

Snares

Exodus 20:1-7; Judges 8:22-27

Scott Black Johnston

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

This sermon is the first in a two-part sermon series on God and politics. Buddy Enniss and I cooked up this sequence as a way for us to participate in the vigorous debate that is being waged in the op-ed pages and on talk-radio concerning the proper role of religion in politics. My assignment for week one is to preach about politicians and God. Next week, Buddy will be addressing the role of Christians in the political process. Or, as he so bluntly put it, "In week two I will endeavor to fix all of the errors that you made in week one." So, let's see what kind of trouble I can create for our theologian-in-residence.

The story of Gideon in the book of Judges recounts the career of a local political and military leader—which, by the way, is a pretty good description of a "judge" in ancient Israel. Gideon rises to popularity at a time when his tribe—the tribe of Manasseh—was being regularly harassed by Midianite raiders. Many of the people who belonged to the tribe of Manasseh were farmers who worked the lush fields along the western edge of the Jordan River. This swath of land, however, was proving to be an especially dangerous place to live and labor, for a devastating pattern was emerging there, as each year, usually at harvest time, camel-riding marauders would sweep into Israel from the desert. These raiders would drive people from their homes, plunder the farmsteads, and then put their own livestock to pasture in the ripe, golden fields.

As the story goes, one year, during the raiding season, a divine emissary approached a young farmer named Gideon. The angel told Gideon that God had chosen him to put an end to these annual incursions. After some initial hesitation, Gideon accepted this celestial commission. He assembled a rag-tag army, and—in a very bloody campaign—succeeded in wiping out the marauders and their leaders. That's where today's passage from Judges picks up. Gideon's troops have won the battle. In exuberance at their victory, the soldiers ask Gideon to be more than simply their officer in the field. They invite him to rule over all aspects of their lives. In fact, they propose that Gideon establish a royal family line, so that after he is king, his son would become king, and following that, his grandson. Buoyed by their victory, I imagine the troops lifting Gideon to their shoulders with a shout: "You are our commander, now be our chief!" It must have been a tempting offer.

Gideon's response to the people's giddy proposal is a classic. "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you." In other words, "You don't need a king, because God is your king." It is a solid theological declaration—one that is echoed throughout the Old Testament. It is also a savvy political statement. Gideon is not a clergy person. He is not a prophet, nor is he a priest. He is a judge—a military and civil leader. He holds his office, yes, because of his skill on the battlefield, but also because of a basic democratic principle—popular support. And, like all people whose position and power depend on the backing of ordinary citizens, Gideon

is a politician. As Gideon transitions back into civil life at the conclusion of his military career, he shows that he is a pretty darn good politician at that. For when he strides to the podium—looking out across the convention floor, surveying all of the folks who have just nominated him for a higher office—Gideon demonstrates that he can deliver a compelling political speech. He begins, of course, with God.

Since the dawn of time, politicians have (with varying results) evoked God's name in their stump speeches. To some of us, it seems strange and even a little frightening when those who hold (or seek) a public office start to speak in religious terms. In a recent editorial appearing in the *New York Times*, Susan Jacoby laments those moments when candidates intersperse their reflections on national policy with talk about God.¹ For Jacoby, an advocate of secularism in the public sphere, the political process will be most trustworthy in "reconciling the competing interests and passions of human beings" only when we stop talking about God's will and start talking about "plain, physical facts."² At the other end of the spectrum, there are many in this country who actually take comfort in hearing their elected officials speak of God. This portion of the electorate has certainly shaped the political landscape, for candidates (and those who "handle" candidates) have taken notice. As Stephen Carter, Professor of Law at Yale University, puts it, "Everybody who wants to change America, and everybody who wants not to, understands the nation's love affair with God's name, which is why everybody evokes it."³

The fact that nearly everyone on the national political stage flavors his or her public discourse with references to God compels us to grapple with Jacoby's editorial and her probing questions. Should we care what our politicians think about God? In our efforts to make good decisions at the polls, should we evaluate a candidate's spirituality? At a place like Trinity, a church known for its tolerance, our first impulse is probably to answer "no." We don't care what faith they espouse, because we know the danger of religious prejudice. We are ever mindful of the awful, awful events that have—in just the last century—been fueled by religious bigotry. Accordingly, many of us have come to view the faith of political candidates (whether they be Jewish, Roman Catholic, Baptist, or Buddhist) as being irrelevant to our decision. We opt instead to base our ballot box choices on the candidates' accomplishments, positions, and vision. Such tolerance is laudable. But it is not, I suspect, unqualified. I have no doubt that if a candidate who belonged to the World Church of the Creator (a white-supremacist cult) were to stand for office here in Atlanta, we would suddenly care very much about his faith.

Even though the World Church of the Creator is an extreme example, I think it does help us to clarify something. The vast majority of us, regardless of our own faith, do care, on some basic level about what our politicians think of God. We care at least enough to ascertain whether a candidate falls into the category "religious wackos." Of course, many of us are not content to stop with that technical designation. We want to know how influential a person's faith is in his or her life. Okay, so you are Jewish or Baptist or Roman Catholic, but just *how* Jewish or Baptist or Roman Catholic are you? When the chips are down will adherence to your faith be more important to you than allegiance to your country? Now, that's a tricky question. In 1960 a version of that question kept John Kennedy busy assuring Americans that he would not do the Pope's bidding if elected. Without a doubt, such concerns about

Kennedy's candidacy were fed by anti-Catholic sentiments. Kennedy's faith was questioned by some people simply because he was different. And yet, I think there is more to the inquisitiveness that surrounded Kennedy than ugly religious prejudice. If a politician's professed belief in God really is the personal bedrock that so many of today's candidates claim it to be, then we are justifiably curious about it. We are, after all, trying to figure out what makes a candidate tick: What motivates her? What touchstones will she go to in trying to make a difficult decision? What is her vision for the world? Despite our curiosity, we rarely get answers to these questions that have any real substance. Why? Well, surely, one reason lies with electoral math. Like it or not, we are part of a system that rewards those who profess a profound faith and yet who are able to keep its specifics sufficiently blurry. In other words, the best politicians are those who are capable of professing a sincere belief in a rather vague god.

After declaring that he would not usurp God's rightful rule over the people—after reminding the Israelites that God alone is the sovereign monarch of their lives, Gideon, without missing a beat, says, "Oh, but I do have one request: Give me your gold." You cannot dispute what Gideon has said about God. His words are orthodox, by the book, solid theology. But, as Walter Brueggemann has pointed out, we should read cautiously here.⁴ Yes, Gideon is orthodox, but watch what happens next. Even as his theology still echoes in the people's ears, Gideon begins to assume the office and the powers that he has just refused. "Give your gold." "Give me a share of your plunder." "Let me tax your treasure, so that I may turn my town into a holy site." This collection of gold makes us wonder: When Gideon looked out at the people and proclaimed that God was their true ruler, was he being sincere? Or was he simply a good politician cynically playing the God card, before doing what he intended to do all along?

This is an exceedingly difficult, perhaps impossible, question to answer. In the midst of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, was Bill Clinton sincere in asking for forgiveness at the National Prayer Breakfast? On the campaign trail in 2000, was George W. Bush sincere in saying that the philosopher who had most influenced him was Jesus? Are such statements candid expressions of faith? Or do these politicians invoke God knowing that we are suckers for any hint of earnest religion? It is tempting to think that the guy who I voted for was sincere, and the other guy was duplicitous. Isn't it? Are they sincere? I do not know. Perhaps our own fragile faith is as good an indicator of sincerity as anything else. When in life do we take actions that are purely based on our religious beliefs? When are we not also concerned with what we consider to be good business practices? When are we truly indifferent to the reactions of family and friends? When, if ever, can we claim to be totally sincere in talking about (and acting on) our faith?

I like to think that Gideon was sincere—"sincere" insofar as he knew the Hebrew tradition—"sincere" in that at least part of him acknowledged that God alone ruled the people. After all, earlier in Judges, Gideon tore down a cultic shrine belonging to his own father in order to raise an altar to God. Is he sincere? Yes, but he is also a politician. And the truth of the matter, for good or for ill, is that politicians by necessity want to domesticate religion. A politician's success depends on arduously and artfully reached compromises. And, to put it bluntly, religious fervor that has not been

domesticated has a bad track record when it comes to making concessions. Now here's the question, brothers and sisters: is that a bad thing or a good thing?

In his fascinating book, *God's Long Summer*, Charles Marsh tells the story of Fannie Lou Hamer, the founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.⁵ In the summer of 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer and the MFDP proposed sending an integrated slate of delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Their proposed slate was to substitute for the all-white slate that had been put forward by the "official" Democratic Party of Mississippi.

When President Johnson got wind of the MFDP's plan, he worried that this dispute could evolve into a storm that would disrupt his nominating convention. So he sent his vice-president-to-be, Hubert Humphrey, to buy Ms. Hamer off. Humphrey, a senator from Minnesota with a solid record on civil rights, began the "negotiation" by asking the devout African-American woman what she wanted. Fannie Lou Hamer responded, "the beginning of a new kingdom on earth." Things went downhill from there. In fact, Hamer was so committed to what she believed was the divine intention (God's vision) for humankind that she was unwilling to budge in her request. As the conversation went on, Humphrey (under pressure from Johnson to get the job done) began to sense that his own political future was in jeopardy. Through it all, he repeatedly assured her that only by compromising could she assist the party to put people in power who would really care about racial equality. If she did not compromise, Humphrey warned, the Democratic ticket could go down. Marsh records Ms. Hamer's reply to this tactic: "Senator Humphrey, if you lose this job of vice-president because you do what is right, because you help MFDP, everything will be all right. God will take care of you."⁶

Politicians must compromise to succeed. Authentically religious people are those who proclaim visions of a better world—they are the zealous ones unwilling to settle for anything less than "a new kingdom on earth." Even at their best, the approaches taken by truly religious people and truly competent politicians make for an awkward dance. In this story both individuals had great intentions, both wanted to change the world, both wanted to see an end to racial divisions; and yet, the gulf between the two was vast. No question about it, religion and politics do not mix well, but mix they must! When we refuse to bring the two together in our own lives, we opt out of a holy responsibility. Of course, when we enter the fray, we continually risk falling in love with the politics and the politicians, and forgetting, as Gideon forgot, who our true sovereign is.

Sadly, Gideon had no Ms. Hamer to oppose him; at least, no such person is recorded in the book of Judges. So, after he collects the gold, he fashions an ephod—a sort of divine representation—and places it in his hometown. Emboldened by his military victory, Gideon speaks confidently of God and then, almost immediately, he turns around and takes up a collection for something that sounds a lot like an idol. Ironically, he creates a shrine in the same village where he once destroyed his father's idolatrous altar. In the end, Gideon sends his people back down a disastrous path that he had once helped them to escape. For, as the narrator of Judges states, the shrine became a snare for Gideon and his family. It fueled jealousy, stirred up rivalries, and eventually would plunge Gideon's children into violent conflict with each other.

What are we to make of this sober ending to a story that started out on such a high note? We might take away the old, old lesson that when religion and politics mix,

we are in for a nasty time of it. Yet, perhaps the lesson here is a bit more pointed: Be wary when politicians ask for your gold—you never know what they may do with it. This interpretation of Gideon's tale prompts some hard questions. Have we become so enamored with the politicians that we support that we will accept any usage to which they may put our gold? In answering as Christians, we need to watch carefully for the deadly coils scattered on the ground. Will we, like Fannie Lou Hamer, have the strength to hold politicians accountable to our highest religious hopes? Or will we, in this election year, become giddy supporters of our political favorites, happily ensnared in the fervor, even as gold is fashioned into idols before our very eyes?

Let us stand together and confess our faith in the One who rules over all, even over those dazzled by blankets heaped with gold earrings, using the words of the Apostles' Creed.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by
the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he
rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the
right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to
judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion
of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the
life everlasting. Amen.

Notes

1. Susan Jacoby, "One Nation, Under Secularism," op-ed appearing in *The New York Times*, January 8, 2004. Jacoby is the author of the forthcoming *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, and the director of the Center for Inquiry—Metro New York.
2. Ibid.
3. Stephen L. Carter, *God's Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 13.
4. Before I began work on this sermon, I called Dr. Brueggemann to solicit his wisdom in identifying a text that might address issues pertaining to God and politicians. I am indebted to him for suggesting this fascinating text, and for pointing me in a helpful interpretive direction.
5. Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39-40. See also: *God's Name in Vain*, 27-31.
6. Ibid.