

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**September 22, 2024, The 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, The 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

### THE “E” WORD

Brace yourself...I’m going to use the “E” word! Saying the “E” word in a purple congregation like ours can be risky, because in a room full of people who are decidedly red and decidedly blue voters, isn’t it easier for us to stay pleasantly purple mixed together in our diversity if the pastor stays silent about it? But I’m going to say it: “Election.” I’m saying the “E” word because between Psalm 1 and James 3-4 I believe we have been given a game plan for the 2024 presidential election.

The “E” word. I hate to even use the word “election” because it causes so many instantaneous reactions in many, if not most, of us.

But isn’t this exactly the place we should talk about elections that cause so much division? Now if you are thinking...here it comes she’s finally going to tell us how to vote, we knew she couldn’t hold herself back this time. Rest assured I’m going to disappoint you. Our freedom as Christians and Americans to freely vote is a freedom I take seriously.

Unlike some of my colleagues through the years, I don’t believe it is my place to walk into the voting booth with you. I don’t belong there. Period.

But I do believe I belong on this side of the voting booth talking about how we act, and feel, and live, as we get closer to the election. And I believe we definitely need to invite God into all the emotions and reactions and concerns that surround this presidential election.

In these last months, people have talked to me about their anger, their fear, their strong convictions and their definite decisions about voting. If your phone and email and texts are like mine, then there are many people who want to make sure we vote and think and act, and often hate, a certain way. And I’m not even on Facebook. There is so much hatred about those “other people” who will not be voting like we will. But we don’t come to this, or any election in a vacuum. We come to this election as followers of Jesus.

Many people are back in the pain of the 2016 election and the last 8 years, of losing family and friends over the elections. Many people tell me they are back into the deep silences between themselves and those they care about most. Or they do spend time together, but talk about everything else, and don’t take the risk of any of the shaky ground of disagreement because neither side “can even believe” how those other people are choosing to vote.

Old pain has resurfaced, new sorrows have arisen, deep fears about the outcome of the election shake people on both sides of the political divide.

Our beliefs on both sides of the divide seem entrenched in concrete, and we’ve lost the ability to see the other people, the other family, the other friends on the other side, in their humanity, in their true child of God status. It gets hard to see people when they aren’t thinking they ways we think they should think.

Human nature hasn’t changed much since the time of James, has it? James’s letter to a Christian community calls followers of Jesus to treat each other with dignity, with justice and to love others as we love ourselves (2:8). As you think about the “E” word and all you’ve been feeling and thinking and saying, let us listen to James’s words from the Message translation as though he is speaking to each one of us individually:

Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom—it's animal cunning, devilish plotting. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor. (James 3:13-18)

I don't know about you but "gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings" doesn't always capture the way I myself am feeling or speaking about the "E" word. It may surprise you, but I have a few opinions myself. :)

So how do we do this, how do we walk through the next 43 days and beyond? How do we let ourselves be guided by James's call to get along with each other in the Christian Community, because that is exactly who he was writing to. How do we walk through the next 43 days with all the election fatigue, and for many the deep sorrow and division and disruption that this election brings. How do we walk toward this election with the fear that many people are feeling about its outcome? How do we walk into this election as followers of Jesus?

This is where Psalm 1 and James can help us. They call us to reorient how we interact with all the election news and election emotions and turn to God first. Because living in the frenzy of the election first is wearing us out, and changing us, and for some breaking their spirits in their interactions with others and their fears about the future.

Once again in life we are invited to hear God's call to turn to God first and let God's presence in our life shape the rest of our life. Psalm 1 calls to us to turn away from those who don't walk in God's ways and in the words of the Message translation to "thrill to God's Word," and "chew on Scripture day and night."

When we do that the Psalmist says we will be like fruit trees planted by refreshing streams of water, producing good fruit, with leaves that don't wither.

That image always reminds me of the little cherry tree in the manse yard. When I came here 22 years ago there were two cherry trees at the manse, a little 4-foot tree and the tree that is still there. One of my first summers here we spent the summer in severe drought.

Having never lived this far south or in the long heat of a summer of drought, I didn't know that people were using soaker hoses on the base of their trees during the evenings.

Near the end of the summer the little cherry tree gave up the ghost and began to lean. That fall when I went to remove it, it basically just tipped over and lay there on the ground, its tiny root system all shriveled up.

All through that drought-filled summer it had been longing for refreshing streams but it had been dying from the roots up because there was no healing water.

If this election season, or any events in life leave us feeling like a small dried out cherry tree that once had the potential of those wonderful tart pie cherries, then Psalm 1 is for us. Unlike that tree that had a caretaker who didn't know any better, we can pick ourselves up and move to get the

help of refreshing streams.

I believe we walk into these next 43 days of pre-presidential election, and then into the days beyond, soaking our roots in God's word. As the Message says: "thrilling to God's words and chewing on Scripture day and night."

In those Old and New Testament pages of promise and grace and God's constant love we will be reminded that

God is bigger than any human-made problem, program, political party or politician,

We will hear again that "Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8)

We will hear that Jesus came to the world, because "God so loved the world.," and sent Jesus into the world, not to condemn the world, but so that the world might have life in Jesus. (John 3:16-17)

We will hear Jesus say: "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

We will hear: "The Lord is our refuge and strength a very present help in time of trouble." (Psalm 46:1)

When we chew on Scripture, we will be challenged again by the words that first echoed through a church in Galatia when Paul wrote: "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, (and if he was writing to Americans today, I'm sure he would have also written, there is no longer Republican or Democrat) for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

We will be handed the deep truth for the walking of these days when Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life." (John 14:6)

And Jesus will offer us the refreshing waters for our root systems with the words: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

And children of God these are just a few sips of the refreshing waters of God's words in the Old and New Testaments that will reorient our hearts for the living of these days. So, I encourage you to begin, or continue, or return to "chewing on Scripture."

Then we come to James, who calls us to live in community by being "gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings." But that isn't all he says. In 4:8 we hear this wonderful promise: "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you." If there was ever a memory verse to put into your heart for the living of these days it is this: "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you." In the fatigue, uncertainty, anger, sorrow and fear of the "E" word, we as followers of Jesus are called to turn toward God.

There are many ways to draw near. You draw near when you walk into this Sanctuary on Sundays, you draw near singing songs of faith in your shower or your car or the kitchen.

You draw near to God in the refreshing streams of the Bible, and in conversations with other followers of Jesus who are trying to find the path to the presidential election.

You draw near in prayer, prayer with words and the prayers of silence and listening. You may be someone who draws or paints or does other forms of art, and your time creating can be a time of sitting with God in the creative process.

Your "drawing near" may happen when you are out for a run or walk.

It may happen as you are creating music on whatever instrument you play.

Your "drawing near" may happen in a book you're reading that reminds you of who God is in your life.

You may feel yourself drawing near to God when you spend time with cherished family or friends who love you, and help you keep your life in perspective.

And as I learned on vacation, sometimes “drawing near” happens in stillness and silence. In July I was over on Lake Michigan, just out of Indiana and into Michigan. There is a wonderful beach called Weko Beach, and I went early in the morning each day to walk before many people were out. Way down the beach there was a huge piece of driftwood that I would sit on to watch and listen to the waves, drink some water, rest, and to pray. The second day I sat down there and had a drink of water, and then thought to myself, well, now I should pray. But I really didn’t have anything to say to God and it felt like I was going to have to try to dredge a prayer up from somewhere. Not a great feeling for me, or I would guess for God.

But in one of those lovely Holy Spirit moments when you sense God speaking and also chuckling a bit, I felt God saying, “Becky why don’t you just sit with me for a while?”

And I was reminded of a wise retreat leader who told me decades ago that sitting and looking out a window at nature can be prayer.

So, I sat, and I feasted my eyes on water that went to the horizon (something my soul needs), I listened to the rhythm of the waves, I felt the cool sand between my toes, watched sea gulls waddle, watched happy groups begin to set up umbrellas and towels and coolers, I felt a deep healing peace, and enjoyed the morning with God. The Amen at the end of that prayer felt real and true.

So, what about the “E” word? What about the next 43 days? Soaking our toes in Scripture and drawing near to God, trusting the promise that God will draw near to us, doesn’t wrap the election up in a nice bow. It doesn’t change the reality of the election, or the candidates, or the party politics. And it definitely doesn’t mean our candidate will win.

But it does change everything when we are invited into the next 43 days with the wisdom of Psalm 1 and James 3 and 4, remembering there are life-giving waters to feed us all, and our God has promised be with us and our world.

Because first and foremost we aren’t just blue and red voters, no matter how fierce, or uncertain, our convictions are in these days.

First and foremost, we are beloved children of the living God, just like all those other voters out there. And knowing and living that truth has the power to change everything in this season of the “E” word.