

Fenestrate Press presents

Selected Sermons of Reverend Cato, Part I

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Comprising the following articles:

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Regardless of how your parents raised you, in 2025, you may have little or no time for the whole Jesus thing. That's pretty understandable, especially if you're LGBTQ!etc. or any of the other groups that have been slandered and harmed by organized religions generally, and self-described "Christians" more specifically.

The (pretty darn) Reverend Brooks Cato is not a "Christian" like those. Born in Arkansas but now at home in upstate New York, he seems to have a lot more affinity for the social justice teachings of the Bible that get less play on TV than the smite this, smite that, smite the other that dominate "Christian" influences in the US. We haven't seen him use the words "Liberation Theology" yet, but if you know the terms "Prosperity Gospel" or "New Apostolic Reformation," he's precisely the opposite of those ghouls. He's the kind of of kind, but forceful, ally that any movement could use, but he also serves as an example of a religious person, and a religion, that starts from love rather than hate. So even if you're not normally much for Jesus, you might find his words invigorating.

We'll publish more from him to time to time, either alone (like this) or in concert with other writers. That said, should you find yourself free on a Sunday in Hamilton, New York, you might find your way into a pew at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church; services start at 10am. You'll notice the recently repaired Pride flag hanging from the front door. If you're more the type that would prefer a Zoom, take a look at stthomashamilton.org for details.

"When life closes a door, throw knowledge through a window."

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There's No Hate Quite Like Christian Love

Rev. Cato

Feb 3, 2025

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I was raised in the Bible Belt. Everything was generally just a lot more Jesus-y down there. Sure, we had more “Repent or Else” billboards, and when you met someone for the first time, one of the first questions they’d inevitably ask was “What church do you go to?” See, it was assumed that you had a church, and if you didn’t, why, you’d get invited to a potluck and a Wednesday night full of preaching and fellowship. Now most folks didn’t know what an Episcopalian was, but if they had heard of us, they usually didn’t know much. So, every “I’m an Episcopalian” conversation inevitably led to questions, which inevitably led to responses that said a lot more about the person asking ‘em than it did about us. When explaining our faith, the scripture-only folks didn’t like the three-legged stool with its Tradition and Reason in the mix. How we read scripture also tended to go over poorly. And how we live out our faith led to some serious pearl-clutching. Our Catechism, resolutions passed by General Convention, quotes from theological minds recent and ancient alike, all were grounds for judgement.

I don’t wanna give the impression that we’re the ones that’re most right, but I’ve certainly been told we’re the ones that are most wrong. In my days as a priest, I’ve spoken on state capitol steps, marched in Pride, and protested for responsible gun legislation. I’ve been interviewed on TV, radio, and podcasts, and my words have found their way to people I never imagined. And as a result, I’ve been yelled at by protestors, spat at in the streets of my hometown, followed to the county line by a truckload full up with the KKK. I even got death threats while I was in Little Rock. And you know who did all that to this Christian priest? Other Christians. There’s a tongue-in-cheek line that says: “there’s no hate quite like Christian love.” That’s what being the wrong kind of Christian in the Bible Belt was like. Even members of my family are ashamed of my ministry. When I marched and spoke at the first Pride event in my hometown, one relative was so embarrassed he wouldn’t go out in public until the hubbub died down ‘cause he didn’t want to face the shame of being associated with me.

“I warned you, bro. I told you.” — Karl Marx

But it’s not all like that. I can’t tell you how much it means to other people to see or read or hear what I’ve said and done. But it’s not me they appreciate. It’s that a priest of the Church cares about them enough to show up with a message of

actual love. Just to be clear, I'm not telling y'all any of this to brag. It didn't matter that it was me at all. It mattered that it was anyone. When I washed feet on the steps of the Arkansas State Capitol, Christians yelled nasty things about why I wanted to see everybody's feet while queer folks begging to get some of their rights back lined up and wept and hugged those helping me. When I spoke at that Pride event, a non-binary college student showed me the scars traced along the inside of their forearm that corresponded to the names of each church that'd hurt them. I was the only minister in their 20-some-odd years who'd ever told 'em that God loved them. When I signed a statement decrying racial injustice, I received angry phone calls from as far away as Utica, but only one call was a gift. The caller was inspired to know there were still clergy around that cared, so maybe they'd write a statement for their own town.

See, I really don't think any of that's because The Rev. Brooks Cato was there. I think it was because The Rev. Anybody was there; it just so happened to be me. I've seen so many hurt souls tell so many Episcopalians – clergy and laity alike – “if I lived closer, I'd go to your church.” Whether they show up or not, it's an affirmation that getting this Christian thing right touches hearts that desperately need love. Actually, it's that “if I lived closer, I'd go to your church” that I want to talk about. Episcopalians make up less than 2% of the US population, and most of us are pretty quiet about it. As a rule, we aren't a proselytizing bunch, which in many ways is a good thing. But so many people've heard so many Christians express their beliefs so loudly while we're being quiet that few know what we're about or that we exist at all. That there is a church whose calling is to love as freely as God does, that's almost irresistible. People just don't know that we offer a different way. And people want a different way, even if they didn't know it before, they long for it, and our conversations, our actions, our risks give them permission to find it.

Ya know, I wonder. When Mary and Joseph take Jesus for his post-birth cleansing (thanks, patriarchy), there's a pair that catches my imagination. Simeon's just a guy, a good guy, but just a guy. He had a vision that he'd see Christ before he died, and sure enough, here Christ comes! Simeon knew what to look for because he'd been guided to it, and when he finally saw Christ, it drove him to poetry. But Anna's the more interesting to me. Simeon's words got recorded, but hers didn't (thanks again, patriarchy). All we know is that she was a prophet who recognized Jesus for who he was, but her story's a little different. Anna didn't have Simeon's advantage, but she'd studied and prayed and prepared for so long that she knew what to look for. Both longed for his arrival, and when he finally got there, both recognized him right away and rejoiced that Jesus was finally there. I wish we had Anna's words, but without them, Simeon's will have to do. There's a line of his I've somehow never seen before. I've been so taken with the words of his song that I missed the words of his blessing. Simeon says, “this child is destined ... to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.” In other words, there's something about the

“Environmentalism without class struggle is just gardening.” — Chico Mendes

Good News of Christ that's going to be good news to some and not to others. And for the latter, what is loving and kind, empathetic and open, hopeful and life-giving, for the latter, that's bad news. They'll oppose it, and opposing it openly reveals their inner thoughts. They're gonna say the quiet part out loud. We can disagree on all sorts of things, but the core message inviting us to love our neighbor remains. And if the call to love your neighbor makes you uncomfortable, it's not the call that should make you wonder; it's your discomfort with the call that should. If a sermon on mercy makes you spitting mad, you're probably showing more of your true self than you mean to. If your response to a tragedy is to balk at visiting the place it happened because you don't want to go swimming, well, you know where this leads.

I'd much rather look at this from the other direction, though. I'd much rather look for the hope. All those folks I mentioned earlier, the foot washers, the nonbinary student with scars named for churches, the maybe I'll come visit phone caller, I wonder if they're the Simeons and Annas of our day. The Simeons know they'll see goodness one day. And the Annas know what to look for. And they're all tied up with the ones who hope for goodness and know what to look for but have given up on ever finding it. And all of 'em know what Christianity is supposed to be. They've hoped and watched and know its failings intimately. And because of that, they're floored when they find out there's a place for people like them in Christianity if they want it, a place they didn't even know was possible, or hoped was possible but had that hope crushed out of them. There's more: the ones with no idea about any of this that can still recognize integrity when they see it. Since last week, I've gotten all sorts of messages from people with no desire to be Christian encouraging me to keep the faith. Jews, Muslims, some Christians, and more than a few atheists also told me to encourage you to keep up the good work. So, keep up the good work! Y'all, even folks who will never be Christian long to see Christians act like Christians. Like Simeon and Anna, they've been waiting for us to show up because when we do it right, we shake the world. So for now, show up. Show up as Christians and shake the world, and do it with Love.

I know we're all a little uncomfortable talking about Jesus. But the world desperately needs Christians to actually uphold Christianity, actually speak words of kindness and actually do acts of love. If we don't, the only thing of Christianity the world will know is how awful Christians are at following Christ. While Christianity could certainly use some good PR, we don't do this to make ourselves look good. We do this because people need God's love. Our world is so broken by hate that even the tiniest acts of love have become revolutionary, but a revolution of love is what the better parts of Christianity's been preaching for two thousand years. This isn't easy, but no one said being a Christian was easy. It can be dangerous, life-threatening, even. I'm not telling y'all to go out and be martyrs. Please, be careful. But also, be faithful, be honest, and be consistent as a follower of Christ. We don't get to stop loving people because it's hard or

"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist." — Fr. Hélder Pessoa Câmara

and love winning out, and we have the spiritual vigor to make it so. That's the message this world's missing but desperately needs. People are starving for it.

Like Elijah, if any one of us still draws breath, we'll follow where God leads. Evil never expects the broken, the loving, the peaceful to rise. Fear of the bomb or Gilead or whatever worries you into doomscrolling, fear may proliferate but it will not win. Fear will not win, the bomb will not win, evil will not win because we won't let it. Being faithful is not the same as being popular. It takes a special kind of strength to stand for unpopular, complete with faithful peace, faithful hope, faithful love. And that's a strength rooted in a loving God and in each other and in faith. May our mercy be so great it frightens the vindictive. May our hearts be so open they unsettle the cruel. May our hands be so diligent they overturn the unjust. May our souls be so hopeful they hound the destroyers. And may our future rest not in the power of a star, but in the love of the Son.

inconvenient or illegal. Our love's growing more important by the day because fewer and fewer people know that love's even an option. Remind them. Remind them with every interaction, and I mean every single one, even the annoying, even the angry, even the threatening. Meet them all with love. That's our way, and it's been our way for a mighty long time. And for a mighty long time, Simeon and Anna and all the others've been waiting. So let's show them. 'Cause when we do it well, there really is no other love quite like Christian love. Show them. Remind them. And do it with that world-shaking, all-inclusive, long-awaited love.

Have We Crossed Your Line Yet?

Rev. Cato

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Okay, y'all, it's time for some real talk. I know, this sort of stuff makes some folks uncomfortable, but I'm not here to make you comfortable. I'm here to help you be more faithful. And faithful people have never been more important in my lifetime. So please, listen. Our government is broken. It has been for a long time. It did not break this year. I don't know when to point to, but the American people've been living in a broken system for longer than I've been alive, maybe longer than any of you. We were built on lofty ideals that we didn't uphold ourselves. We fought each other over those ideals, but let the brokenness continue. When we were at what many call our best, we were at our best at the expense of just about everyone outside of the majority. That does not mean that straight, white, Christians always had it easy. Of course it doesn't, but it does mean that most folks that were had it easier than most folks that weren't.

The wealthy've been exploiting the rest of us since our founding, and they've gotten extra good at it lately. Our military's been dragged into conflicts we had no business being involved in time and again, and while it's mostly the wealthy picking fights, it's mostly the poor who do the dying. None of this should come as a surprise, regardless of how you tend to vote. Most of us agree that peaceful protest is a fine way to call for change. Most of us don't want to see anyone harmed. Most of us know that all the hot button issues are more complicated than a simple "for" or "against." Most of us know our neighbors are good people even when we disagree. But where we are now is a far cry from that kind of acceptance of reasonable differences.

A few weeks ago, I asked y'all to draw your line and decide for yourself ahead of time what could change in the political world that would be a bridge too far for you so that whatever the current spin is wouldn't overshadow your own moral compass. And so today, I ask you if we've crossed your line yet. The US military has arrested not just civilians but citizens. A Florida sheriff has given drivers permission to run protestors over with their car and threatened to kill protestors that resist. One Minnesota lawmaker was assassinated in her home, along with her husband and the family dog, by a man posing as a police officer, and another Minnesota lawmaker was shot in his home; neither are members of the party in power. ICE continues to perform raids while wearing masks, sharing no identifying information, and scoffing at requests for warrants. The impunity with which they act has led to protestors trying to prevent them from doing their

bring the sun to the earth to slaughter millions. And I'm worried that any sermon written before Sunday'll already be obsolete thanks to the delayed arrival of a new horror.

I'm worried, which is why I'm so grateful to have people like you and a faith like ours close at hand. Take a look at that Elijah and Jezebel story. Jezebel arranged for the assassination of all God's prophets, but Elijah survived. All was lost. Elijah was certain things'd never get better. But God spoke, and angels nurtured, and Elijah regained his strength to travel and speak and fight back. Elijah was all that remained, home and people and influence were gone, but God was not. Even when all appears lost, if you are all that remains then all is not lost. If you remain, so does hope. If any of us still draws breath, we'll follow where God leads, even to the lair of evil itself. Evil never expects the broken to rise. Now, the story of Legion's a little different. Actual demons confront Jesus, beg him not to banish them back to the torments of Hell, and Jesus obliges. He doesn't respond with vengeance. He responds with mercy, and he sets them free. The locals are so terrified by his power – and maybe by his mercy – that they run him out of town. Even when it's right, it's not always popular to act like Jesus. In both those stories, the majority insists on discrimination to the point of lethality. Whether it's the direct danger of a prophet sticking around to see his religion fall or the threat of even the messiah sticking around long enough to find out what happens to the merciful after sundown, it's not always popular following God. But popular isn't what we're here for. Popular is easy. Prophetic is not.

I'm confident that there is no situation in which dropping the bomb is justifiable. I know the arguments for those dropped on Japan. They're bogus. The bomb indiscriminately slaughters millions in a haunting fashion. "Thou shalt not kill" still applies, but we've gotten here again because one extremist misuse of religion combats another extremist misuse of religion while yet another extremist misuse of religion cheers to the detriment of all of humanity. Should the propaganda machines convince enough that the time is right for the bomb, St. Thomas', be prepared to be in the minority. In many ways, we already are. Episcopalians make up roughly 1% of the American population. As part of Christianity, we're in the majority, but we've grown so far from the dominant Nationalist Christianity (or they've grown so far from Christ) that within our own family, we're on the margin largely because we promote the traditional Christian values of peace, hope, and love. It's getting less and less popular to talk about those ideals. But y'all, since I gave that speech on the Village Green [ed: see "No Kings Rally Speech"] a week ago, I'm here to tell you that while peace, hope, and love aren't common these days, they're desperately needed. I didn't say anything all that extraordinary. I talked about peace, hope, and love, and every day since I've been approached by people I've never met saying just how much they needed to hear that message. And it's a simple message: the world is broken, yes, but that doesn't mean it will stay broken. We have the fortitude to imagine peace, hope,

The Bomb, Antisemitism, and Existential Worry

Rev. Cato

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Before I get started, I want you to know that I wrote this before the news about Iran came out. I think it still applies, though, so here goes.

I'm a little extra worried this week. For those of you who grew up with chipper "duck and cover" cartoons insisting that a classroom desk provides sufficient protection from a bomb hotter than the sun, this is a worry that may be familiar, but I didn't live through that fear. By the time I came around, I was taught the awful power of the bomb, taught never to let the bomb happen, taught that disarmament was the way to the future, promised that the horror of its strength was its own deterrent. From the movies I watched growing up, the bomb was just there to knock asteroids off course or deter Martian invaders. I've never had to worry about the bomb for humanity's sake, but now with warheads waiting in the wings, now I do worry. I'm concerned, to say the least, that as the conflict between Israel and Iran continues, I've got very little confidence in the primary leaders involved. Israel, Iran, Russia, China, and us – I don't trust any of those leaders to have their fingers on the button. One of 'em would drop the bomb out of vindictiveness, another out of glee, and another 'cause anyone who disagrees is an antisemite.

A quick side bar: Opposing the actions of the government of Israel is not necessarily antisemitism. Hating the Jewish people because they are Jewish, that's antisemitism. Hating the atrocities committed by any government is not. Saying things like "Israeli tanks shouldn't fire on Gazan aid stations," for example, isn't antisemitic, it's humane. The Jewish people are not the same thing as the Israeli government, just like we're not the same thing as the American government. It's just not the same, and pretending it is weakens the actual definition of antisemitism, puts Jewish people worldwide at greater risk, and gives a nuclear power free reign. Don't fall for it, folks.

Anyway, I'm worried. I'm worried that, for some supposedly justifiable reason, conversations in backrooms are laying the groundwork for the most extraordinary destruction of humanity imaginable. I'm worried that cartoon villains are beginning to look tame. I'm worried that, every morning, I feel the need to check the news before getting out of bed to see if this is the day the modern Icarus will

work, but because of the total lack of clarity of who is law enforcement now and who is not, actual legal raids in other legal categories are also getting gummed up by protestors that can't tell the difference. I'm not saying that's good by the way, I'm just saying it's the completely predictable outcome of the kind of secrecy with which agents of ICE go about their business.

Please, do me this favor. If I have to cash in all of my relational capital with y'all for this, consider it done. If you're rooting for all the stuff I keep trying to tell you the Bible calls evil, please, add in a news source you'd normally disregard. I know, it sounds like I'm asking you to abandon the truth. I'm not. I'm asking you to consider the possibility that a single source of news – whether it's a TV station, a newspaper, a friend – a single source of news will never be capable of sharing the entire truth. It's just not. Look for news sources that challenge your assumptions and know that the real truth lies somewhere in the middle. Look, y'all know where I stand on this stuff. I don't need to tell you again, but I will ask you again. Please, dear God, please decide for yourself if the means your government is using align with your values. Are you comfortable with everything you see happening happening to you? You may think you are immune to the treatment other people are experiencing. On that point, I feel comfortable saying, you are not immune. When the current supply of scapegoats is exhausted, new scapegoats will be chosen. And when that supply is exhausted, a new round will be chosen. To crib a line from the old poem, when they come for you there will be no one left to speak for you.

I know some of you also wonder how I can justify talking about this stuff. Y'all, read your Bible. Somewhere around 15 percent of this congregation just finished reading all of it together. If my words aren't compelling, ask them what it says. Ask them what it says about immigrants and the poor and the hungry and children and women and eunuchs and mundane evil and extraordinary evil. Ask them what it says we're supposed to do. I am not a politician. I have no interest in being a part of that foul world. I'm not telling you what's evil to make you vote right or change how you're registered. I'm not trying to tell you how to be good Democrats or good Republicans or even how to run the country. What I'm telling you is how to live into what Jesus taught. What I'm telling you is what the story of God has to say about moments like ours. What I'm telling you is how fiery the Holy Spirit can become when injustice reigns. What I'm telling you is that Christianity demands changing the worse angels of our nature, both as individuals and as communities, to serve the interests of other people, focusing not on those wearing boots but on those under them.

My hope is that we can all see where evil tries to emerge and all of us together stomp it down before it gets the opportunity to wreck our world. I love you, my people, and I so desperately want you, all of you, to live fully into yourselves. St. Irenaeus of Lyons says "the glory of God is the human person fully alive." The hard truth of our current situation is that no one, not a single soul, can be fully

alive so long as some of us live in fear while others revel in that fear. Fear tamps down human souls while that glee in others' suffering poisons souls. We were never promised an easy life as Christians. Paul's letter underscores that. "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts." It's time we, all of us, act like it.

find the creeping fearmongering, the scapegoating, and the violence disturbing, if you've had enough, if that still, small voice of your conscience breaks through, we will welcome you. We need your help. Besides, history remembers who stood on which side of the street.

Remember, good always wins. It may be hard to imagine from where we stand today, but if it's not good, it's not over. Good always wins. I don't know what that looks like just yet, but we're trying to get to good before the national descent into evil is complete. Even if that happens, even if the pseudo-king gets everything he wants, even then, good will win, but we could save ourselves and the rest of the world a whole heap of trouble if we stop him before he's satisfied. I don't know the full picture of what good winning looks like. But I do know what this evil leads to. You all do. I know the people that were on the other side of the street last time know, too, 'cause they told us if we voted blue that's where we'd end up. And I guess they were right. I voted blue, and here we are.

In time, good always wins. Bear with me just a little longer, and I'll tell ya what I hope that looks like. When good wins, regular people have what they need. Human decency breeds more decency. Love harms no one, and hate for anything but the hateful is gone. Good winning looks like the people getting their say. It looks like children getting enough to eat. It looks like full lives without the fear of oppression. It looks like joy and hope and kindness. It looks like unlocked doors and sleep-filled nights and neighbors popping over for nothing more than a cup of sugar. Good wins when we embrace the many facets of humanity living together. Good wins when you stand up and refuse to let evil get the final say. Don't wait for billionaires to get tired of this. Don't wait for politicians to get tired of this. Don't wait for corporations to get tired of this. Don't even wait for your neighbors to get tired of this. Change it now!

Thousands of protests just like this one surge across this country. People like my grandpa are used as embellishments on that tyrant's lapel. Thousands weep in inhumane cells. And so, we make our stand. Stand for good. Stand for truth. Stand for love. Stand for inclusion. Stand for dissent. Stand for cooperation. Stand for freedom. Stand for hope. Stand for good. 'Cause good always wins.

No Kings Rally Speech

Rev. Cato

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I can't believe we're here again. I mean, I can believe it, I just wish we didn't have to be here again. It's Saturday. I wanna be at home eating junk food and watching TV. I wanna play with my dog. If I'm completely honest, I really just wanna take a nap. But I can't sleep while missiles launch. I can't sleep while senators are handcuffed. I can't sleep while parents are ripped from their children. I can't sleep knowing this world we've become so accustomed to is changing faster than we know. I can't sleep with the doors of my house locked for the first time in 9 years of living here.

All this evil starts at the top. Politicians cling to power – but that's not new. Corporations prioritize profit over people – that's not new. Billionaires heap their hoards ever higher – that's definitely not new. But we get a reminder today because today's Flag Day, and those elites do not own that flag. That flag doesn't belong to politicians. That flag's not a logo for sale. That flag's not theirs to hoard. That flag is our flag. And there are few things I've seen in this world more powerful than that flag draped over a casket. Regular people like my uncle had one. When the time comes, my step-brother'll have one. My brother-in-law will, too. My grandfather's flag watches over my home in a place of honor. For all its faults, I love this country. I don't think I realized that fully until this year. I think I might be a patriot. I know this country has a hard history. I know it's not perfect, but my blood's mixed with its waters, my heart beats for its diversity, my fingernails've carried its soil. I love this country and what it says it stands for, but between what it says and what it does stretches a vast chasm of hypocrisy and exploitation.

Patriots love their country, demonstrate for their country, strive for their country to grow ever more perfect. Patriots know this country isn't perfect yet. The Founders knew that, too, even wrote paths for improvement right into the Constitution. Remember the Constitution? Patriots know we can do better, and we push our country to get better. You here, you are patriots. I never imagined myself to be one but the tears I've shed for my country and its people – all its people living here – prove I am a patriot. I didn't choose to be a patriot, but I can't help it. I love this place. In spite of all the fear and anger and fury rising in my chest, I love this place because of what it could be, and I love this place because of you. Look at y'all. Yet another weekend of rain, and you're out here anyway 'cause you see what's broken. And for those who've disagreed, if you

The Lie of Christian Nationalism

Rev. Cato

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Y'all, I'm beat. I'm tired down in my bones, soul tired. Anyone else just plain wore out? Last week, after I preached on Nex Benedict's death, someone asked if I was ever going to stop preaching politics. It's a fair question. And I'll be honest, I don't particularly love preaching about that sort of stuff. But there's a deep need. If politicians would just stay out of religion, I'd be inclined to return the favor. But they just can't seem to help themselves. That said, there's a long tradition of our history tied up in that gunk, for better and definitely for worse. Skip all the way back to the beginning of our scriptures, and we're already in that milieu. Joseph guided Pharaoh, King David was the apple of God's eye, countless prophets sat on cabinets and took sides over divisive issues. The thing is, today's not quite the same thing. See, those folks lived in a theocracy or something very close to it. Their country was their faith. They believed all their national successes came from God, and all their national hardship, too. As the stories go, God won their battles, God enriched their palaces, God gave their laws. Of course their politics were interwoven with their faith.

By the time we get to Jesus, he's living in a world that's a little bit of both. Some of the rules were the law of the empire, some remained in the hands of the priests. Ultimately, Rome decided which ones mattered more, but even Rome had its own unique relationship to religion. Their pantheon of gods was one part deeply held faith and one part cosmic soap opera. When they conquered new lands, they were fine with letting the new subjects keep their own faith so long as they recognized Rome on top. The various uprisings in Jerusalem's history – against the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, to name a few – those uprisings were as much religious as they were political. The Temple in the middle of the city wasn't officially the seat of the government, though everyone knew that's where the real power lay. It was so obviously important even to outsiders that conquerors leveled it twice. When Jesus cleans out the Temple, it's a religious act, sort of re-purifying the sacred. But those in power see it as a political threat. It's a threat because it challenges how they do things, including how people make their money. Since we're in Lent, it probably bears repeating that when they bring charges against Jesus, the charge they bring isn't a religious one. It's political. "This man says he is the King" and then sorta under their breath "and he blasphemes, too."

I really wish religion and politics could stay separate. For what it's worth, Jesus never once said we should establish a government in his name. I remember my Civics classes. I remember how scary it gets when religion takes the reins of government. I suspect a lot of minds are going to modern examples. Maybe you've seen those pictures of Iran before and after the Revolution in 1979? The before pictures are colorful; their clothes were kinda mod; hairstyles looked like Hollywood; variety was everywhere. Now, the legally-mandated hijab hides hairstyles and women's individual choice gets subsumed by religious law.

Before you think this is just a Muslim problem, look to the British Empire. The monarch of England holds two roles: head of the nation and head of the church. These days, that's a little less of a problem, albeit the bishops of the church still automatically get seats in the legislature, but there was a time when religious fanaticism drove England's expansion and subsequent genocides on multiple continents, all in the name of claiming supposedly savage souls for the Christian God.

Modern-day Israel's another prime example. Now, before I go further, a quick word that feels absurd to have to say. This is not about Judaism. This is not about Jewish people. When we get further into Lent and Holy Week, we'll have to deal with our own religion's history with anti-semitism. This is about theocracy, and modern Israel is very much in that world. Terrible things have happened to them, and they continue to inhabit a very difficult geographical place in the modern world.

But what they are doing with Palestine is plain wrong. I know, they need to be able to defend themselves. I get that. But they've gone far beyond defense. And I know, back in October, the Hamas attack that killed 1,139 people was horrendous. For what it's worth, Hamas is a religious group with political power, too. But since then, the State of Israel has engaged in its own attacks on civilians. Just last Thursday, over one hundred Palestinians were killed and another 700 injured when they were trying to get food from an aid convoy. All told, roughly 1,400 Israelis have died in the conflict. Depending on who you ask, that number's between 12,000 and 30,000 for Palestinians. It seems there's no proportionality when you're fighting for God and Country. I know it's not as simple as religion or politics in that part of the world, but when countries use religion as a tool, attacks on civilians, children, the starving, they can claim it's not terrorism; it's a righteous and holy defense of God's people. It's incredible what you can justify when you hide behind God.

Ok, that was a lot. We all know the world is broken. We all know the Middle East is complicated. We all know religious extremism is bad. What's making me so tired these days is that we're being encouraged to see religious extremism everywhere in other people and other religions, while in a weird sort of double-speak, we're also being duped into believing that the religious extremism growing

Actually, I already do wear it. That's what this collar means. That's what that pride flag waving in front of my church's door means. That's what the flock of people I care for means. But this isn't just Christian stuff. This is human stuff. That smile you're wearing, that's humanity. That tear you shed, that's humanity. That hope welling in your chest, that's humanity. That's all humanity wrestling with the atrocities of our time. I'm here to respect the dignity of all that humanity, and unless I miss my guess, you are, too. Now, it's going to take that humanity or faith or conviction or whatever it is that drives you, it's going to take every aspect of that motivation to win. But make no mistake, we will win. In time, we will win. Together, we will win. No matter how far their hands reach, they can't take us all, and so, good people of Hamilton, we will win.

Ya know, in the old scriptures, there's all sorts of stuff the wealthy are supposed to do. Jesus says rich folks should take everything they've got, sell it, and give the money to the poor. Now, I don't know if you know this, but I'm no Jesus, so maybe we could just start with making billionaires pay their taxes. That same Jesus fella wanted all the sick brought to him to get healed. I'm no Jesus, but maybe we could start with universal healthcare. That same fella feeds thousands just 'cause they're there. Maybe we could start with feeding the hungry. Creation? Maybe we could start with saving a National Park. Foreigners in our midst? Maybe we could start with those who can't afford a golden ticket. Forgiveness? Maybe we could start with not confusing what they call "disagreements over politics" with what're actually threats against my existence. Look, I'm not greedy. So maybe we should start with something kinda basic like, oh I don't know, respecting and promoting fundamental human rights. Call me old-fashioned, but I just don't think state sponsored kidnapping without due process does respect the dignity of every human being.

Now, I know this is true for lots of religions, my tradition's no different: the underdog gets special treatment. As liberation theologians say, there's a special place for the oppressed, and that special place prioritizes them over all others. In other words, if the world's out to crush you, Christians and other people of faith, shoot, all people should be out to help you. And "help" means actually help. Need a place to sleep? Here's a bed. Need a bite to eat? Here's some bread. Need a place to hide? Well, we used to offer you sanctuary, but now we gotta fight to get that back. The point is, you are who we serve. If we're talking Hands Off today, I'll tell you what I want to get their hands off of. You. They grope for purchase anywhere their cruelty can take hold, and that starts with the most oppressed. They search out scapegoats and turn modern browncoats loose with just enough plausible deniability to get off scot free with a wink into a camera. Let me put a finer point on this. Get your hands off of Pride. Get your hands off of the wealth of human diversity. Get your hands off retiree's savings. Get your hands off my doctor's clipboard. Get your hands off bathrooms, hands off lost children, hands off Title IX, hands off marriage, hands off my freedom of religion and hands off my atheist neighbor's freedom from religion. Hands off! I know this isn't a sermon but if I'm not careful I'm gonna get to preaching for real!

So I'll step back here in a second, and make room for somebody else. But first, there's gonna be a lot going today. There's things to study, things to learn, things to try, things to avoid. But let me go on and commend you for doing the hardest part, getting out here in nasty weather and standing up for what you believe. Keep at it, please. We need your help, we need your ideas, we need your energy, and we need the unique gifts you bring to this work. But more than anything, we need your desire to make this country good. I'm not sure if I can say Make America Good Again, but at least we can get the arc of the moral universe to bend toward justice again. Maybe not the catchiest slogan to put on a hat, but I'd wear it.

within Christianity is actually reasonable. There's some serious mental gymnastics there, but mouthpieces for those seeking power lead us down the garden path and all the way to the tomb. And there, they point to a stone not yet rolled away and tell us who they want us to believe put Jesus there. And no, it isn't the Romans. Sometimes they'll say the Jews, but usually they're a little more circumspect. No, it's the gays, or the poor, or the exorbitantly wealthy. It's foreigners, and people with brown skin, and children figuring out who they are. The empathetic, the loving, the honorable. These days, if you're anything like Jesus actually was, you can be blamed for crucifying that same Christ.

And y'all, it's easy to get sucked into that view. We come to church and hear lessons from scripture and a sometimes angry preacher, and then the entire rest of the week, we're bombarded with reasons all that we learned on Sunday gets it wrong. Just by sheer volume of information, Christians trying to get this whole love-your-neighbor thing right are fighting an overwhelming force. And then, when we push back to remind the world who Jesus was, then we're told we can't bring religion into politics. And that's so dang frustrating because I don't want religion in politics. I don't want anyone's there, including mine. CS Lewis himself said theocracy is the worst kind of government and works on people like an intoxicant. It's way too powerful and relies on the desires and prejudices of those wielding it. It's not unreasonable or extremist to recognize that.

I don't know about y'all, but I get lambasted for reminding folks of this danger. How can I possibly be a good Christian and not want a Christian Nation? I don't want a Christian Nation because I remember my history. I know what Christians do with power. I know what religions do with power. I also know which Christians (and which religious people) long for power and take it. I'll give ya a hint: it's not the reasonable that make a theocracy; it's fanatics. And my Lord do they wield power. And they wield it most effectively through their followers. I ran into a quote the other day that says "The road to fascism is lined with people telling you to stop overreacting." I can't tell you how often I've been called paranoid or even anti-Christian because of this stuff. Must just be my imagination or some overly-apocalyptic fear of a future that hasn't happened yet; surely all these Christians couldn't get it wrong.

Y'all. I'm so tired of this, and I know this year's only going to get worse until the polls close. I doubt it'll stop then, but at least we might get a chance to catch our breath. I think part of what's so exhausting is it feels inevitable, like trying to save a town from flooding with nothing but a mop bucket and a desire to preserve the precious gifts we have. The group The Compassionate Conservative Revival warns, "Christian Nationalism seeks supremacy over all else; whereas our Lord never did. Our nation is a country founded for religious freedom—for all religions—even those we don't agree with. ... Christian Nationalism not only threatens our republic, it belittles our faith. It is a fixture of the empire, not of [[God's]] Kingdom."

“Christian Nationalism” is an oxymoron. It neither benefits Christianity nor the Nation. I’ll set the Nation stuff aside; we’ll get enough of that the rest of the week. But looking at the Christian stuff, there are over 45,000 denominations of Christianity worldwide. But when Christianity gets tied up with the political sphere, we don’t get breadth. We tend to get a single option, and it tends to be the least Christ-like of ‘em all. Those that don’t subscribe to that one option get punished, often horribly. Read up on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s story of trying to keep Christ-like Christianity alive in 1940s Germany. He was hanged for his teaching by “Christian Nationalists.” And he’s far from alone. History’s riddled with horrendous acts done by nations hiding behind the vestments of Christendom.

Christianity today needs a good ol’ fashioned Temple Cleansing. I don’t want Jesus as President, but I’d love for him to show up with his whip and flip some hypocritical tables. I’m sure there’s some he’d find to flip in my soul, too, and much as I might hate it, I need it. And so do our churches. Do not let the “Christian” in “Christian Nationalism” fool you. It’s a misnomer, and it’s intentional. It is fascism first, and “Christian” only when it needs a cudgel. My siblings in Christ, Lent is about a lot of things. Top of that list is purgation. We desperately need this season to purge what needs purging in our tired hearts, tired bones, and tired souls. Some of that’s highly personal. You do you. But some of that’s collective, and our communal body has work to do. Stay alert, keep watch for wolves in sheep’s clothing, and remember that when we ask “What would Jesus do?” flipping tables remains an option... for now.

Hands Off Rally Speech

Rev. Cato

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Hey, folks. I’m Brooks Cato, and I do my preaching at St. Thomas’ Episcopal Church just a block back that way. I’m grateful to get to speak today, but I really wish I didn’t have to. We’re in trouble, folks. Before I say anything else, I wanna acknowledge that I am, in fact, a Christian. I know a lot of y’all aren’t, and that’s just fine by me. I don’t care what or if you believe. But I do care about mercy, justice, and human dignity. So as long as we can agree on that, we’re good. That said, I might slip into preaching a little bit out of habit, so buckle up and please, forgive me.

One of the many prophets says, “Seek justice, do mercy, and walk humbly.” That’s a big one for folks like me. Seek justice? I wonder what Sackets Harbor thinks about justice. Do mercy? I wonder how empty food banks do mercy. Walk humbly? I’ve seen drag queens with more humility – and better eye-shadow – than the crew down in Washington.

When I was baptized, I promised to respect the dignity of every human being. That’s one of our vows. I vowed to respect the dignity of every human being. I cannot stand by while supposed Christians berate the already oppressed. I cannot stand by while supposed Christians criminalize people. I cannot stand by. But ‘stand by’ is the message we keep getting. “Just wait and see, let it play out, give it time for people to see their true colors.” Y’all, we knew their true colors a decade ago. We didn’t have to dig for proof. They told us. And they told us again in 2020 after hundreds of thousands died. And they told us again on January 6th – that’s a holiday in the church’s calendar by the way. January 6th is The Epiphany. It celebrates truth coming to light. Y’all, this whole country should’ve had an epiphany on January 6th. That should’ve been the end of it. But it wasn’t, and here we are again. And now that they’re back in power, all who speak up get lambasted for telling the truth. Imagine if I were an international student: ICE woulda scooped me up weeks ago. But I’m not. I mean look at me, can you imagine why they wouldn’t’ve taken somebody that looks like me yet? Mhmm. The hard truth we’re getting now is an epiphany of its own. That hard truth is that not a soul in the White House cares about you. Or me. Or any human that doesn’t put another dollar in their pocket. If you aren’t made of gold or rare earth elements, they ain’t fighting for you.