A Few Post Election Words

Well this morning, like most preachers across America, I’d like to spend a little time offering some humble observations and suggestions following our big day on Tuesday. I’d like to set the tone for my talk with some words from St. Teresa of Avila from the 16th century. She wrote: “Let nothing trouble you, let nothing scare you, all is fleeting, God alone is unchanging. Patience everything obtains. Who possesses God, nothing lacks. God alone suffices.”

I really like St. Teresa. She wasn’t just a haloed oracle, but a real down-to-earth human being with wisdom that’s both God-inspired and homespun, not always at the same time. She especially won my heart with a famous quote she made after a really bad day, at the end of which a passing cart drenched her with muddy puddle water. She lifted her eyes to heaven and proclaimed, “God, if this is how you treat your friends, it’s no wonder you have so few of them!” I really like her. She comforts me in my own fallibility.

I also want to emphasize that most of this homily was written before the vote count in Tuesday’s election. It had no particular winners or losers in mind, so please know that I’m not singling out any individual or party. OK? Whatever your political tribe is, it isn’t the exclusive target. One size fits all. I find St. Teresa’s words to be especially timely in the aftermath of a chaotic and at times stomach-churning election. “Let nothing scare you, all is fleeting, God alone is unchanging.”

Unfortunately the paroxysms of fear, vindictiveness and anger that many of us have been anticipating after this election seem indeed to be happening around us. But as followers of Jesus we have a role to play in all of this, and it’s not one of fear or fury. We’re called to keep our heads and keep our perspective.

I think one way of applying St. Teresa’s words to our own situation is to view this past week as a freeze frame in a long movie. (And of course this is much more than a movie, but I trust you understand the limits of metaphor.) We’re in the middle (or maybe more accurately approaching the climax) of The Story. But through Jesus and the writers of Scripture we’ve been given the courtesy of reading the script, and it will come out well.

And the scene we’re in now provides us with an opportunity to do our part in the plot to bring about that good ending, and also to take comfort that the Director really is in control. As for our part in the scene, the Scriptwriter is clear. We’re afforded the natural human emotion of anger, but we’re clearly told not to sin in our anger, or to let the sun go down on it. And we’re allowed to have hope for change, but in so doing we’re called to follow Christ’s model of humility and sacrificial love. In other words, we’re all called to build up, not to tear down.

And here I’d like to tip my hat for the gracious, healing words that both Hillary Clinton and President Obama offered after the election. Both said that this is a time to heal, and they’ve modeled that encouragement that comes from living in a country where a change in government is meant to be a thing of cooperation, and not strife. I also heard
very gracious words from folksinger Joan Baez and comedian Ellen Degeneres (among others) encouraging us to really try to understand each other, rather than deepening the rift that has divided our nation. That’s what feeds our love.

Call me a starry-eyed optimist, but I still have some faith in our system, and I have faith that Americans will continue to act not only to preserve it, but to make it more responsive and more effective. In other words, I believe that the post-mortem for American democracy and the freedoms it stands for is a bit premature.

But much more importantly, amidst the contagion of fear that’s swirled around us (and it’s a fear that I have to admit that I’ve given a toe-hold a few times), I think we run the real danger of forgetting that the President of the United States is not God, and that there’s someone else who is God.

For us Christians I think this is a test. Do we really believe that, despite electing flawed people in this particular time and place in a long, long history, God’s will really will ultimately prevail in the end? Or perhaps are we putting too much stock in human leaders? Do we place our hope in horses, and chariots, and weapons of war, and government structures, and elected officials, or do we take a breath and remind ourselves that God is still God? And that He’s made us promises that are just as relevant right now as they’ve ever been?

I hope it’s the latter, and I’d like to review a few of these this morning, right from the texts we’ve just heard, starting with our Old Testament reading from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is one of those timeless books that has something to say to all generations of people. His prophecies gave hope to the people of Israel in their time of exile. But they’ve also assured all of God’s people ever since, of a coming time when everything is going to change. Jesus and the New Testament writers confirm that hope with their forward look to the new creation.

But in today’s reading Isaiah writes what he hears from God, who says: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I’m creating; for I’m about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.” And he goes on to describe a place where weeping will be no more, and the land will produce an unimaginable abundance, and lives will no longer be cut short by the scythe of death. Children will no longer be born for calamity, and they and their offspring will be blessed, he says.

And in this amazing new heavens and earth there will be peace. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent (the father of hatred and lies)—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

You see, the anguish brought about by human leaders isn’t a new thing. And even our best leaders haven’t been able to save us from it. Until the day of the Lord we’ll be subject to humanity’s fallenness and the suffering it produces. In today’s Gospel Jesus
says, “When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there’ll be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.”

And he says before that happens we’re going to come under heavy persecution! (Now of course there’s debate as to whether Jesus is mainly talking about the coming crisis in Jerusalem at the hands of Rome, or the time immediately preceding His Second Coming. I personally prefer to think that Jesus is seeing through bifocal lenses, and the prophecies for both times more or less appear together. In other words, it’s all on a continuum: the ending of the old, and the beginning of the new.)

Well, today’s Gospel reading more or less ends with the hard stuff. It ends with a few words about persevering, and little else. But of course elsewhere Jesus describes this as the birth pangs of the unimaginably wonderful new heavens and new earth. I admit there’s a part of me that wants to say, “Okay, Jesus, but can we just kind of skip that part about war and persecution and famine and disaster and go right to the good stuff?” In any case, I don’t make the news; I just report it.

And that really brings it down to where we are now. The point is that, wherever we’re at, regardless of how things look in the short run, regardless of how ominous the self-serving earthly powers look, regardless of earthquakes in New Zealand and global warming, regardless of lawmakers who sometimes seem not to have learned the kindergarten rule of playing well with each other, regardless of all of that, there is hope, because the Lord is king, and His reign has already begun. Jesus has resurrected and ascended to the right hand of the Father! The rest is just cleanup. The screenplay has been written and the Director is directing.

We don’t have to put our ultimate trust in human leaders, who are just characters in the movie. Take out a penny and give it a good look: Right above that image of Abraham Lincoln is emblazoned the words “In God we trust.” Isaiah says as much in the Canticle we recited earlier: “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.” And he says, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

So as followers of Jesus the question is this: “How then shall we live?” Given that we know God wins in the end should we just hunker down in our little Christian cocoon and wait for the Second Coming? Should we passively just let it all unfold? I know you know the answer to that one. Jesus never called us to separate ourselves from the world. He said to be in the world but not of it. In other words, be people of God’s values, and not those of the world. And we’re not to withdraw, or even move to Canada, but to be salt and light to the world, right where we are, and to love each other as Christ loved us. He couldn’t have made it any clearer.
So in closing I’d like to say just a few words specifically about how we respond to a passionate and polarizing election, and to the fact that we now have a new President Elect. And I hope all of these words have to do with us being part of the solution rather than a part of the problem. The problem is that we live in a world that’s cast to and fro by worldly values that fail to place God on the throne as our King. And the solution to that problem is to effectively be the loving, healing, truth-speaking, Gospel-spreading vanguard of God’s kingdom on this earth until Jesus returns to complete the work.

So with respect to our response to the election, first I’d like to suggest that we begin by following the directive of Scripture by praying for our leaders, every one of them. (And I don’t mean praying that God will rain down hellfire on their heads. I’m pretty sure that’s not what they meant.) St. Paul writes to Timothy, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Second, I’d urge us all to let Jesus’ teachings and the authority of Holy Scripture guide us as we remain politically engaged through thick and thin. There should be nothing to prevent us and much to encourage us to be politically active insofar as this helps to lay the groundwork for that world we all look forward to. But the key is to steep ourselves in God’s ways and in Jesus’ teachings by reading our Bibles and praying for guidance.

Finally, as believers we’re called to respect our leaders (or at the very least through them to respect the offices they occupy), and obey the laws of the land insofar as they’re in harmony with God’s laws and the teachings of Scripture. In Peter’s first letter he exhorts the faithful with these words: “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.”

So the way we silence ignorance is by our example, not by shouting louder or engaging in retaliation. For the Christian what this means on the ground is that no matter what fears we have, no matter what disappointments we endure, no matter what righteous indignation we may feel, we’re to work these through to a place of God’s love and peace. What the scriptures teach us is this: Don’t feed the hate monster. Don’t try to rationalize resentment which will only fan the flames. That will not have a good outcome, and it’s expressly against the teachings of the one whom we call “Lord”.

But when leaders and laws do come into conflict with clear Christian teachings we may be called upon to make some difficult decisions, just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. did. Respecting our laws and our leaders doesn’t relieve us of the responsibility to courageously challenge injustice or immorality. But we do so not with vengeful hearts or verbal violence, but with love and forbearance, acknowledging the fact that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God.
This self-restraint isn’t meant as a burden, but as a joyful privilege nourished with the knowledge that God will bring all things around right in the end, and neither any human institution, nor for that matter, the gates of hell itself will prevail against that which Christ has established. That’s what’s written in the script, and we can be assured that that’s the joyful ending we await.

I’d like to conclude with some words Fr. Nate Bostian, a fellow priest from Texas, offered in the early morning hours after the election: “As I have after every election, I shall pray for our President elect, Donald Trump, and for the peaceful transfer of power which is the hallmark of the noble American experiment. I shall pray for the love of Christ to conquer all hatred, the Hope of Christ to overcome all despair, and the Faith of Christ to give comfort to every heart. If you are weeping now, you will be comforted. If you are celebrating now, may God use your enthusiasm to make this nation what God intends it to be: One nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for ALL.” Amen.