

**Feelin' All the Feels**  
**November 8, 2020**

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*Text: Psalm 46 and Romans 12: 9-18*

As you can probably tell, in planning for this service, we gave ourselves some options. Not knowing what this week would bring, nor what the future holds, we chose liturgy, scripture, and songs of grace and courage that could hold us, come what may. Until yesterday, I thought I'd be leaning into the stillness and assurance of Psalm 46, but I decided to go with Romans instead! Friends, like many of you, I've spent an excessive amount of time this week in front of a screen. In zoom meetings, yes, but also watching and scrolling the news, hitting refresh on vote counts, listening to speeches. And with many of you, I've been trying to understand how we, as people of faith, are called to make sense of this historic moment and respond to it. As ever, we turn to the wisdom of our tradition and Paul's powerful words may give us just the starting point. What an opportunity this moment has given us to claim our deepest values and faith practices and these so called "marks" of being a genuine follower of Jesus that Paul here defines! We've heard a lot of talk about character lately. Here's a chance to look at our own.

Let's start with the easier stuff, shall we? Rejoice in Hope, Paul says! Rejoice with those who are rejoicing, and weep with those who are weeping. If you are like me, you've been feeling all the feels - feeling the joy, the sorrow and everything in between. After yesterday's declaration, I wonder how many recalled similar words from Psalm 30 that tells us "weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning!"

For many, a joy not felt for years has come, and with it a deep relief, a collective gale-force exhale after holding our breath for so long! The joy and sheer exuberance that comes in knowing that a woman, a Black and South Asian woman, a daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants, is our Vice President elect! Amen? Joy comes to all of us who believe, as William Barber says, "If you want to change the narrative, you've got to change the narrators!" For many, that fact alone means it's time for a Kool and the Gang-style celebration! Literally 10 minutes after I wrote exactly these words yesterday, I went outside to stand in the bright sun and I heard that very song blasting from a neighbor's window. There *are* parties going on! Not right here and not everywhere, but we've seen it already, the dancing in the streets. After so much sorrow and turmoil, after several very long nights, after four very long years, if you are feeling it, by all means, rejoice in hope and let your joy unfurl!

For others, it may be more about feeling gratitude. Paul includes this one elsewhere. "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus!" he says. I trust after this week, we've had some renewed practice here as well. Those reflexive responses of "Thank, God!" "Thank you, Jesus!" Indeed, many of us are grateful. Grateful that this week has passed without violence. Grateful that voters turned out in record numbers. Grateful that our deeply flawed and frayed democratic institutions are holding. Grateful for saints like John Lewis and RBG who paved the way. Grateful for all who have been working so epically hard to get out the vote, to count the vote, to report on the vote

and to protect the vote! Indeed, we should give thanks in all circumstances, but that surely includes the good times, and the laughter too!

Show of hands (though I can't see them)! How many of us wept yesterday and are still weeping, whether a little or a lot? Tears of joy and gratitude, for the historic breaking of another glass ceiling, for the glorious sun seem to shine through the heavens all the more? In a moment profound as this, our weeping and rejoicing are joined! And yet, and yet, these tears may well be tapping into *all* the other feels too and into a more sorrow filled weeping! Weeping from our exhaustion. Weeping from the depths of our desperation. Weeping over the profound damage already done. Weeping over how polarized we've become. And with it, weeping from still feeling that almost instinctive, and distinctly 2020, dread that asks what...comes...next?! As journalist Dave Pell wryly noted, many have become and still are "too authoritarian-curious for comfort." And underneath it all, we're still feeling the grief, still feeling the trauma, as individuals and as a nation. Covid is still surging. The struggle is still real!

And here's where it gets even harder. Can parts of us begin to find the empathy and for all those for whom the joy did not come? After all, most of us know how it feels. Can we find some depth of understanding, compassion and genuine love, even as we 'hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good'? Can we bless those who persecute, bless and not curse them? Friends, this is not striving for some moral perfection here. We aren't Jesus! We aren't supposed to be Jesus! Yet I suspect our souls will expand and our resilience and capacity for joy will deepen when we can find in our hearts even the intention for this kind of radically counterintuitive, countercultural love. As René Girard wrote, and Richard Rohr quoted in a recent daily devotional, "What Jesus invites us to imitate is his own *desire*, the spirit that directs him toward the goal on which his intention is fixed: to resemble [Love] as much as possible."

Paul also invites us to be patient in suffering. Stepping back from the immediacy of whatever we may be feeling, taking the long view and setting this moment in some historic and even cosmic context, I'd like to turn now to a historic example of this kind of character in action. Hear these lines from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address:

*On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil-war. ...Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. ...Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"*

Lincoln concludes:

*"Fondly do we hope -- fervently do we pray -- that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. ...With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's*

*wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.*

If you can take a few minutes later and read the full version, you'll see all the more how Lincoln lifts up a providential, if incremental, sense of God's justice. He suggests that the war was punishment for the nation's offence of slavery. And yet, he does so with grave humility and with a willingness to share responsibility. No malice. No divisive words about us and them! He leaves the judgement to God and to a collective discernment. As one Lincoln scholar has noted: "Rejecting the South's defense of slavery as "a positive good" and the North's assumption that they bore no responsibility for the peculiar institution, Lincoln used his Second Inaugural Address to propose a common public memory of both the war and American slavery as the basis for restoring national unity<sup>1</sup>."

Over 150 years later, the same challenge is still before us. In order to pursue unity, in order to restore some sense of common hope across the dueling versions of reality in our country today, we must start by working towards a shared understanding of our past. Deeply held misunderstandings, ignorance, implicit biases, the pain and shame of our shared and enduring legacy of genocide, slavery and war still lies at the crux of what divides us. Until we too can propose a common public memory that is rooted in a vision of God's love and healing for all, that begins with shared acknowledgement, that includes efforts towards genuine repair for those who have been harmed, our calls for unity and reconciliation will continue to fall short. This is the work that we too are in, that we too must at least strive to finish, and that maybe just maybe we've finally begun. One thing is clear. We can't do it alone!

We can't cover all the virtues or values in our passage but there is one more I need to address. Paul says we must persevere in prayer. Speaking of not going it alone. Elsewhere, it's translated: "be constant in prayer!" A great joy and nourishing inspiration for me over the slog of these past many months has been tuning into a half-hour weekly Social Justice prayer call at the Pentecostal Tabernacle Church in Central Square. PTC is a genuinely diverse, comprised largely of Black immigrants and African Americans. I and several others of us have been invited to attend by their pastor Bishop Brian with whom I've been meeting regularly since the spring. We've been getting to know each other, discussing what this moment of racial reckoning means in Cambridge and how our churches and others congregations might come together to share! For those who have begun to attend these calls, the experience has been nothing short of transformative. Each week, a PTC lay leader frames up a theme, grounds it in scripture and lists out three or four prayer points which are assigned by cold calling on those who are on the call! They take these assignments unflinchingly and pray out their hearts for several minutes each on their appointed topics - praying for public leaders one week, for the dismantling systemic racism in another! It's a profound expression of faith and confidence in God who is already at work in the world. They too have what I would call a providential sense of God's justice and peace and they are ever seeking to align themselves with God's will for their lives and the world. To close out these always inspiring, often joy-filled calls, they invite people to unmute themselves and to pray aloud whatever concerns they may have! This leads to a beautiful cacophony of thanks, praise, and petition! One voice comes through the chorus, faithfully repeatedly, I need you, God. I need you!

Another literally sings into the blend - Alleluia! Alleluia! I'm excited to show up again this week but I don't expect the tone will be all that different, even giving these weeks news. I expect someone will be saying "I need you, God" this week as much as last, just like last week someone was saying Alleluia and Thank you, Jesus, well before the votes were counted! This community has a remarkable charism, a gift for joy and Spirit filled prayer. We are learning from them! In some circles here at First Church, we've begun unmuting at the end of our calls and praying similarly, and the experience of uplift is palpable. The constancy of their prayer allows their church to daily embody a profound trust in and reliance on God. And here's the thing. They don't just do it once a week! At PTC, they host prayer calls every day, at 6 am and midnight, gathering 10, 20, or 30 people. Last Saturday Bishop texted me at 3:37 am to let me know he just got off an amazing prayer call. Due to the pending election, they started early that night at 11 pm, and they filled their zoom capacity! 100 people and a waiting list. Imagine it. 100 people, praying to God, for 4 and ½ hours until 3:30 am, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep, doing their part in the battle for the soul of our nation, to quote Biden's speech last night! I told him I now see why you call them Prayer Warriors! "Ha," he said, "and that midnight crew, I call them Prayer Ninjas." I told him they make our church look like Prayer Cadets or like little white belts or green belts in karate uniform! And yet we are learning from the gifts of Spirit led relationship. I can't wait to see where She's leading next! Stay tuned!

Friends, celebrate as we may this weekend, we can't lose this learning, or the depth of groundedness nor the boldness of action that this moment has been teaching all of us! I can't help but feel like these last months and this last week have been already preparing us, already giving us the spiritual practices we need to rest and return to God, and to our deepest values, that we may be ready for whatever comes next! We must stay awake, and maybe someday take that literally, as Pentecostal Tabernacle does! We must stay vigilant. By God's everlasting courage and grace, may we continue to let our expressions of God's love and justice be genuine and joy-filled, and to practice humility. May we continue to rejoice in hope, and not only in the good times! May we continue to learn patience in suffering and perseverance in prayer! With common memory, and common hope, so far as it is possible and as much as it depends on us, may we learn yet to live peaceably with all. Amen.

1. Lucas Morel, *War and Remembrance in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address*, 2009. <https://ashbrook.org/publications/onprin-feb2009-morel/>