

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. Like many of you, I presume, **I grew up attending public school.** Through the years in school, each morning began the same way: standing, putting my hand over my heart, turning towards a banner of stars and stripes, and saying these words: ***“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. And to the republic for which it stands...one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”*** It was so common, so presumed, by the time I was through elementary school it had become a perfunctory exercise. I’m not sure I ever had a moment of genuine patriotic fervor as we recited the daily ritual, but it was a routine part of my day nonetheless.
1. My kids, on the other hand, **go to school in Berkeley in 2019. None of them know the pledge.** I asked my daughters this week if they had ever heard of it, and they stared at me blankly. And for good reason. In 1984 the the Berkeley School Board voted to not require the pledge to be recited in Berkeley schools. Perfunctory displays of patriotism are not what Berkeley is known for.
 2. Personally, I am ok with this. The truth is **I’ve never been one to feel particularly stirred by national rituals like the pledge or the anthem.**
 - a) Maybe it’s the fact that I was born on the Third of July, which meant I spent the first several years of my life believing that the annual fireworks show I was taken to on my birthday in my hometown was actually to celebrate Me, not the national Holiday on the following day.
 3. **It’s not that I am not grateful to be a Citizen of the United States.** I definitely am. Being born in the time and place I was has afforded me a life of relative peace and prosperity and an opportunity to have a voice in my own government; an experience that I am well aware many other humans throughout history, including many today, have not experienced. **Every time I cast a vote I do feel a stir of pride and gratitude for the capacity to do so,** and I take civic engagement seriously.
 4. **I grew up in San Diego, a large military town,** and so respect for the troops and the flag they represent was a cultural touchstone. Both of my high school proms were on a military base. My own father is a Vietnam veteran. And so I’ve always had deep respect and gratitude for those who have served our country with the goal of defending the peace and prosperity I enjoy, even putting their lives on the line to do so.
 5. But as I’ve grown older from the days I first learned the Pledge of Allegiance, and **I’ve become aware of more of our nation’s messy story, I’ve also become more cynical about the assertions we make in our national hymns or pledges.** Can we really celebrate liberty and justice for all in an era of mass incarceration? The pledge was written in 1892, thirty years before women had the right to vote. Were we included in the “one, indivisible nation”? And why do we talk about being “under God” anyway? **How is our faith or lack of faith in a deity connected to our understanding of what it means to be American?**
- B. Well as most of you know by now, we are well into a series that has been a defining conversation for our community, **as we consider some of what I pitch are the “idols” of our day: human constructs that allow us to elevate certain points of view over others, and in so doing, distort our understanding of reality, and certainly of God.** This series is one we’re revisiting, and some of the teachings I’ve been reworking from preaching them before. We’ve talked about the idol behind patriarchy, about heteronormativity, whiteness, and even evangelicalism. But today’s teaching is a new one for us to consider together.

1. Today we're connecting with some of the questions I've brought up in my own musings about patriotism, and wondering together: **how are followers of Jesus supposed to think about our relationship to the state?** What is its connection to the life of faith? Particularly for us in the United States, a nation that has often drawn on Judeo-Christian imagery in its civic life, but also codified some separation between church and state, the question can feel murky. So what do we know about how Jesus thought about our commitment to our country?

II. (Guidance from the Bible)

- A. To answer that question, of course **it makes sense to look at the New Testament and what it tells us about the life of Jesus and his earliest followers.** But it also makes sense to understand the context Jesus was coming into.

1. Remember **Jesus was Jewish and came into a Jewish culture at a particular moment in history.** And that culture had its own journey of how it had been navigating these questions around the intersection of faith and political governance. And the breadth of that journey is perhaps most easily illustrated by noting two significant moments in it. I just want to take a moment to consider **two particular eras in the life of Israel** that I think are relevant for us as we consider the tradition Jesus arose from, and then we'll take a look at what Jesus had to say.
2. The first era to consider in Jesus' tradition I'm calling ***"The Nation of Israel Era"***.
 - a) After the Hebrew people were delivered from slavery in Egypt, they received the law from Moses, they wandered in the desert for 40 years, and then finally through conquest, they were given the Promised Land. Once there, they established a nation state, Israel, unifying twelve different tribes into one country. That nation eventually becomes a monarchy with a King. The capital is Jerusalem. In the Holy City of Jerusalem, God invites people to build a temple which is understood to be the dwelling of God on earth. In Israel, the faith and the government are connected. King David, with all his philandering faults - comes in this era to be considered an archetypal leader - anointed by God to lead the nation, both as a governing King and a worshiper of God: fulfilling a priestly role and a political role in one.
 - (1) Remember David comes to power as a military leader, the general of an army.
 - (2) He also writes many of the Psalms, which was essentially the book of prayers and worship songs for the Jewish people.
 - (3) Here is one of the Psalms that is said to be written by King David, and in it you can see a clear unity of understanding that Israel is under it's God who is God above all others, and that other nations will even see that and submit to Israel and Israel's God.

(a) Summon your power, God;

show us your strength, our God, as you have done before.

29 Because of your temple at Jerusalem

kings will bring you gifts....

Scatter the nations who delight in war.

31 Envoys will come from Egypt;

Cush will submit herself to God.

32 Sing to God, you kingdoms of the earth,

sing praise to the Lord,

***33 to him who rides across the highest heavens, the ancient heavens,
who thunders with mighty voice.***

**34 Proclaim the power of God,
whose majesty is over Israel,
whose power is in the heavens.(Psalm 68:28-34)**

- (4) So we have this era in which **the nation-state was understood to align with what it meant to be God's people**. Following God's moral laws and right worship of God were tied to political sovereignty, as God's people reigned in their Promised Land. Some of their kings were more righteous than others, but whether the king was honoring God and responding to his prophets and priests appropriately or not, **God was ultimately in charge of the wellbeing of the nation** and was believed to work through Israel's political systems to bring freedom and blessing to the people of Israel, and victory over their enemies.
3. But of course, **that era didn't last**. Eventually, the people of God kept ignoring the cries of the prophets and were not living into faithfulness to Yahweh. With that era of falling away from Yahweh-honoring worship, also came **a loss of political sovereignty**. Foreign adversaries overtook all twelve tribes, and the people were annihilated, assimilated, or carried off, taken from their land, to live in exile. And this is another significant example of how the people of God related to their political surroundings in the Hebrew Bible, as foreigners in exile. **We can call this "The Exile Era"**.
- a) Compared to the mountaintop experience of David's day, you can imagine that the exile felt like a demoralizing, dispiriting existence. The exiles had not only lost political power, they had been separated from the very land they saw as sacred. And yet, through the prophet Jeremiah, God's people were not simply abandoned to nostalgically long for the old days. They were given instruction for how to live faithfully to Yahweh in this new era, as if, this too, was part of God's grand purpose for them:
- b) ***"The Lord God of Israel who rules over all says to all those he sent into exile to Babylon from Jerusalem, 5 'Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons and allow your daughters to get married so that they too can have sons and daughters. Grow in number; do not dwindle away. 7 Work to see that the city where I sent you as exiles enjoys peace and prosperity. Pray to the Lord for it. For as it prospers you will prosper.' (Jeremiah 29:4-7)***
- (1) So this is something very different that God is asking the people of God to do in regards to how they relate to the world around them. Rather than possessing their own land, running their own country, defending their borders, and fighting off their enemies, they are invited to make a home in a place they do not hold the political power. They're invited to form alliances, even marriages in this land, presumably with some folks who may not share their heritage. They're encouraged to seek peace and prosperity, or the Hebrew word of *shalom* for the city of Babylon, praying for it, and understanding that their fortunes are tied up with Babylon's.
- c) So in the Hebrew Bible, we have these two different visions of how the people of God are to live in relation to the political state.
4. And then as the story unfolds further in the New Testament, **Jesus comes on the scene**. And this is for us, where things get particularly interesting.
- a) **Jesus comes into yet another political context: an occupation**. The people of Israel have returned to their land. They have rebuilt the ruins of Jerusalem and restored worship in its temple, but in the era of empires, they are no longer a sovereign nation. They are an occupied people. **Roman soldiers patrol their sacred lands**. Heavy taxes

are extracted from their hard work and sent to a foreign Caesar. They long for a Messiah that was prophesied centuries ago to come and deliver them from this oppression. They dream of a challenge to Rome, a king that will rule on David's throne, so they may be restored to political sovereignty.

- b) **But this does not seem to be the project that Jesus is interested in.** Jesus, who demonstrate genuine supernatural power, who seems to carry the mantle of God's Spirit in an unbelievable way, who preaches with authority, feeds the hungry, heals the sick, and affirms his follower Peter when he declares, "You are the Messiah (God's new anointed one), Son of the Living God." This Jesus is up to a different kind of project.
- c) **You could say he talks non-stop in a kind of political language.** He keeps talking about a new kind of Kingdom, a Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of Heaven, but this kingdom doesn't seem to be like kingdoms the world has known before. Jesus offers 37 descriptions throughout the gospels of his kingdom, but **none of them sound like the kingdom his followers have ever seen or even imagined.** It is a kingdom that starts like a tiny mustard seed and slowly grows to be a large tree. Or a bit of yeast that work through the dough it's in, transforming it all. It's a hidden treasure found in a field. It's a pearl of great price. But it doesn't seem to be marked by might; instead it seems to be marked by expanding mercy and love.
- d) **The tension between what Jesus friends and followers seem to expect, and what he has come to do only heightens in the final hours of his life.** At his arrest, when the group of Jewish leaders arrive to take Jesus by force, his friend Peter pulls out a sword to defend him, slashing the ear off one of the men detaining him. Rather than encouraging his followers to take up arms, **Jesus rebukes Peter's violent outburst and heals the man's ear.** He allows himself to be taken and then to be sent as a political prisoner by the Jewish leaders, to Pilate, the governor from Rome; the politician tasked with overseeing the Jewish people on behalf of their Roman occupiers. In this conversation with a man of worldly political power, we see Jesus put on the spot to explain his own kind of power.
- e) **33 So Pilate went back into the governor's residence, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" 34 Jesus replied, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or have others told you about me?" 35 Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own people and your chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?"**
36 Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my servants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." (John 18:33-36)
(1) Jesus is aligning himself not with an earthly political kingdom, ruled by violence, but **a different kind of kingdom, one not of this world.** His is a kingdom that testifies to the truth that God is inviting all of God's creation into a trans-national kind of familial community. Not one which is marked by the quest for political power and might, but one that is marked by inclusive community, freedom, connection, and self-giving love. It's for this reason that Latina theologians like Ada María Isasi-Díaz, have coined a different term to describe what Jesus seems to be naming, **the Kin-dom of God.** This is not an oppressive concentration of power in the hands of a ruthless monarch. **Jesus is inviting followers into a kind of kin-ship, la familia del dios.**

(2) Jesus makes clear that he wants this *Kin-dom* to transcend national borders. “Make followers of all nations”, he says. He does not say, “Go build a nation.” He does not invite his friends to kick out Rome and build a new state of Israel. **Jesus’ peers seem to want him to return them to the *Nation of Israel Era*.** They think that’s what the Messiah is supposed to do.

(3) **But that is not Jesus’ mission.** That’s not the part of the story Jesus is inviting his followers to live into. Rather, Jesus seems to understand himself and his followers as living in a different place in Israel’s story, the era into which Jeremiah prophesied. He is calling them to live and worship as those dwelling in exile.

B. **It’s a call that wasn’t lost on Jesus’ closest followers.** Peter went from being the one who took up the sword to defend what he thought was Jesus’s earthly kingdom, to a core founder of the transnational community Jesus left behind to carry on his work. **Peter became a core founder of the community trying to live out Jesus’s kin-dom values, the church.** A community that was not to live as a governing party, but a community in exile. Peter says it this way:

1. ***9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 You once were not a people, but now you are God’s people. You were shown no mercy, but now you have received mercy.***

11 Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to keep away from fleshly desires that do battle against the soul, 12 and maintain good conduct among the non-Christians, so that though they now malign you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God when he appears.

13 Be subject to every human institution for the Lord’s sake, whether to a king as supreme 14 or to governors as those he commissions to punish wrongdoers and praise those who do good. 15 For God wants you to silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good. 16 Live as free people, not using your freedom as a pretext for evil, but as God’s slaves. 17 Honor all people, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the king. (1 Peter 2:9-17).

2. Peter, it seems believes that to follow Jesus means to live with an identity that is informed first and foremost through **commitment to the community Jesus was revealing** - living as those who’ve received the mercy of the Divine. He calls that community **a holy nation, a chosen people**. Paul says something similar when he tells his listeners that they are first and foremost **”citizens of heaven”**.

3. **But as Peter demonstrates, to be a citizen of heaven, to be in the “holy nation”, doesn’t necessarily mean living in active rebellion with the state you find yourself either.** In the same way that Jeremiah coached his listeners to be good neighbors, Peter seems to be coaching a similar kind of submission and participation to the earthly political context his listeners find themselves in, the participation of exiles. “*Be subject to every human institution for the Lord’s sake...*” he says. By and large, he didn’t want his followers to be perceived as political revolutionaries who were rebelliously seeking to overthrow their occupiers. They were to work within whatever governing system they found themselves, **but remember that their fear, which in this context meant truly their worship, their reverence, their allegiance, was to God alone.**

III. After the 2016 election, a lot of smart people have been running analysis on “what happened here?” Three of the people asking that question were sociologists who did a study of the affect of what they called “Christian Nationalism” on the 2016 election. And what they found was that even controlling for other related factors, such as racism, sexism, and economic uncertainty, one of the clearest indicators that someone was likely to vote for Trump, was their investment in “Christian Nationalism”. What is that?

1. **Christian Nationalism, as these scholars defined it, is the belief that America was founded as a specifically Christian nation**, and that a core part of its identity is to govern with Christian values. This shares overlap but is distinctly different from what’s known as civil religion, as the authors of the study define it. Here’s how they define that difference: *“Civil religion, on the one hand, often refers to America’s covenantal relationship with a divine Creator who promises blessings for the nation for fulfilling its responsibility to defend liberty and justice. While vaguely connected to Christianity, appeals to civil religion rarely refer to Jesus Christ or other explicitly Christian symbols.”*

B. Christian Nationalists however take what they imagine to be a unity of faith and state even further.

1. *“Christian nationalism, however, draws its roots from “Old Testament” parallels between America and Israel, who was commanded to maintain cultural and blood purity, often through war, conquest, and separatism.”*
2. These Christian nationalists see themselves as **living in a New Israel**. And the tradition has a history, often with language like New Jerusalem, or Zion being used. In 1630, preacher John Winthrop spoke to his community in the Massachusetts Bay colony about establishing a “city on a hill”, a place where the God of Israel would be uniquely present in their midst, as Yahweh had been in Jerusalem. The tradition that took root of seeing the American project this way lives on, and **still shapes how some American Christians understand their identity in this day. And that encourages them to live into the Nation of Israel Era.**
3. If you believe you’re living in this part of the story then **it shapes your expectations of how you relate to those around you**. During the *Nation of Israel Era*, as the authors of the study point out, at least part of the understanding of what it meant to be Israel was to **pursue religious and cultural purity**, not to be persuaded by the gods or goddesses of surrounding cultures.
 - a) And so reading this story, **divorced from a deep cultural understanding of how that story emerged, what it meant to the people whom it emerged for, and what it means for those people today, has at times led to some scary things**. Living into that story has meant seizing lands inhabited by indigenous people, believing you have a God-given “**manifest destiny**” to your Promised Land.
 - b) Living into that story has meant claiming a supposed **God-given right to possess human beings**. It has meant the rise of hymns like “**Onward Christian Soldiers**.” It has meant in a world of growing globalism and multi-nationalism, a rise of sentiment that **doesn’t espouse love of neighbor but instead proudly proclaims “America First”**. Living into this story has meant **resisting immigration**, saying of those who are perceived to be other, particularly those who are not white, “**Send them back**”.

C. But as we’ve already shown **this was not the story Jesus wanted us to live into**. This is not faithfulness to divine. It is instead another form of idolatry; the **Idol of Nationalism**.

1. **I am not saying that there is no value in a national identity**. Political theorists will argue, and I think there’s truth to this, that a sense of patriotism, of value in the state is necessary

for any welfare state to exist. It's needed for us to want to pay taxes and to do this with assurance that our money can benefit not just ourselves but people we'll never meet. Perhaps this is what Peter was calling his listeners to, when he encouraged them to be subject to their governing authorities. He understood that to build communities of peace, we need the cooperative spirit that a national identity brings. The problem is when we begin to pit our community against another when nationalism become another form of tribalism, and when we bolster that rivalry by casting God as rooting for our team against someone else's.

IV. How do we live primarily as exiles instead of nationalists?

A. Examine our allegiances.

1. The truth is **the project of building nations has often involved cultivating fondness for the state with devotion to deity** - mixing religion with government. In the Ancient world, heads of state were often looked at as gods, or close to them. The Roman Empire that Jesus found himself in basically deified their Caesars, which meant that even when Jesus followers chose to respect the king, and to pay their taxes, "giving to Caesar's what is Caesar's" in Jesus words, they still spoke out against pledging allegiance to Caesar the way the Romans at times wanted. They would not revere Caesar. **And it's for this reason that ultimately many of Jesus' closest followers, including Peter himself, found themselves martyred.** Because while they tried to live peacefully within the political empires they found themselves, when push came to shove, they were not going to worship the emperor. **"Jesus is Lord" was a political statement. It meant "Caesar is not".** And the refusal to bow down and worship Caesar cost many of them their lives.
2. We live in a different context than those earliest followers of Jesus. **In our democratic republic**, which has since its founding named at least a value for separating church and state, **we should not be required to bow down and worship our heads of state.** And yet, it can't be denied that **in more subtle ways we are being pressured to declare allegiance to something other than the Divine.**
3. It can happen **as we say the pledge or sing the national anthem.** I'm not saying as a Christian you should never do that, but I do invite each of us to **be conscientious of what it means** and perhaps ask the Spirit how we're investing our hearts into something other than the Divine as we participate in patriotic rituals.
4. And **I'm not just talking about traditional acts of patriotism**, or even stated practices of a particular political party. **Candidates of all stripes, political parties, activist movements, social organizations: all of these call on us in some way to become devoted to them.** I believe that part of living as exiles is participating in these organizations in real ways, bringing the salt and light of God's expansive love into every context we find ourselves in, but we must be aware of how our hearts become aligned with other agendas, and **always maintain the freedom to critique and push back when our systems move counter to the way of the Divine.**
5. In 1953, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached a sermon he called the "False God of Nationalism". In it, he described the tension this way:
 - a) *One cannot worship this false god of nationalism and the God of christianity at the same time... We must choose whom we will serve. Will we continue to serve the false god that places absolute national sovereignty first or will we serve the God in whom there is no east nor west? Will we continue to serve the false god of imperialistic greed or will we serve the God who makes love the key which unlocks the door of peace and*

security. Will we continue to serve the false god of racial prejudice or will we serve the God who made of one blood all men to dwell upon the face of the earth.

B. Embody Kin-dom values

1. Thankfully Christian nationalism is not the only model for engaging as Jesus followers in a representative democracy. **There have also long been people of faith who have committed to using the tools available to them, including civil engagement, as well as non-violent resistance, even civil disobedience, when necessary, to further the values of God's kin-dom.** Abolitionists. Suffragettes. Civil rights leaders. Many of them, too, were people of Jesus centered faith: not folks who believed that Jesus had ordained them to establish a new empire over and above any other, but folks who understood that their commitment to Jesus meant **engaging with the state on behalf of the vulnerable, just as Jesus had done.**
2. **This is our call.** To care for the poor, who Jesus called blessed. To tear down the social barriers of exclusion as Jesus did in his day. To protect immigrants, recognizing that all in the human family are our neighbors, and so *all* are our concern.
3. As we do so, we need to be careful **not just about what we stand up for, but how we do it.** We must remember we are following a non-violent leader who did not raise the sword when attacked. We follow one like Peter who coached his followers to live above reproach, modeling the loving way of the Divine in their engagement. May the way we speak, the way we act, the way we resist be a living testimony to the one we call King.

C. Finally, we are called to work for the shalom of our earthly homes.

1. Remember Jeremiah's invitation to the exiles in Babylon. Not only should they joyfully engage with the world around them, taking wives, building homes, but they work for the *shalom* of their communities.
2. *Shalom* is often translated peace and it is that, but **it's more than simply a lack of conflict. Shalom is total wellbeing.** Holistic wellness and prosperity. Flourishing of life. This is what we too are called to work towards as foreigners and exiles.
3. That means not only actively pursuing initiatives to restore peace, prosperity, and well being to all in our communities, it means **caring for the health of the land we find ourselves on itself.**
4. It means building initiatives that **cultivate peace across national borders**, rather than putting our own nation's interest above others.
5. And it means, as people of faith, **actively praying for the well-being of our city, our nation and our world**, just as Jeremiah encouraged his exiles to pray.
 - a) In recent months, our own **Connie Barker and Sylvia Williams** have been praying every morning at 6:30 am, Monday through Friday online together, interceding for our Haven community, interceding for one another, and interceding for issues in our world politically and otherwise. They are praying regularly for the shalom of the earth, the shalom of our country, the shalom of the world. They're hoping to organize online gatherings once or twice a month in the evenings that others can join in who are interested in doing the same thing but can't pray at the time they pray. And all of us are invited to find our own way of participating in this sacred work of seeking the shalom of our homes.

D. The good news in all this is Jesus is not our National Mascot. Jesus is not anyone's national mascot. No. **Jesus is the clearest revelation of the divine heart at the center of the universe that is inviting all of us home into the trans-national family of God.** He is the one who is called the Prince of Peace, the one who causes the lion to lie down with the lamb,

and the swords to be traded for plough shares. And he is inviting us everyday to live into the kin-dom he came to initiate, where family members from every tongue and tribe and nation live in complete *shalom* with one another and celebration of the heart that loves us all. **May we turn away from nationalistic idolatry, and join him and the Spirit he fills us with in that work. Amen.**

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. How have you traditionally thought about the connection between your life of faith and your civic life? What about this teaching resonates with or challenges that?
2. Have you seen Christian Nationalism at work in contexts you are in? What has its impact been?
3. What might it mean to “live in exile” in your context?