

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, September 27, 2020

“God’s Sustaining Presence”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7

Of course the story about Moses and the rock in Horeb doesn’t begin here in chapter seventeen of Exodus.



It begins much earlier. Yes, in one sense the story begins “In the beginning...” (Genesis 1:1). In the beginning, when God made the Creation, “a mighty spirit or wind swept over the surface of the waters”. So, God was present *in the beginning*. Yet, our story of the Israelites’ search for God begins in Exodus 14 when Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt and they complained that they would have been better off as slaves (14:11-12). In the next chapter, they murmured because the water was bitter (15:24). In the next chapter, the one we read last week, they howled because they were hungry and in Egypt they had lots of meat.



Now in chapter seventeen, they were thirsty and they again lamented. Moses in turn complained to God. And through all of this, the people asked, “Is this Lord in our midst, or not?” (Exodus 17:7).



While I do not subscribe to the view that United States of America (USA) should have a Christian government (nor do I believe that the USA should even have a ‘theist’ government), we have the phrase ‘In God We Trust’ printed on our currency (only since 1957). We sing “America, America, God shed his grace on Thee” (PH 440) and we sing in the last stanza of “My Country Tis of Thee”:

“Our father’s God to thee, Author of liberty, to thee we sing, Protect us by thy might, Great God, our King” (PH 437). Our legislators in the House and the Senate (although, not all) as well as our Presidents often place their hand on a Bible as they swear an oath of allegiance to the country. Yet, we are just about one month away from an election and everyone on both sides of the aisle are

complaining, muttering, howling, whining, lamenting, fighting, and even claiming insurrection.



As a nation, we have for over two-hundred years claimed it has been led by God to be, as Ronald Reagan once declared “the shining city upon a hill”. Nonetheless, we find ourselves asking like the ancient Israelites did, “Is the Lord in our midst or not?” We are in a time when we all, on the right and on the left, are wondering if God’s sustaining presence is with us any longer.

As a person of faith, I yearn to re-discover and re-attune myself to God’s sustaining presence. I will do all I can for justice and peace in this land. Yet, there comes a time when a rest must be taken from writing letters, signing petitions, attending endless meetings, posting Facebook memes, attending protest rallies, and engaging in café discussions.



There comes a time when we must stop and pray. Yet, what is it for which we should pray? It would be wrong to pray for God's sustaining presence. Why? For by praying for God's sustaining presence, there is the doubt, at best, or the assumption, at worst, that God's sustaining presence is absent. And this doubt, or this assumption, that God is absent is a lie! God's presence is *always* with us, it has *never* left us, it never leaves us, and it will remain with us always. *If* we feel the absence of God's presence, it is that we sense, at best, that we are no longer in tune with God's presence, or, at worst, we are no longer seeking it.



Therefore, we must stop and pray that through the Holy Spirit we become re-united, re-connected, and re-attuned to God's presence that is *always* with us present to sustain us.

This week, I have listened to the Holy Spirit speak through Priscilla Svec, Carlene McCarty, Douglas Cox, our Vermont Associate Conference Minister minister (Paul Sangree), and my colleague Paul Eyer of the Williston UCC church. All of these friends have suggested to me that our church be prompted each day for twenty days to pray for our nation as we approach the national election. Each day in October, for twenty days, a prayer prompt will be offered

in which we as a congregation can together (in a non-partisan manner) pray for a given hope, dream, aspiration, and yearning for our country. I would like to take part in this prayer prompt to help us reconnect with God's presence and remain in tune with it throughout the chaos in which we feel amidst.

Yet, returning to God's sustaining presence and praying for God's intervention is *not* enough. God calls us to be in partnership with God in God's salvific plan. We are to be co-participants in the enabling of the Kingdom of God, not passive by-standers or observers.



Therefore, I would like our congregation to participate in an initiative entitled "With Malice toward None" inspired by Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address (1865) following the death of more than 618,000 soldiers during the American Civil War.¹ The days leading up to, during, and following the 2020

¹ "Civil War Casualties", <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/civil-war-casualties>, accessed, September 27, 2020.

For Abraham Lincoln's entire second inaugural address, see:

https://www.facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/speech-president-lincoln-second-inaugural-address?utm_term=lincoln%27s%20second%20inaugural&utm_campaign=Search-27&utm_source=adwords&utm_medium=ppc&hsa_tgt=kwd-493726701112&hsa_grp=63212501410&hsa_src=g&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_mt=p&hsa_ver=3&hsa_ad=444127870032&hsa_acc=4949854077&hsa_kw=lincoln%27s%20second%20inaugural&hsa_campaign=1661698525&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIxK6j5dWJ7AIVvcDICh0upw5WEAAYASAAEgLfDPD_BwE, accessed 27 September 2020.

presidential election may become the most divisive period in modern U.S. history no matter who wins - or worse, if the election results are needlessly doubted and contested. People will have a wide range of emotions ranging from intense disappointment to grief, rage, and despair. The temptation will be to avoid, ostracize, or attack others. In other words, this election period could begin a dark time of polarization in the land—unless we act together to make it otherwise.²



That’s where the “With Malice toward None” initiative comes-in. If our church is interested, we can pledge to one another: “Regardless of how the election turns out, I will not hold hate, disdain, or ridicule for those who voted differently than me. Whether I am pleased or upset about the outcome, I will seek to understand the concern and aspirations of those who voted differently and will look for opportunities to work with people with whom I disagree”. The

² “With Malice toward None”, <https://braverangels.org/what-we-do/with-malice-toward-none/>, accessed 27 September 2020.

pledge is about a commitment to respecting the humanity of those who differ from us. It is about recognizing our foundational role as citizens to be the architects and agents of a more perfect union.³



With prayer and this pledge, I will re-connect with and become attuned to God’s sustaining presence during these troubled times. I hope you will join me and together we will drink living water from the rock.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to you at home, the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.

³ “With Malice toward None”, <https://braverangels.org/what-we-do/with-malice-toward-none/>, accessed 27 September 2020.