

11.03.24 ~ Pentecost 24, Communion & Covenant

“Fragile or Durable Faith Freedom?”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Psalm 146 ^{TLB}

¹ Praise the Lord! Yes, really praise him! ² I will praise him as long as I live, yes, even with my dying breath.

³ Don't look to men for help; their greatest leaders fail; ⁴ for every man must die. His breathing stops, life ends, and in a moment all he planned for himself is ended. ⁵ But happy is the man who has the God of Jacob as his helper, whose hope is in the Lord his God— ⁶ the God who made both earth and heaven, the seas and everything in them. He is the God who keeps every promise, ⁷ who gives justice to the poor and oppressed and food to the hungry. He frees the prisoners ⁸ and opens the eyes of the blind; he lifts the burdens from those bent down beneath their loads. For the Lord loves good men (and women). ⁹ He protects the immigrants and cares for the orphans and widows. But he turns topsy-turvy the plans of the wicked.

¹⁰ The Lord will reign forever. O Jerusalem, your God is King in every generation! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

Leader: These are the Words of Liberty for Believers.

All: Thanks be to God!

Acts 5:28-42 ^{TLB}

²⁸ “Didn't we tell you never again to preach about this Jesus?” the High Priest demanded. “And instead you have filled all Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring the blame for this man's death on us!”

²⁹ But Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our ancestors brought Jesus back to life again after you had killed him by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ Then, with mighty power, God exalted him to be a Prince and Savior, so that the people of Israel would have an opportunity for repentance, and for their sins to be forgiven. ³² And we are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, who is given by God to all who obey him.”

³³ At this, the Council was furious and decided to kill them. ³⁴ But one of their members, a Pharisee named Gamaliel (an expert on religious law and very popular with the people), stood up and requested that the apostles be sent outside the Council chamber while he talked.

³⁵ Then he addressed his colleagues as follows:

“Men of Israel, take care what you are planning to do to these men! ³⁶ Some time ago there was that fellow Theudas, who pretended to be someone great. About four hundred others joined him, but he was killed, and his followers were harmlessly dispersed.

³⁷ “After him, at the time of the taxation, there was Judas of Galilee. He drew away some people as disciples, but he also died, and his followers scattered.

³⁸ “And so my advice is, leave these men alone. If what they teach and do is merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. ³⁹ But if it is of God, you will not be able to stop them, lest you find yourselves fighting even against God.”

⁴⁰ The Council accepted his advice, called in the apostles, had them beaten, and then told them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and finally let them go. ⁴¹ They left the Council chamber rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for his name. ⁴² And every day, in the Temple and in their home Bible classes, they continued to teach and preach that Jesus is the Messiah.

Leader: These Are the Words of Faith Freedom, Empowered through God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Decisive and omniscient God, we thank you for reminding us that you know all outcomes before we do. You are the creator, and we are the created. As we study the Scriptural principles in your Word, let us hear your direction and guidance in all things and in all of life, especially this week. Let us obey you with our commitment to share the gospel with others in a way that preserves their soul freedom yet exposes your goodness. Let us be responsible citizens; let us pray for peace and freedom to vote our consciences. Speak deeply to us as we prepare for the coming weeks. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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As of today, there are only **1.5 days** left until the Presidential Election, so if you haven't already voted, please plan to do so. It will be another week of controversy and division, so let us keep our focus on Christ and God's love for us. May we be God's instruments of peace as our durable faith freedom remains secure.

Apparently, from my bookshelf research, your previous Senior Minister preached about religious liberty and our Baptist history a good deal. It makes sense if one reflects on the past decades of world conflicts, cultural changes, economic stresses, and institutional church decline. One of Walter B. Shurden's Four Fragile Freedoms is Religious Freedom, the ability to worship or not as one sees fit, without interference from any government entity. The Baptist Joint Committee's website explains: "Religious freedom is a pillar of American life, written into the U.S. Constitution and spelled out in the first sixteen words of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

[\[https://bjconline.org/mission-history/\]](https://bjconline.org/mission-history/) And “as Baptists, we claim a long legacy of women and men who have risked their lives to advocate bravely for religious liberty for all,” people like Thomas Helwys, Dorothy Hazzard, Roger Williams, John Leland, Maria W. Stewart, and many others who influenced Baptist heritage of free church [\[https://bjconline.org/mission-history-baptist-heritage/\]](https://bjconline.org/mission-history-baptist-heritage/).

Now this is not a religious liberty class, but an effort to put our faith and freedom into perspective. Let us start with non-typical Scriptures for this topic. It may be surprising that I selected a hallelujah praise psalm for a week of national polarization. There is a collection of five such psalms at the end of the psalter. They are hymns of praise for the congregation but are based on one individual’s observations of the Lord’s goodness. They are “thank offerings” recognizing that humans should not put their trust in “princes” but in God; they (and I suggest “we”) should not put our faith in frail or faulty leaders but in the loving, free, and omnipotent God. The Old Testament prophets Haggai and Zechariah were encouragers who taught the people to put their trust in God to rebuild the temple.

This is a familiar theme in two parts: no one but in God can salvation be found and no person who turns to God in humility and sincerity does so in vain. We cannot know whether these beliefs were personal or national in nature, but it does not matter. We must hear the message that there is no permanency in our lives or from any other influencer, except God. He is eternal; **his reign** never ends so our liberty should be in and through God, not humankind, no matter the credentials, lineage, or skills. Worship of man or any human is a dangerous idolatry, which we see Jesus and Paul warn against throughout Scripture. The

Triune God's supernatural source of power, and Christ's justice and mercy are greater than humankind's abilities or dreams. God brings to ruin the wicked and encourages the righteous. An individual's plans die with him or her as the spirit departs, and the body turns to dust. The psalmist reminds the reader not to trust in man but in God.

This is certainly appropriate for an election week! There are bigger issues at stake than just politics or the economy: our long-standing Baptist faith freedom; religious liberty for all; legal and economic justice for the poor and differently abled; and uniform care for orphans and widows, according to our Scriptures. Honesty, cooperation, humility, and reconciliation are character traits that must dominate after the election, no matter who wins. Humankind's greedy ambition is sin. Will our faith freedom stand strong to support differences of opinion? Or will it crumble to the popular factions, as James Madison warned of our fragile democracy? If we truly believe in Jesus for our personal salvation and in what he taught, truth and freedom will prevail.

Baptists believe that no authority, especially a civil one, can stand between individuals and their creator. This is the "wall of separation between church and state (written in 1802 by Thomas Jefferson)." To be made in God's image allows free conscience, according to Genesis 1-2; throughout Israel's history, the Scriptures show that freedom and liberty exist in relationship with God. Then, of course, in Galatians 5:1: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."; Matthew 22:15-22: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."; and our

Acts passage today, we hear Paul, Jesus, and Peter defend the human right to worship freely without government interference.

The deepest concept of faith freedom comes from the Lordship of Jesus Christ, yet Baptists saw a practical need for political protection from major persecution of their religious beliefs. Roger Williams was best known for establishing a new free state and free church in Rhode Island, the only state of the thirteen colonies to offer complete religious liberty for its citizens.

In Virginia, between 1767-1778, forty-two Baptist Ministers were jailed for preaching the Gospel. Thanks to Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Mason, John Leland, and other influential leaders of the time, the Bill of Rights passed in 1785 and then went on for Federal consideration. Religious liberty is a free vote in any election. Religious Liberty means having free churches within a free state and a representative government. It is written that we in Virginia are citizens of two Commonwealths: one earthly commonwealth called The United States of America, and one heavenly commonwealth called the Kingdom of God. We give allegiance to the states or nation in civil matters, but as believers never yield control over our personal consciences to humankind. We obey God, not humans.

Freedom and cooperation provide church autonomy, a certain independence, yet also church association, an interdependence of compatible, collaborative churches. This cooperation allows many to do more missions work, for example, than any one small church can do. We call that “associating, fellowships, and in today’s language, collaboration.” Groups like CBF (Cooperative Baptist Fellowship),

NorthStar Church Network, Leland Seminary, and BGAV (Baptist Association of Virginia) are all good examples of yet another durable freedom. Notice the word “convention” is missing?

Our Baptist history is rich with a legacy of conflict and resolution. One booklet quotation from the Virginia Baptist Historical Society sums it up well for us at this specific time:

As a Christian citizen, it is right for you to participate energetically in the political process, furthering the cause of representative government, participating in grassroots political movements with joy, pride, and commitment. But if you do not with equal or greater energy participate in a grassroots movement to **share the gospel of Jesus Christ**, then you may be rendering to Caesar that which belongs only to God . . . let us always remember that there may come a time when we must obey God rather than men.

That’s what Peter did in the Acts passage. His intercessor, Gamaliel, supported this principle and helped the pharisees see the folly of execution. What will we do? Go back and re-read it. And remember last week’s warning to Timothy: “Follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness,” as you “fight the good fight of faith.” That is our calling to faith as well as to being good citizens. Faith freedom can be fragile, but the rewards are durable and eternal. Amen. ||

Let us pray. Creator God, we thank you today for these reminders that we serve only through your freedom and strength. Please help us to be open minded yet committed to the Gospel of Jesus. Encourage us through these Scriptures to do our part as citizens heaven and earth, and to trust you in our ministries and with our country’s leadership; help us find beauty and not conflict so that together we may serve your kingdom well. And may it be through your blessed elements that we recall your sacrifice for our sin. It is in Jesus’ name, we covenant together and pray, **Amen.**