

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor
Proper 26C
30 October, 2016



Good morning, All Saints. I love this place so much. It doesn't seem to matter whether I get back here once every couple of years or once every couple of decades: this is my home church, which makes you my church family and me your odd Aunt Barbara whether we have ever met or not. Like you, I keep coming back here because it is the place I feel most sane, most accompanied, most drawn out of myself to be with people whose lives may be as different from mine as they can be, but whose hearts I trust beyond all reason.

Maybe it's because we're all on our best behavior here, or maybe it's because the windows let us to drop the curtains on what's outside them for a while. Maybe it's the compounding interest on all the beauty that has been deposited in us through the years here, or maybe it's the promises we keep making together: to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, to respect the dignity of every human being. *All persons. All people. Every human being.* That's a lot to promise.

I will, with God's help.

You can't say things like that more than once or twice without feeling close to the people who are saying them with you, even if you don't know their names or zip codes—maybe even because you don't know their names or zip codes, any more than they know yours. A certain level of anonymity can be a great aid to feeling warmly toward other people. A certain distance can permit a broader embrace.

This may not be something a preacher ought to say, but I have always found it easier to love humanity than to love any particular human beings for more than an hour or two at a time without a break. It helps to imagine them naked. I learned that from a training manual for flight attendants. The rest of the time I pray to God to remind me that I can be as hard to love as anyone God ever met, and if that were not true of me as well as a large percentage of God's beloved children then Jesus would not have had very much to say or do while he was here. Love is hard. Justice and peace cost more than most of us have budgeted for them. Respecting the dignity of every human being? *I will, with God's help.* Just please don't tell me who they're voting for.

Nine days from now we will have a new president. According to sources as varied as *The Wall Street Journal*, *salon.com*, and the American Psychological Association, record numbers of us are suffering from what some mental health professionals are calling Pre-Election Stress Disorder and others (who suspect that the condition may last a while longer) are calling Political Anxiety Disorder. It affects millennials at almost the same rate as people in their seventies. It troubles people of all colors from both parties .

Even if you have been spared, you may recognize some of the more common symptoms in your family and friends: irritability, sleeplessness, weight gain, increased alcohol consumption, feelings of powerlessness or resentment, avoidance of conversations involving politics, more conflict at home, less productivity at work, persistent low grade anger, and something

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called “cognitive dissonance,” which is the crunching sound your brain makes when it hits new information that contradicts what you thought you knew about the world.

Your next-door neighbors hammer a sign into their yard that tells you they aren’t who you thought they were. The large crowds at the other candidate’s rallies suggest that your values aren’t as mainstream as you believed they were. Some of your Facebook friends post things that make you want to get up and make sure your doors are locked. As David Brooks wrote in his op-ed piece this week, “Anxiety is coursing through American society. It has become its own destructive character on the national stage.” Bizarrely, that makes it the one thing voters have in common at the moment: left or right, red or blue, him or her, we all agree that if the other team wins, apocalypse is right around the corner.

Why am I talking about this in church? Because I think it’s a spiritual problem. Because I think our corporate stress around this election crashes right into the promises we make every time we baptize someone into the body of Christ. Because Habakkuk showed up in the lessons for today—the only time he ever shows up the lessons—which means that today is his only chance to be heard for three more years, and he is the perfect prophet for anyone suffering from Political Anxiety Disorder.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?

Or cry to you, “Violence!” and you will not save?”

Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

No one knows anything about Habakkuk except what is in his book. The political enemies on his horizon are the Chaldeans, a “fierce and impetuous nation” whose “horses are swifter than leopards, more menacing than wolves at dusk.” They seize dwellings not their own. They gather captives like sand. Apocalypse is right around the corner. But Habakkuk’s argument is not with them. His argument is with God. Why is God letting the bad guys win? What has happened to the God of justice? Habakkuk thought he knew who God was, but the Chaldean menace is messing with his head. The Divine Listener will not listen. The Divine Savior will not save: meet cognitive dissonance, circa 600 BCE.

Against all odds, Habakkuk decides to remain faithful even if God won’t. He stations himself on the rampart of his fortress and waits for God to answer his complaint. *How long?* That’s what he wants to know, but there were no term limits in his day. He might have waited nine days and he might have waited eight years. When God finally answered him, the news was not good.

The Chaldeans are serving a purpose, God tells him. Their arrogance will circle back on them, but that is not your business. Your business is to write the vision –to write it so plainly that even those who hurry by can read it. “For there is

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still a vision for the appointed time,” God says to Habakkuk; “it speaks of the end, and does not lie.” If it seems slow; wait for it. It is on its way; it will arrive right on time.

And in the meantime (the *very* mean time)? The spirit of the proud is not right in them, God says, “but the righteous live by their faith.”

Lots of people think Paul wrote that verse, since it shows up more than once in his letters, but Habakkuk said it first. Every three years he gets to say it himself, reminding us that before Jesus and after Jesus, God’s people have always lived by faith—by continuing to do what they know what is right, regardless of what the leopards and wolves are doing. At the same time, he reminds us that the faithful do not cease to be faithful when they call God to account. Job did it. Jeremiah did it. Depending on how you read Jesus’ last words from the cross, he did it too. The fact that these laments have ended up in scripture tells us there is something sacred about them, something we need not fear doing ourselves. Perhaps it helps God to hear the faithful cry out while the Chaldeans are serving their painful purpose?

In his bestselling book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates says, “You are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life.”

That is far more eloquent than the advice therapists across the country are giving patients with Political Anxiety Disorder. “Get more exercise.” That shows up on a lot of lists. So does “limit social media,” “stick with facts,” and “watch Saturday Night Live.” One therapist suggested making a list of things you do now that you will still be able to do regardless of who is elected. Another recommended finding something practical to do right now: call and encourage a voter in a swing state, offer a ride to someone you know is reluctant to drive. Action is key, no matter how limited the outcome.

No one said, “have faith,” which didn’t surprise me since I was reading *Huffpost* and not *Christianity Today*, but God didn’t say anything to Habakkuk about *having* faith. God talked about *living by* faith—a small but vital difference that removes faith from anyone’s possession and gives it back as a way of life.

I heard something close to that in the advice of a counselor who practices in suburban DC. When couples come to him for help with election anxiety, he says, he reminds them to stop downloading negativity from their environment and “focus on the kind of partners and parents they most want to be and let their deeper values guide them.”

“Just do something selfless to help someone else and you’ll feel much better,” he said. “You’ve got to serve other people to be happy.”¹

That was in the *Washington Post*, not the gospel for today, but I think it still works. Does your Political Anxiety Disorder have you up a tree? Are you hoping to see the Savior without bumping up against that tall crowd of rowdy people who keep getting in your way? Good luck with that. Better hope you see the Savior before he sees you, because when he does he’s going to tell you to come down from your watch post and do something selfless for someone else—like sit down to supper with a bunch of people whose names you don’t even know. Some of them will be as anxious about eating with you as you are about eating with them. Some of them will be voting the other way. *C’est la vie*. How else are you going to let your deeper values guide you into a life worth living? How else are you going to keep the promises you have made? *All persons. All people. Every human being.*

¹ Steven Stosny, quoted here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/09/26/feeling-anxious-ahead-of-the-debate-heres-how-to-cope-with-election-stress-disorder/>

It's the vision God has given us. It's what keeps us coming back. It's what we're here to practice. It's what we want to give our children. So we will, with God's help—for nine more days, and all the days to come.

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