

**WHAT KIND OF COUNTRY DO WE WANT? PSALM 8; JUNE 14, 2020;
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From a global pandemic that has taken more than 100,000 American lives to a vicious eight minutes and forty-six seconds of police brutality resulting in the death of a black man and a global movement for racial equity and justice we are living in historic times.

The president's abuse of power directing military police to use force to clear peaceful, law-abiding protestors from a public park so that he could perform a sacrilegious political stunt holding up a bible for the cameras is one of the latest installments of his unpredictable, antagonistic leadership.

Who knows what will happen next? For a president who trusts no one but himself, lacks self-control, feels slighted by any interaction that does not bow to him in fealty, whose eggshell ego and hunger for revenge causes him to routinely violate legal, moral, and ethical standards we are lucky a disaster worse than those already happening has not taken place.

Conservative Bret Stephens wrote last week: "we are in the midst of an unprecedented national catastrophe...never before have we been led by a man who so completely inverts the spirit of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address: with malice toward all; with charity for none—eight words that encapsulate everything this president is and does and stands for."

Yet, I confess that I feel some culpability, not directly for his actions, but for his presence in the White House. The old saw: "We have the leader we deserve" may not be far from the truth. He was elected—albeit by a thread—by a political base that feels left out and ignored by the shift of American culture to a more progressive and diverse society.

But there has also been a seismic shift in the American economy. One writer put it this way: the snare in which humanity has been caught is an economics; great industry and commerce in service to great markets, with ethical restraint and respect for the distinctiveness of cultures, including our own, has fallen away in eager deference to profitability.

When I say I feel responsibility for his election I do not mean I am part of his base or support him in any way. I am referring to what has happened to our nation over time. We have drifted away from a kinder, more altruistic republic to a hardened, vengeful, might makes right, survival of the fittest economy and society, *except where race is involved* for blacks never enjoyed the fairness and equitability that privileges whites.

And so today and over the next two weeks I want to ask in this strange social isolation that has suspended our lives and even our economic systems: What kind of country do we want? Next week I will ask: What kind of church do we want? And two Sundays from now: What kind of faith do we want to practice in this changed world?

The inspiration for these sermons comes from a timely essay by Marilynne Robinson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and pundit whom President Obama flew to Iowa to interview in his last year as president. *He flew to her home* to interview her about the state of humanity and society.

She is an active member of her United Church of Christ and an unabashed Calvinist. That is, she sees herself in many ways as an apologist for the Christian life in general and the Reformed Christian life in particular.

The Scripture lesson today is Psalm 8. It is an exuberant celebration of the magnificence of a Creator who brought into being such a glorious universe: sun, moon, stars and earth—as the crown jewel of the whirling planets—and human life so wondrous, charged and with oversight and care of the earth and the grandeur of its life forms.

“What are humans?” the Psalmist asks, “that you have made them only slightly less than divine, crowned them with glory and let them rule over the earth?”

Given the events of late, you could make a case that we have failed to live up to that divine intention for our lives; we have descended a long way from the Psalmist’s vision for human potential. Yet, we also know from many biblical sources that we are, in this life, in a struggle against evil and so course correction, moral support, confession of sin are all needed.

There was a time, Robinson remembers, when we did attract immigrants in the tens of millions and we did create great cities and institutions and a culture that is envied around the world. We sustained a government that was decent and answered to the ideals of democracy. We were an optimistic people—there was the assumption things could and would get better that created a social ferment that yielded progress.

There was a time when workers’ wages were enough to raise a family, buy a house and have enough left to take a vacation or save to send a child to college. Our roadways and national parks showcased the beauty of the nation and its pristine woodlands, mountains and bodies of water.

And there was a time when the word public was an honorable term: as in public good, public servant, public interest. When a common vision and purpose united us beyond our political preferences and stirred the embers of sacrifice that moved our citizens and soldiers in times of great adversity and ennobled some of our greatest leaders and accomplishments.

Yet, recent history is defined by a different vision for the nation. Even before there was a viral crisis there were reports of declines of life expectancy in America, rising rates of suicide and other so-called “deaths of despair.” A decline in hope and purpose is a crisis of civilization that deserves our reflection and careful consideration for the good of our nation which, despite disturbing trends, is still a great nation.

Let us not forget that the great wealth that is evidence and endorsement of an American way of doing things was amassed over a very long period of time. It is also true that this abundance of wealth and good will would take far less time to squander and waste than it did to build. We are advised in the midst of what seems a reckless abuse of our material and philosophical inheritance to take stock lest we slip past the point of no return. Perhaps you noticed a White House lifting of the ban on baiting the great brown and grizzly bears out west. Donuts are the preferred lure to pacify and bring a bear close enough not to miss.

We are caught the snare of an economics. Perhaps it started back in the 60s with MacDonald’s profit hungry, public health threat of supersizing. Tom Friedman wrote that the national motto “Out of Many, One” has been transformed into “Out of Many, Me”. We can see it in the willful opening society too soon, missing opportunities to save lives from COVID and in racial disparities made glaringly obvious. And if that weren’t enough then George Floyd’s death and the scourge of police brutality. We have not taken seriously our sacred duty for the welfare of one another and the planet.

The list of profit v. public good is long: the 2008 fiscal crisis induced by banks bundling bogus housing loans; the deception and jeopardizing of life by the oil and tobacco industries; pulling out of the Paris climate accord, to name a few; and the gross disparity of wealth that separates an elite class from the masses who work two and three jobs to pay the bills and a middle class rapidly becoming a mere façade.

What kind of country do we want? We are already starting to reopen society. An election is on the horizon. Black Lives Matter has entered the consciousness of most Americans—especially those under thirty, a burgeoning demographic bigger than the baby-boomers.

Corey Booker quoted an old Washington DC saw: Change doesn't come from Washington, it comes to Washington. Just when we were having to remind people of the importance and power of the vote a galvanizing national movement for reform, racial justice and equitable living for all arises. It is the appearance of a movement like we haven't seen since the 1960s with an election just months away; the combination of forces could be the jump start to a turn from our dystopian, xenophobic, racist leadership. Nor will even new, more just and public minded elected leaders usher in the kingdom of heaven. Democracy can be a slow, messy process. It is built on trust, on checks and balances, on bipartisanship, and on a higher and humane vision that benefits all citizens. It is time to stop minimizing the affect little old me will have on the process and take responsibility to rebuild a robust democracy.

“What are human beings that you think about them? That you pay attention to them? You've made them only slightly less than divine, crowning them with glory and grandeur, letting them rule over your handiwork.”

There's a vision for who we are and who we have it in us to be.

Let's embrace it at the voting booth, in the ministry we share with one another and brothers and sisters of other faith traditions.

Let's find a way in the life we create together to crown every person regardless of color, creed, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation or any difference with glory and grandeur!

Tom Friedman, in that piece on the national motto said, “it's time to embrace a new motto: “Out of many, we.” That's the country we're called to be.

Unless I miss my guess, that's the country most of us long for and now with the turn of events have a chance to build. Amen.