and I certainly hope God will increase our discernment and courage to acknowledge the unique ways that the fallen ways of empire might have dulled our consciences and be inhibiting God's kingdom in our lives. But that's a bit of a longer term goal. This morning, my concern is for the fear and anxiety we may feel now, or that can hit us pretty quickly when the TV or radio or some podcast turns on.

So, as our parish here is far from monolithic in its political leanings, the basis (bases?) for anxiety or fear likely varies a lot from person to person. But I do want to give an overview of them without making a value judgment about any of them or suggesting that one is more valid than another. And these concerns about an outcome in the election can be roughly divided into threats we perceive to our sense of security, our sense of significance, and our sense of belonging.

For example,

- from the standpoint of our physical **security** or provision, we may have some concerns about an election based on financial concerns about the potential for others to receive or take what we feel like they should not be justly entitled to. And this could be in either direction: right-leaning folks are often concerned about the ballooning of entitlement or welfare programs and the lack of personal responsibility it may enable for some who benefit, while left-leaning folks may be more concerned about the unprecedented disparity of wealth as the rich get richer and inflation goes up while wages or pension payments of most everyone else stays relatively unchanged.
 - Some other security fears concern protection from violence:
 - On the global scene, some are concerned that military aid going to other countries make *this* empire less capable of protecting itself, while others are concerned about the collapse of alliances or weakening of NATO could squander a level of peace in the West that was previously not enjoyed.
 - But then, regarding safety on the domestic side, some can feel acute fear about undocumented immigrants flooding over the border, unvetted for criminal histories and associations, or the feeling that crime has increased nationally and locally, while others are more on edge about sending kids to school without the unthinkable happening.

Have I named any source of fear or anxiety for you yet? Perhaps saying it out loud is making your fear or anxieties a bit worse *for the moment*, but if we aren't willing to name the bad news that is dominating our hearts and minds, we'll have no chance of receiving the good news that might dispel it.

- But the fear or anxiety we may feel is not necessarily limited to our sense of physical security and provision. While those concerns *alone* can be enough to destroy our serenity, without Jesus' help, there are other potential concerns related to our sense of **belonging** or identity. And this concern can cut in both directions as well.
 - In particular, when it comes to the conduct of the nation's leadership with this or that election outcome, I think there can be a real fear of being ashamed - or *already* feeling ashamed - based on ungodly elements of either party's agendas or evidence concerning the conduct, character, or even cognitive abilities of the presidential candidates.¹ When our sense of belonging or identity is *derived from* - or *strongly tied to* - *being an American*, this concern of shame about (quote) "what America *has* become or *could* become" can cause considerable fear or anxiety.

Then, finally, fear & anxiety about this election cycle could also relate to our sense of **significance** being tied to our association with America *and what we perceive as its virtues or its strength*, relative to other empires throughout history or today.

- For some, one thing they've loved the most - and been proud of - as an American is the freedom of thought and the melting pot of perspectives that have been facilitated by principles *like* the Separation of Church & State from the government side. But now this sense of national virtue is feeling threatened by a rise of book bannings and mandating elements of christianity in schools or minimizing the uglier parts of American history.
- Meanwhile, others may love America's military strength or other rights it affords, but have felt *their place* in the nation come under threat. This can be heard in mantras like "I want my country back," which reflects the frustration that can come with change and feelings of marginalization (or underappreciation). Perhaps in the past maybe one had a sense of being secure in one's place in American society, a society that seemed to more reflect their own values. But, in recent years, that sense of significance and identification with "being an American" and "America being like me" has been eroding and quickly. #

Now, I've just provided this summary of ways that we may feel our god-given desires for security and belonging and significance could be in serious jeopardy with this or that outcome in November - again, not to make value judgements about the legitimacy of this concern or that, but in hopes that you might feel *seen* this morning in *whatever* your concerns may be, and to hopefully help each of us get clear about about some of the stronger roots of fears & anxieties we in particular may be feeling about a possible election outcome. Because, as we begin to uncover what particular bad news may have taken root in our hearts or minds, this allows us to bring that before the Lord with a greater openness to receive His good news. The good news is that while we can certainly care and have preferences about political outcomes (and specific convictions about party platforms and leaders) we need not fear *any outcome* - we need not pin our serenity on the circumstances and changes of (this) empire - but rather trust Christ alone with our God-given needs for security, belonging, and significance. And Jesus will prove Himself faithful when we put that faith in Him. And so that we might have ears to better hear - or receive - this good news, let's turn to our gospel passage this morning to see *how* this *is* Jesus' good (and trustworthy) news for us today. #

¹ Though, I don't mean to imply that these concerns (or any that I've already listed) should all be weighted equally, rather I am just acknowledging the breadth of concerns that might fuel anxieties for us about November.

Those who were here last week, or at least heard the sermon, will recall that we talked about the brokenness endemic to all worldly empires as exemplified in what transpired in Herod's birthday banquet of death {and if you missed it I've included an excerpt from that passage in the box in your bulletin}. Well, as Mark's gospel moved on today to the account of the Feeding of the 5,000, we should understand this feeding *also* as a banquet Mark is presenting in *contrast* to Herod's banquet. Where Herod's banquet of death pointed to the inadequacy and unreliability of empires to meet our God-given needs, the Feeding of the 5,000 represents the abundance and complete reliability of placing our trust in Christ instead.

You'll recall that with the account of Herod's banquet, we took particular note of the guests in attendance who had placed the hopes for their own well-being in the fickle ways of empire, which resulted in them not only becoming complicit in wickedness, but forfeiting any opportunity for the Kingdom of God - for God's best - in their lives. But in contrast to *them*, we should understand Jesus' "guests" at the Feeding of the 5,000 as those who had been failed by the empire they were living *or had already learned the hard way the mistake of hoping in it* and now recognized its unreliability to meet their (God-given) needs for security, belonging, and significance. In other words, in whatever ways that we may feel anxious or fearful about how worldly power may fail us, Mark invites us to identify with this crowd who are *already despairing* of how worldly power has failed their expectations.

And note that they are quite literally *running* after Jesus instead! 😊 Our passage opens by saying that Jesus and His disciples were being inundated with these people seeking after them, such that Jesus and the disciples attempted to take a short respite from ministry by sailing across the Sea of Galilee to a solitary place. But this was to little avail, because verse 33 says the people "ran on foot" around the lake and arrived ahead of them. And verse 34 says that when Jesus landed, He had compassion for them and began to teach them many things: presumably how God cares for them and is infinitely more reliable than the worldly powers that have failed to meet their needs! The Kingdom of God was always the crux of Jesus' preaching.²

So, what happens next is that it begins getting late in the day and the disciples become rightly concerned about the crowds' physical well-being, their need to eat! But what is often missed about the disciples' proposed solution is how it would've been at odds with all that Jesus had been teaching the people that day. Think about it: this crowd of people has quite literally fled the relative comforts of the towns and cities to follow Jesus into the desolate wilderness, because they believe that He is the only one capable of meeting their needs.³ So, just when these people have done the *exact thing* the Lord would *have* them do, the disciples are proposing to send them *back* to the cities and towns, which would communicate *in this circumstance* the message that Jesus actually *isn't* reliable or worthy of trusting for their needs.

So, Jesus' corrective to the disciples is "no, no, no, no, no...You give them something to eat." Though, even this, they misunderstand. Their reply reveals their shock & confusion, as they say, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" And this is what they misunderstand, and we can often misunderstand, about how the Lord *does* meet these needs all of us have - for security, and belonging, and significance - that I keep talking about. Because the way Jesus intends to care for and meet these needs of ours is through partnership with Him.

In this case, Jesus clarifies that he isn't asking the disciples to spend the equivalent of half a year's wages to provide a single meal for these 5,000 people. Rather, He directs them to bring what they

² Rather than *using* these people, as Herod essentially does with those who support and look to him - to maintain his power - (an objectification of people that worldly power inevitably does), Jesus does not use/objectify these people, but rather receives and blesses them!!

³ Note the allusion here to God saving the Israelites from the Empire of Egypt and providing for them in the wilderness under Moses.

have to Him. He asks them what they *do have* and invites them to submit it to Him, and with their partnership - the disciples not only give what they have, they distribute it as well - with their partnership Jesus ensures that everyone - the crowd of 5,000 *and* the disciples - gets what they need, which in that moment is physical provision & security.

But this dynamic of partnership with God is critical for us to understand how God *does* go about meeting our God-given needs. So, (for example) when we talk about trusting God to “provide” security from a food and shelter standpoint, this of course doesn’t just look like praying and asking God to provide and expecting money to just *appear* in our bank account while we waste our abilities and do nothing. No, trusting and partnering with Him looks like exercising our gifts and seizing opportunities He gives us to earn a living (insofar as we have the capacity to) and trusting Him to bless it to provide for our physical needs. Though, such partnership also means that *we don’t get to dictate how God ultimately does provide for us*, as it may not be in the way we expect or it may be in some way we have to humble ourselves to; God could even provide for us in ways through the empire - through some government policy - and yet, He calls us away from the idolatry of ever *trusting* the adequacy of empire and its policies to fulfill any of our God-given needs, and to instead trust in Him alone. And can you see how this shift can dispel any anxiety we may feel about our sense of financial security if we’ve attached that to political outcomes.

The good news is that while we can certainly care and have preferences about political outcomes (and specific convictions about party platforms and leaders) we need not fear *any outcome* - we need not pin our serenity on the circumstances and changes of (this) empire - but rather trust Christ alone with our God-given needs for security, belonging, and significance. And Jesus will prove Himself faithful when we put that faith in Him.

And when it comes to physical security of *safety* for ourselves and those we love, our trust in God’s promise of resurrection and everlasting life for all who *do* trust in Him means that death is not something to be courted, but it *has* lost its sting. And so, when empires - ours and others - do what they’re gonna do - which, let’s face it, is completely out of our control - and when it becomes clear to us that domestic policies can never fully guarantee our safety, repenting of trusting in empire over God for these and then clinging to God’s promise of *everlasting* salvation can begin to dispel any fear for our lives and for the lives of those we love that the machinations of empire may threaten.

But when we talk about this dynamic of participating with God to meet our God-given needs, this doesn’t only apply to our security or physical well-being. As I spoke at the beginning about how we may fear feeling ashamed - or already feel ashamed - of the conduct of America’s leadership, based on the results of November’s election. While I’m absolutely sympathetic to this - I’ve detected this fear in my own heart at times - such fear does indicate we may have an undue - and spiritually unhealthy - attachment to being “an American” for our sense of identity and belonging. Now, every empire throughout history would love for every one of its people to find their utmost identity in being a citizen of that empire; and we are trained in this from a very young age. But when we embrace instead that *our* identity and significance comes in participating with Christ - in following Him and being marked by His Spirit - then this will begin to free us from the lie that America or its leadership reflects on our worth in any way. And we can find much greater peace about whatever may happen in November as our hearts *grasp* that our worth is not derived in being an American or from the character or abilities of America’s leaders, but only through being loved by God, who was willing to let empire kill His son for our sakes. #

Then, finally, I spoke at the beginning about how we may derive some sense of significance from our association with America and what we perceive as its virtues or its strength relative to other empires. But *when* our sense of significance is tied to the merits or successes of a worldly kingdom, this is akin to building our house on sand rather than the rock of Christ. And on that sand it’s no wonder that we would

feel anxiety or fear if we perceive that the outcome of an election might undermine whatever reasons we are “proud to be an American.”

But when we allow Jesus to relegate that commitment & passion for the American project to His invitation to *participate* in His Kingdom coming in and through our lives, then we will cease to experience such anxiety or fear changes in America that weaken our identification with what America is all-about or may-become-all-about, because we have built our house on the rock of Jesus, not the shifting sands of empire.

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So, if we detect *any* anxiety or fear about the election results in November - and I do mean *any* - the antidote is dispel that fear is to identify the way we have allowed our serenity to become tied to the circumstances of an empire instead of trusting in Jesus for all that we need, and to repent of that and turn back to partnership with Him (or - if you're not a believer - perhaps recognizing that empire can never provide all that you need, you will would consider turning to partnership with Jesus for the first time).

- Are you concerned about your security or provision? Respond to that concern through partnership with Christ, who promises to provide us not with what we always want, but with better than that: with what we need *plus* the abundant life of His kingdom.
 - And don't waste your energy envying those who you believe profit unjustly in this worldly kingdom, whether those would could work but don't, or the rich who keep getting richer, because in doing so they are stifling the Kingdom of God in their lives - as Jesus would say, “they are getting their reward now”⁴ and so they are most to be pitied.
- Are you fed up with the options for president or exasperated by a candidate's aging or character or something else? Trust in the ageless and perfect one (in God only wise)!! He is our true shepherd and our only real hope.
- Or perhaps you are finding yourself less and less proud to be an American? Well, so be it. Perhaps the Lord is mercifully removing an idol that we might find more of the significance and abundance available in learning the ways of His kingdom and living for Him alone.

Friends, even if you have found these words today to be helpful or re-centering, we should all expect it to be a *challenge* to keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus in the months ahead. The pull to trust in our worldly kingdom, constantly covered in the news and infotainment we subject ourselves to, that is a mighty pull. So, if at any time you come to realize you've gotten all wrapped up in it again - and overcome by it - be compassionate to yourself, like Jesus remained compassionate to those who had run after Him.

And, if you *have* found these words to be clarifying or encouraging today, perhaps return to this sermon when you find yourself off center; it will be posted and easily found on our website or at www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/electionpeace

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In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁴ Matthew 6