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Date: July 9, 2017
Sermon Title: Religion in the News
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Isaiah 52:7-10

Isaiah 52:7-10

*How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.*

The idea of "Religion in the News" is to get us into the habit of seeing religion all around us and to use it to get us thinking about and talking about all sorts of things from all sorts of angles. The fact is, newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, are full of religion, good, bad, and ugly.

Just last Thursday, July 6, there was a cartoon on the editorial page of the *Connecticut Post*. Now, mostly, editorial cartoons are political, very political, partisan political. This one shows Jesus speaking to the multitudes, and he says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you—unless they're gay. Then all bets are off."

Well, first, I was surprised to see Jesus on the editorial page in a cartoon. Second, I was surprised to see Jesus quoted accurately. He really did say in Matthew 7:12, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Third, I was surprised by the sudden twist added to Jesus's verse. I'm guessing it's a jab at Christians who sometimes pick and choose how to apply Jesus's teachings and when to ignore them.

You can see how easy it would be to show that cartoon around and have a lively discussion on a whole range of stuff: on Jesus, on homosexuality, cartoons, hypocrisy, tolerance, welcome, rejection. On the Golden Rule itself.

Or, this article from the front page of *The New York Times* on June 24, "Is a Buddhist Group Changing China? Or Is China Changing It?" It's about a gigantic, \$150 million Buddhist temple in mainland China being built by a Taiwanese Buddhist group called "Buddha's Light Mountain." In a country that is officially Communist, restricting Churches and tearing down crosses, that is imprisoning and targeting Muslims, that has killed and disappeared members of another Buddhist group, what is going on with this "Buddha's Light Mountain"? How are they successfully maneuvering around China's chaotic religious policies? (Johnson, Ian. "Is a Buddhist Group Changing China? Or Is China Changing It?" *The New York Times* 24 June 2017: 19. Print.)

Another article from a few months ago featured an equally huge Church being built in Chairman Mao's hometown, literally overshadowing his monument. What does this say about China, one-fifth of the world, and evangelism in the 21st century under repressive regimes hostile to religion? And what are people still yearning for that they flock to Churches and temples at a time of explosive economic growth *and* religious restriction? Evangelism. Mission. Proselytizing. Communism. Church and state. Gospel and Salvation. All those from one article.

These articles and thousands more all year long, across all kinds of media, help us to think about religion, even our religion, in fresh ways from fresh angles.

You've heard the words "doctrinaire" and "dogmatic." That's what a lot of religion is. Religion tells you what to think. You think it. That's all there is to it. Despite what some folks do with it, our religion, our kind of religion, is meant to be a "thinking-person's religion." And that didn't just start with 20th-century Liberalism or with the Pilgrims landing on Cape Cod or with Martin Luther's revolutionary Reformation or the Age of Enlightenment. It goes back to the beginning, the Garden of Eden. Free will.

God says, "Don't eat the apple." But he doesn't say, "You *can't* eat the apple," just "*Don't* eat the apple." In other words, he invites Adam and Eve to think

about it. Think about your actions. Think about the consequences. Think about why you shouldn't; or if you prefer, why you should. As my father would say, "Use your noggin! What do you think it's there for?"

Later, the Bible says, "Come, let us reason together." (Isaiah 1:18) There is an assumption there, do you see it? "Let us reason together." The assumption is that there's something to be gained from thinking things through, from discussing and questioning back and forth. And it's better when we do it together. Use your noggin and others' noggins too!

Jesus made an interesting comment: "Wherever two or three are gathered together, there I am right in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20) Jesus is pretty clear, there is a dynamic that happens when we get away from our computer screen, out of our man cave, away from our cubbyhole, and let in some outside light.

The Bible promotes thinking and discussion. I'll give you an easy example to show how provocative the Bible can be. Jesus was asked once, "Should we pay taxes, especially to a government we don't like, didn't vote for, don't trust?" Jesus answered, famously, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." Nice answer . . . but not entirely clear. Which is why Christians have spent 2,000 years trying to think through what exactly do we owe our government? And what precisely do we have a right to withhold from our government?

Could you abide a little political summer humor? Governor Christie of New Jersey shut down the State Parks and Beaches July 4th week, and then he and his family went to his State Beach residence and sunned themselves on the empty beach. It made me wonder: Does the State of New Jersey really own the beach, or do the people of New Jersey own the beach?

A few years ago in 2013 there was a federal government shutdown, but do you remember this? Some Americans refused to take it. They literally stormed the gates, especially the monuments and patriotic spaces. *They stormed the gates*, claiming that property as their own. I think if I lived in New Jersey last week I would have crashed my car right through the barricades to get to *my* beach, and I don't even like beaches! What I *do* like is making sure Caesar gets only what is Caesar's and not what is God's and mine.

You see? Religion in the news, or religion *from* the news. It's all around us if you look for it. Anything and everything is a jumping-off point to bring our faith into every issue you can imagine. That's what makes faith, or a Church, a living faith, dynamic. The ground rules are simple. I look for stories that are overtly, obviously religious. Something with "God" or "Church" almost right in the

headline, you can't miss it. Or, stories that *should* have a faith perspective, even if it's missing in the story itself.

The Connecticut Post, front page, June 15th headline: "Pastor Accused of Stealing Church." Whoops. That's not good. Bishop Franklin Fountain is accused by his family of stealing the Church founded by his father, buying it for a dollar. Guilty or innocent, that story is never going to end well. (Tepfer, Daniel. "Pastor Accused of Stealing Church." *Connecticut Post* 15 July 2017: 1. Print.)

When I was a pastor New York City, I hosted a conference on how Churches can harness the media to help further their ministry and grow their Church. We brought in some outside experts, and their first advice was to find a way to get your Church noticed, on the front pages of your local paper.

I laughed! I said, "Do you know what I'd have to do to get our Church on the front page of the *NY Post*? *The New York Times*? *The NY Daily News*?" Scandal! A good juicy scandal would get me on the front page. Murder would get me on page 6 or 7. Nothing else would raise an eyebrow! So it's not good when your local paper puts your Church on the front page because the pastor stole the whole Church, lock, stock, and barrel. But it sure was an obvious example of "Religion in the News," what with "pastor" and "Church" in the headline.

Likewise with another article from the *NY Post*. "L-I HELL-RAISER," it proclaimed, in gigantic type with a sub-headline, "Satanic Tags on Churches." Sadly, there are lots of articles all year long about attacks on religious institutions, whether it's swastikas on synagogues and cemeteries or graffiti and threats on mosques or this story about "Vandals spray painting Satanic graffiti" on Churches out on Long Island. The Devil's horn, a pentagram, or the words "Hail Satan" painted on the side of the Churches. (Prendergast, Daniel, Kevin Sheehan, and Max Yaeger. "L-I HELL-RAISER: Satanic Tags on Churches." *NY Post* 19 June 2017: 19. Print.)

Such articles are not just an occasion for tsk-tsking or saying. "Oh, how sad." They become opportunities to deepen the conversation: what is Satanism? Or a hate crime? What do we do about intolerance? Why is anti-Semitism so persistent? How do we fight it, stop it, end it? And, what if it happened to us?

Of course, our recent election was the number-one source of "Religion in the News" material, and that has been true since John Kennedy ran for president. We'd never had a non-Protestant president, so Kennedy's Catholicism was a huge issue. In those days most people knew very little about any religion outside their own. So half of America wanted to know: "What's a Catholic?" "Will the pope run the White House?" Literally, people asked that.

When Joe Lieberman was John McCain's vice-presidential running mate, folks wanted to know: "What's an Orthodox Jew?" "What will happen if he has to work on the Sabbath?" Jimmy Carter forced people to ask, "What does it mean to be 'born again'?" Mitt Romney is a Mormon. Ben Carson a Seventh-day Adventist. George Bush said his favorite philosopher was Jesus Christ. Donald Trump was a devotee of Norman Vincent Peale.

Newspapers and magazines dug into all those stories, giving us the chance to explore all the divisions and diversities within religious experience. *And* to ask, "What does that mean for us?" "Are we 'born again'?" "What's 'honoring the Sabbath' mean to us nowadays?" "Is Jesus a philosopher? And if so, what would it mean to ascribe to his philosophy?" "And what about Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*? Is there anything to it?"

When Trump won the presidency, the news switched to analysis. Why did evangelical Christians vote so solidly for Trump? What does that say about religion or politics or the future of both?

But the benefit for us is the chance to think deeply about how and where and why our faith intersects with our politics. Which brings us right back to "rendering unto Caesar" and "rendering unto God" and deciding who gets what part of each of us.

It's probably true after most elections, and certainly true after this one, that winners and losers are trying to understand the changing landscape. This party won, this party lost; these blue states turned red or vice versa; the Tea Party is in ascendancy or not; evangelical Christians are wielding power or losing it. Who votes, who doesn't. Who's next in line, who's not. And all the various worlds of religion are trying to figure out their place in the national landscape, in the national conversation. Which religious group pushed Trump over the top? Which clergy have the president's ear? And who is on the outside looking in? And what do they do now?

On June 11, the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* had a front-page article, above the fold, as they say, complete with three pages of text and color photos, and the headline of the day, "Liberals Fighting for Their Faith." Sub-headline: "Seeking to Break Right's Grip on the Nation's Moral Agenda" (originally titled "Religious Liberals Sat Out of Politics for 40 Years. Now They Want in the Game"). It makes for fascinating reading and even more fascinating discussion. Seriously, download the article, make copies.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/us/politics/politics-religion-liberal-william-barber.html>

Gather your family or your five best friends around the table, read it . . . and see where it takes you! I guarantee you an interesting hour! (Goodstein, Laurie. "Religious Liberals Sat Out of Politics for 40 Years. Now They Want in the Game." *The New York Times* 11 June 2017: 1. Print.

I'll just give you a couple of sentences to warm you up. "After 40 years in which the Christian right has dominated the influence of organized religion on American politics . . . left-leaning faith leaders are hungry to break the right's grip on setting the nation's moral agenda." And it goes on to list all of the issues that have been on the fault line of American sociopolitical-religious debate for our whole lifetime: abortion, poverty, racism, gay marriage, healthcare, school vouchers, the environment, peace, migrants and immigrants. Have I missed any?

Now, what happens over time is that religious groups stake out a position on each and every topic, backed up by the declaration that this is what God thinks. At the risk of oversimplification, generally speaking, the religious right has been better and more vocal in framing their views in religious language. Now, according to the article, the so-called religious left is finding its religious voice.

To put it in personal terms, take our little Church. We are a people who take the poor very seriously, and the elderly; and we just had 300 people get back from helping our neighbors in Appalachia; outside our window are 7,000 American flags for our soldiers killed since 9/11; and we feed the hungry all the time, and we fund Operation Hope for the homeless. Generally speaking—I'm not talking about everybody or all the time—but generally speaking, we don't link all that directly to our Greenfield Hill Congregational Christlike Church faith, we don't cite chapter and verse, we don't draw a direct bold line between Jesus of Nazareth and our good works.

There *is* a direct line. We *know* the direct line. We *have* chapter and verse. But we hold back. Maybe we're shy or don't want to sound like "Bible Thumpers." The end result is that other religious groups have more clout, more obvious moral authority on the national debate over certain issues. Folks like us have forfeited the floor. It didn't used to be that way. When the Founding Fathers were founding this nation, when abolitionists tackled slavery, when the Civil Rights movement fought for justice, we did so with God and Church front and center, and the Bible in our hands and on our tongues. We knew why we did what we did and why we stood for what we stood for, and we said it loud and clear. Then we stopped. We didn't stop *doing* it, but we stopped talking, at least about God.

I will end with one last story. I found an article about Hispanic Pentecostal Christians out West, who have taken a keen interest in the environment. Titled

"To These Pastors, Saving the Colorado River Is a Divine Command." Those pastors are especially concerned about conservation, clean water, drought. But what's interesting is they are framing it all in born-again, evangelical, Pentecostal, Biblical, religious terms. For the most part, Hispanic Pentecostal Christians are quite conservative, but generally not political. They would normally emphasize strict moral behavior, ecstatic worship, hand clapping, speaking in tongues, and a personal relationship with Jesus. Now, all of a sudden, they're praying for the salvation of the Colorado River. From the Rockies all the way to the Mexican border in Arizona, they are looking to their Bibles and their Church for guidance about conservation, ecology, and stewardship of the environment. Lo, and behold, they find their Bible full of references to God's good clean Earth and God's hope that we would keep it that way. Turns out that caring for the environment, being careful about what we do to the Earth, to the water, isn't just some ultraliberal, tree-hugging, atheistic, hippie, Chinese communist plot to ruin America. It's actually Christian. It's actually Biblical. It's actually godly. It's actually their business, right up their alley.

A lot of these Hispanic Pentecostal Christians are farmworkers. Their livelihood, their world is tied to the river. And their world is drying up. One pastor said his Church used to do their adult baptisms in the river, but now the river is so low people have to lie down in the riverbed to get fully immersed. (Santos, Fernanda. "To These Pastors, Saving the Colorado River Is a Divine Command." *The New York Times* 16 Apr. 2017: n. pag. Print.)

I close with that story because it's a perfect reminder of looking to the news to find stories that can open our eyes to a million topics. It's fun. It's informative. It's helpful. And it's spiritual.

There is a lot of good "Religion in the News."

Let's conclude by joining in singing, "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus," No. 190:

*Tell me the stories of Jesus
I love to hear;
things I would ask him to tell me
if he were here:
scenes by the wayside,
tales of the sea,
stories of Jesus,
tell them to me.*

*First let me hear how the children
stood round his knee,
and I shall fancy his blessing
resting on me;
words full of kindness,
deeds full of grace,
all in the lovelight
of Jesus' face.*

*Into the city I'd follow
the children's band,
waving a branch of the palm tree
high in my hand;
one of his heralds,
yes, I would sing
loudest hosannas,
"Jesus is King!"*