

Of the many pieces of wisdom my dad offered as I was growing up, I think one of the most important was, “a faith you don’t wrestle with is a dead faith.” It’s hard to say what the specifics of our conversation were when he said it, but it seems reasonable it would have been when I was studying for confirmation and struggling to accept the doctrine of double predestination. I remember being stunned that a preacher would say such a thing. It seemed unthinkable at the time that Dad had an unsettled, tricky faith—that faith was something he wrestled with. But he meant what he said about wrestling, because when I declined to get confirmed as a Presbyterian because I couldn’t believe some specific points of doctrine, he wasn’t mad. Instead, he told me he was proud of me for taking it seriously and thinking about it and to keep on taking it seriously and thinking about it. What a gift to be given not just permission but *encouragement* to explore and question and figure out for myself what an honest faith includes—to let faith always be a work in progress!

I was thinking about all of this late last month, on the way up to Minneapolis for training from and solidarity with various interfaith leaders resisting the violent occupation of their city by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). After all, the trip was in response to a call from clergy. While I would have been glad to go regardless of my vocation, I was responding as an exercise of faith, an intentional effort to follow Christ and love God and my neighbors more than I love my safety or comfort and more than I fear the power wielded by the state. And I was, of course, deeply aware that many ICE agents, the government officials unleashing them on our communities, and their supporters, claim to be devout Christians. I wondered if they wrestle with their faith—if they even know that they can do so *faithfully*.

In honesty, it seems to me that the ideology of white Christian nationalism is fairly detached from the good news of Jesus for the oppressed, the poor, and the vulnerable (the widow, the orphan, the stranger).\*<sup>(note)</sup> In its public expression, this worldview appears to be rooted in deep fear of difference, which too easily turns into hatred and, ultimately, rhetorical, legislative, and physical violence—none of which resembles the life and ministry of Jesus at all. But if you ask a person who holds this worldview about their faith, the response will include Jesus as savior, the judgment of God against evil, and so forth. And so this white Christian nationalism threatening perhaps irreparable harm to our nation, our neighbors, and the world, is a strange thing. It is a prejudicial worldview wearing an ill-fitting costume of faithfulness to God’s will. And it’s a view that can be maintained only to the extent that it is *not* examined or interrogated. It is, in my dad’s words, a dead faith. Perhaps a once-living faith, it has calcified into willingly blind obedience to ideology, however far removed from the example of Jesus it may be.

As we navigate this time of Christian nationalism's unbridled attack on democracy, Pastor Nikki and I invite you to join in our Ash Wednesday service and special Lenten services each Thursday evening until Holy Week. Our Lenten theme this year is "Twisted Faith," and these services will work to interrogate and untangle the ways in which abuse of scripture has twisted faith to serve the anti-Christ powers of empire rather than offering good news and new life to all people. Our special services will explore how faith has been twisted in relation to slavery and race, to creation, to indigenous peoples, to women, and to LGBTQ folks, using scripture as justification. And we will liberate these grossly weaponized scriptures by exploring interpretations rooted in historical context and the example of Christ.

I hope you will be able to join us for these services. And, more than that, I hope you investigate what *your* faith is versus what you hold onto that was imposed upon you, drilled into you, simply taken for granted. I hope that you will take a faith inventory with some regularity to determine what helps you follow Jesus more closely and what actually pushes you away from his way and what you may be in need of. I hope you never take your faith for granted, but tend to it, fertilize it with new ideas and information, turn the soil around it, nurture it well, and prune it where necessary, so it may be a living, thriving faith that bears good fruit.

With joy in the hopeful mystery of faith,

Pastor January

\* It is important to note that it is absolutely fine to love your country and be a Christian. It is not necessary to choose between a healthy patriotism and a healthy faith. Also, we must be careful not to pretend that Christian nationalism exists only within certain conservative, fundamentalist traditions. There are Christian nationalists in every Christian denomination, including our own. There are Christian nationalists who are unchurched.

Sociologists Dr. Andrew Whitehead and Dr. Samuel Perry define Christian nationalism as,

"...a *cultural* framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life ... the 'Christianity' of Christian nationalism represents something more than religion. ... it includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious." *Taking American Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, 10.

Constitutional law scholar Amanda R. Tyler notes that,

"Christian nationalism is not Christianity, though it is not accurate to say that Christian nationalism has nothing to do with Christianity. Christian nationalism relies on Christian imagery and language..." – *Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection*, 1.

In other words, Christian nationalism is not a religious stance, but a socio-political viewpoint that appropriates and misuses Christian symbols and language in an effort to justify its claim of moral legitimacy.