

## **The Verdicts**

**Sermon, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

**The Third Sunday after Pentecost**

**The Rev. Dawn Allen-Herron**

**St. Mary's Episcopal Church**

A few of you may remember that last Sunday I began a three-part series – I've never done that before! About 40 years of preaching, and I'm finally gonna preach three Sundays in a row! – on the God of the Old Testament. At the risk of being accused of bait-and-switch, we're not going to do that; not as planned, at least.

We cannot gather and speak and pray and talk together, and act as if nothing has happened; act as if the Supreme Court decisions on Thursday regarding handgun licensing, and on Friday concerning the constitutional right to reproductive freedom, have not happened. We cannot pretend that the context is the same.

This morning, what I would like us to do is to reflect together, to find comfort, and if not comfort, companionship; to find hope, and if not hope, then at least steel for the work ahead; to create safe spaces for each other, and to gain some perspective from our faith, from our tradition, and from the scriptures.

What we will not do is make an argument for or against terminating pregnancies. I will not, because I cannot, provide a legal brief or comment. I will not, because I cannot, offer a well-researched sociological or economic treatise on the effects of these decisions. What I can do is speak from my heart, from my story, and from the stories that I carry in me. Stories that I have heard from you all.

What I can also do is offer at least something of what the church, what the tradition of our faith, and what the scriptures have to say.

I want to begin with my own context, because it's important to know that each of us speaks from and within a context. I am the granddaughter of working-class people, and the daughter of newly-middle-class parents. I'm pretty well-educated at this point, at least in terms of paid education. I enjoy economic comfort and stability.

I am voluntarily childless, if the only children that count are the ones you bear in your womb. I have lived in five states. I have been taught, and I have believed, that I live in a great country, that my voice matters, that I matter, that I belong.

On Friday, I slept a little late, so I awoke to a world, to a country that seems to have betrayed me and the promises that it has made to me. You may argue that my feelings are wrong, but I will say, for me and for many other women that I have heard from, that it feels as if I don't fully belong. As if I am not a full participant. As if I am incompetent to make fundamental decisions about my own life.

I thought a lot about, from the very first instance that I heard the news stories, about children that I do think of as "my children." Young girls that I know here. My niece. My grand-nieces and nephews. I've thought about how these young girls and women may and can become world-class physicians. Geneticists.

They can become world-class ethicists and philosophers. They can even become a Supreme Court justice.

But what they cannot be trusted to do – it appears – is to make healthcare decisions for themselves. And they will grow up in a world – it seems, for now – in which being “Mom” is still legally more important than anything else they will do.

I have heard many stories since Friday. I know that there are many other women whose experiences of the Dobbs decision and since it, are triggering horrors of the worst days of their lives. Triggering memories of wanting desperately to be a mother biologically and being unable to. Triggering memories of being pregnant and having unspeakable conflict and knowing the economic and educational and sociological effects that pregnancy has on their lives.

I’ve heard stories of women, from women and men, of the horror of various times in their lives when their agency was taken away. When their ability to make fundamental decisions was disrespected.

In the context of Thursday’s Supreme Court decision regarding the New York handgun laws, we know that the right to carry a handgun “just because I want to” is protected, and the right to terminate a pregnancy to save my own life is not protected.

I know many want to make “slippery slope” arguments, and maybe there’s a place for them, but whatever slippery slope we’re talking about, most of us, many of us who are most affected by these decisions know that what will not be taken away is guns. Tools to save the life of pregnant women may be taken away in some places, but guns will not.

The Supreme Court has said that some of us, some citizens, in this case women, do not and should not have moral authority over their own lives. Others, rightly so, are terrified. People of color, and the LGBTQIA+ community, wonder if their fundamental rights will also be encroached upon.

And so, it’s important to me to speak of this. I know some people don’t want me to, and don’t want us to, but if this is not the place where we can say together that the God of our faith – and this did not begin with Jesus, friends – the God of generations of our faith, from creation onward, has spoken with and to and for and in and among all kinds of people.

It’s not the Constitution of the United States that says that we matter, in the first instance. It is God. It is the God of Sarah, and Deborah, and Esther, and Leah, and Miriam, and Mary. It is that God who says to us, and to others about us, “we are fully human.”

Our voices matter, our stories matter, and they ought to be told and retold, and passed down through generations. And of course, they have been told, and they come to us through scripture.

We have been, at least around here, pretty quick to criticize what the actions of Vladimir Putin say about Ukraine and Ukrainians. That they “don’t really have a right to exist under their own authority.” I would say to you, this morning, that from my perspective, what the Supreme Court has said about the women of the United States is as much of a lie as what Putin says about Ukraine and Ukrainians.

So, who is this God? That’s the question for us. Where is God in this? Where can God be in this? How will we be faithful? How will we be faithful followers?

One thing, for sure. God, we see even in today's reading, has sent prophets in every age. Prophets to call us to the good. Prophets to speak to us in the particular context we live in. Not to simply grab rules from another time and bring them forward as if 3000 years haven't passed, but to live among and with and in us, and to speak to us.

Elijah and Elisha were two of those. And in today's story, where this mantle is passed, we see living proof that God's presence, God's voice, continues across generations. It has for generations before us, and it will continue when we are gone.

We also can see, in the first reading this morning, that God is a God of liberation. I hope you heard the thing where Elijah and then Elisha picks up the mantle, rolls it up, touches the water, and what happens? The waters part, and they go across. Have you heard a story like that before? Where there's water, and it's parted, and people go across to freedom! We remember it every time we lug the baptismal font up here, and we touch the water, and we touch each other, and we say it is God who parts waters that appear too big to part!

He carries us through on dry land, to the promised land.

It doesn't always happen, you know, and I know, the moment we want it or the way we want it, or the way we even see it, but it does happen, and it goes on and on, and this is the testimony of people of the faith that we share for generations.

I believe, even when it is difficult, that God is still a God of liberation, and that we can still expect to be led through difficult times to freedom. And that we are called to walk with others, to stand with them. To throw down the thing that matters to us so that others can walk through on dry land to freedom.

So, what shall we do? Everyone's a critic of a sermon that doesn't say what we should do, right?

I don't know. I don't know for you. I know a few things; I think for me.

Of course, we pray, and of course, we act. I believe that we can create safe space, here among ourselves, and in the other places that we are. As more than one person has pointed out to me this week, we in the church, especially at St. Mary's, it seems we can talk about anything, right? We've rolled up our sleeves and we've talked about sexuality, race; we've talked about hard things!

But it's still really, really difficult for women to tell their stories of reproductive rights and freedoms and choices. It's still really difficult.

I have a good friend who has said repeatedly over the years, "it would be fine for me to tell my family, my friends, my church, that I have a little cocaine problem. But to speak of having a pregnancy, a life-altering event, and make choices about that, is absolutely untenable." Doesn't happen.

So, we can begin however it's possible, wherever it's possible, in ways that remain judicious and wise, but we can take risk and we can create safe place for people to tell their stories, and we can listen to them.

And guess what! We don't need to be the judge of them. We can walk with people and hear people about all kinds of decisions, and we do not need to give God advice on how God should deal with them. We can just be.

So there's something we can do. We can tell our own stories bravely, where it is appropriate. We can be braver than we have been before.

If you didn't catch it, I will tell you, it's still brave, at 63 years old, to say in front of you, I am voluntarily childless. It's not okay with a lot of people, so it's important to say that.

We can, of course, refrain from treating each other with disdain, but any civic organization can do that. We can do more. We can treat people as if they are mysterious, wonderful gifts of God that we are eager to know in all of themselves, and that we love them, and that we trust their ability to make decisions about their lives.

We can give grace to those with whom we disagree strongly. I pray those of you who wished I would never have spoken about this today will give grace to me, because I know there's some of you.

Where possible, something we can do is to make certain that the voice that agrees with the Dobbs decision is not the only voice our culture hears as a Christian voice, or as the voice from God. We can claim our voice as Christians who worship a God who is on the side of flourishing life every single time, and who gives dignity to every single person.

We can notice that there are people around us who are not anywhere near as privileged as I would describe myself as being, who have never imagined that they matter and that they belong and that our country is a country where their voices are heard. There are people who have never suffered that illusion. And we can find those people, and we can be places where their voices do matter. We can hear them, and we can stand with them on their terms.

We can share resources with each other. Maybe not a pithy meme that denigrates another, but we can share resources that are articles that give us even a little bit of hope. People who've said or done things that help us to imagine that there's a way through, and that we won't be in this situation forever. When you find those places, send them to me for sure. I'm hanging by my fingernails to.

Finally, I'll say, please, if you are a person, male, female, non-binary, anything, who needs to talk, please call or text or email me or someone else. I am available and I am eager to walk with you.

So know this. You are loved, of course. You are worthy, whether someone else says you are or not. You are forgiven and you are cherished. You are beloved of God, and best as we are able, you are beloved of us as well.

Even as we read and think and live through this time in our country, we will hear many voices. Please, I urge all of us as people of faith, to bring ourselves back as oft as we are able, to asking, "Where is God in this? Who is God for us?"

I hope that the answer will be that God is something more than a weapon to be used against somebody else. But let us walk through this together.

Let us take a moment to pray.

God of our ancestors, you have been faithful throughout time, and we have seen the testimony of people before us who have been in this and more difficult times. We pray today for every person who, for whatever reason, feels discarded, in this country or their own, who feels devalued, who feels as if their voice or their experiences don't matter, or as if others think them unable to make decisions for themselves.

We also pray for those who yearn to make decisions in community and alongside others, and who do not have that sort of community. We pray for them, and we pray that we will be people who are community in helpful ways to others.

We pray for those who are afraid today. For those who are terrified today.

We pray for those who are reliving the terror of other times in their lives.

We give thanks for all of those who are allies, to vulnerable infants, children, youth, women, men, who are allies for the vulnerable.

We pray, O God, that our own vision will not be blurred so much by the concerns for our privilege, for our rights, that we do not see the struggle of others. Give us eyes to see, and ears to hear, we pray.

We pray for the courts of justice in our country. We beseech thee to bless the courts of justice and magistrates in all this land, we pray that you will give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding that they may discern truth and impartially administer in fear of you alone.

You have, O God, proclaimed your truth in many voices in every age, direct in our time, we pray, those who speak where many listen, and those who write what many read, that they may do their part in making the heart of us wise. They will do their part in making our minds sound, and our wills righteous.

We give thanks, O God, that we have the assurance that our hope, at the end of the day, has never been in a constitution or a law or a person, but that our hope is grounded in you. Help us to live and rest in that hope, even as we work for liberty, for life, for justice and freedom, for all of your creation.

We pray this to you, O God, who is the God of Jesus. We pray through Jesus, your beloved child, and we pray with the support of the Holy Spirit, and we pray in the communion of saints, through time and space.

Amen.

## **2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14**

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

## **Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

## **Luke 9:51-62**

When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."