

“Countdown to Election Day”

Rev. DC Fortune

UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

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Countdown to Election Day

We have 72 days to save democracy.

The last time I stood before you at this pulpit was July 21st.

My sermon was on the challenges and humor to be found in the aging process and as I recall at that time, we were all terribly concerned about the age of our sitting president.

Toward the end of that sermon, I made a gentle case for supporting the president in his campaign, but it was not an endorsement that carried any enthusiasm. In fact it felt like... Resignation. Surrender. An alliance forged in loyalty but lacking enthusiasm or any real hope. After his disastrous performance in the debate back in June, it was difficult to imagine him being able to win another presidential election even with a lunatic as his opponent. That lunatic is unabashed and unapologetic, in fact he is so proud of his lunacy and cruelty that it turns the stomach cold and brings with it a sense of existential dread.

However, as they say, a funny thing happened on the way to lunch.

As I got into my car to leave church that day and head home. I turned on the radio to learn that president Joe Biden had just announced that he was withdrawing from the presidential race. He had not yet endorsed his vice president Kamala Harris, but that announcement would come within the hour.

The energy shift that happened with that simple announcement was profound. Suddenly I found hope in my heart and there was an enormous feeling of relief as though from a burden I did not quite realize that I had been carrying. You know it's like when you go to the chiropractor and you think you're fine, but the chiropractor makes some sort of an adjustment and suddenly you feel much better, even though you were unaware of the discomfort you carried. It was like that. I mean, I knew I was tense, but I had no idea *how* tense I was until I was able to relax.

In the four weeks since July 21st we have all experienced what feels like a year's worth of political news and adrenaline and upset and anxiety and excitement packed into a month that felt like it passed in a week. If you're tired there's a good reason for that.

First Joe Biden endorsed Kamala Harris, and I appreciated that he separated the acts of his own stepping back and the act of endorsing her to create a sort of space so that she did not get splattered with any of the recriminations that were sure to fly around his

withdrawal. There were and remain rumors about a number of high placed Democratic Party officials who are said to have pushed Biden out. And some of those leading politicians will lose a certain amount of inner party social capital as a result. Harris will not suffer because she was not associated with that effort. In fact she was one of the president's staunchest and fiercest supporters right up until the moment of his decision.

The Democratic Party national convention was held this past week. The tenor of the campaign has shifted dramatically. The convention in Chicago, which I can only imagine had to be completely re-worked program-wise to accommodate this new reality, was an absolute celebration and dance party. There is a level of hope and enthusiasm and excitement and fresh air in the Democratic Party that I have not experienced since 2008.

We have 72 days before the presidential election date on November 5th.

After the Republican convention in July it was disturbing even alarming with the tone of that thing it was *exclusive* and not *exclusive* in a fancy-pants hoity-toity country club sort of way, but *exclusive* as in you don't belong here if you don't think like us. Exclusive as in if you are an immigrant you don't get to be here; exclusive as in if you have a body with a uterus, you don't actually get to make all the decisions you'd like to in this world.

It was just after the end of that that televised train wreck that Biden made his announcement, which I thought was at once clever and strategic and probably had a big helping of dumb luck. But whatever the case, the banana-pants exposition that was the Republican convention was immediately upstaged by Biden's announcement and by the ensuing couple of weeks of endorsements and rallying of support for Kamala Harris at the top of the ticket.

Lots of people endorsed her. She raised 300 and some odd million dollars for the campaign inside of like a week. Black Women for Harris had a zoom call and raised a bunch of money. Black Men for Harris raised a bunch of money in a zoom call; White Dudes for Harris raised a bunch of money on a zoom call; cat ladies raised a bunch. I mean it was just crazy how many people and how many affinity groups got together and worked collectively to say we are excited about this ticket we are endorsing her wholeheartedly and here's a pile of money to help.

The difference that even the most casual observer could see between the two parties, the two conventions, and the two tickets, could not be more stark.

We have one ticket that wants mass deportations of immigrants, and we've got one party that says let's make sure that we find a way to treat people humanely. We've got one party that says let's put people in camps and another party that says hell no, that's a terrible idea.

We've got one party that says transgender people ought not to exist. The project 2025 document, that enormous 900-page tome produced by the Heritage Foundation, states very clearly the opinion that transgender individuals are incompatible with service in the armed forces and should be discharged immediately. The same goes for soldiers and officers who are gay or lesbian or bisexual or non-binary; any of the LGBTQ people and are to be erased from military service immediately: no pension, no benefits, no nothing.

Meanwhile the other ticket featured speaker after speaker who acknowledged and celebrated the humanity, the contributions, and the beauty of people who hold any number of identities including all of those alphabet letters and whatever else someone might claim. Their argument is that all people have dignity and should be treated that way.

You know how averse I am to binaries of any kind, but this situation is a true binary choice. We are faced with a would-be dictator and convicted felon, or an attorney who has devoted her life to putting abusers of all kinds in jail.

We have someone who has never worked for anyone else in his lifetime, who has never had to face any consequences for his actions, or a woman who works in the public eye, and has had her every professional decision critiqued by the public she serves.

We have a man with the temperament of a spoiled toddler or a woman who embraces her role as a parent to the children her husband brought into their marriage.

There is no choice here folks. This is as clearly a time when it is good versus bad, kindness versus cruelty, generosity vs. avarice, humor vs ... what? An empty heart?

The Former Occupant wants desperately to get back into power so that he can die that way: in power, unaccountable to anyone, except perhaps his maker. He is a megalomaniac who wants to be a dictator to benefit his own financial situation and buy the love and loyalty of oligarchs and autocrats. He has no respect for the law but views it as an inconvenience that he sometimes has to pay to avoid.

But he's a felon. His sentencing hearing is coming up in a few weeks. He wants to delay it so that he can dismiss the whole business from the safety of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and run rampant through the regulations and guidelines that have kept America relatively safe and healthy for decades. FDA? Nah. No need. EPA? Who needs it? Bunch of whining tree-huggers. Affordable Care Act? It's popular, but he still wants to kill it. Department of Education? Nope, that's on the chopping block. Scientists and doctors and people with decades of academic and practical expertise will be tossed in favor of people whose sworn allegiance is to Herr Trump and nothing and no one else.

Kids in public schools will have to take the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test, but those in private schools will not. Public universities will be dismantled

and formed into institutions of toxic ideology. People will be allowed to discriminate again on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation, nation of origin, disability, sex, and political affiliation.

For those who doubt that these things are indeed real threats, for those who say “Nah, he won’t put people in concentration camps, that’s just fear-mongering,” I remind you that this is the guy who approved a program that ripped crying children – nursing infants – from the arms of their parents and herded them into chain-link paddocks in warehouses along the southern border.

Timothy Snyder teaches history at Yale University, and in 2017 he published a book called “On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century.” In this slim little volume, he outlines how tyranny and dictatorships have battled democratic movements through the ages, but with some stark examples from our not-so-distant past.

In this book, he argues that to protect democracy, one of the things we must do is to defend its institutions, and to understand that the threat to them is very real. He quotes an editorial published on February 2, 1933, in a leading newspaper for German Jews:

“We do not subscribe to the view that Mr. Hitler and his friends, now finally in possession of the power they have so long desired, will implement the proposals circulating in [Nazi newspapers]; they will not suddenly deprive German Jews of their constitutional rights, nor enclose them in ghettos, nor subject them to the jealous and murderous impulses of the mob. They cannot do this because a number of crucial factors hold powers in check ... and they clearly do not want to go down that road. When one acts as a European power, the whole atmosphere tends towards ethical reflection upon one’s better self and away from revisiting one’s earlier oppositional posture.¹

This is real, friends. It is real and it is terrifying.

Their game plan is clear, and they intend to follow it. In his last term as President, he chafed at the restrictions the democratic institutions put upon his worst impulses. This time, he plans to eliminate those institutions right away so that his domination can proceed unhindered by anything so mundane as ethics or democracy.

And yet, on the other side, we have something pretty amazing.

We have 72 days, and how this thing shakes out is up to us. All of us.

I don’t have to tell you what the political climate is in our area, and I don’t have to tell you how absolutely essential Pennsylvania is to the national race.

¹ Snyder, Timothy “On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century” Crown, Penguin Books, Random House, NY, 2017 pp 23-24

When former First Lady Michelle Obama spoke to the convention on its second night, she challenged people to “do something” to support the campaign.

That is what I am asking you to do today.

Do something.

Make sure you are registered to vote.

If your kids are off at college, or heading off to college, make sure they are registered to vote, in whatever state where they will make the most impact. For example, if your kid is going to be in reliably blue Massachusetts, make sure they are registered and vote by absentee ballot here in Pennsylvania. If your kid is going to Arizona, you’ll want to discuss where their vote could do the most good and make plans accordingly.

Check in on your friends and relatives. Sometimes voter rolls get purged and people get dropped from the rolls. There is still time to register to vote in Pennsylvania. October 21 is the last day you can register to vote and still be eligible to cast a ballot in the Presidential election.

Talk to neighbors and friends. Make sure people have rides to the polls.

See if people need help voting early or by absentee ballot if they’re going to be away on November 5.

The local political party offices are going to need all of the volunteers they can get. Go out and knock doors. Make phone calls. Deliver yard signs. Donate money.

I don’t know if party offices still do phone banking in a single place anymore, but if they do, maybe make up some sandwiches or have pizza delivered for the volunteers.

Offer a house party to raise money for a particular candidate.

There are lots of ways you can participate in our democratic process.

Know your limitations, though. Not everyone has the physical ability or the temperament to knock on doors or make phone calls to voters. I learned years ago that I am NOT a good person to do phone banking. I get too easily frustrated and am inclined to say impolite things to voters who have – in my estimation – stupid opinions about important topics.

Maybe post cards are your thing. Maybe stuffing envelopes is still a thing that happens. I know I still get the things in the mail and hung on my doorknob.

72 days.

That’s six dozen.

10 weeks plus two wake-ups.

That's just beyond the six-week abortion bans in effect in Florida and Georgia and North Carolina and Iowa.

Shall we talk about the consequences of this election in terms of reproductive choice and reproductive health care? We have one side that supports a total ban on abortion nation-wide and has an eye on limiting access to contraceptives and fertility treatments, and we've got another side who will codify the right to choose in federal legislation.

There is not time to spare.

There is hope in progressive spaces now, and we need to capitalize on that energy. The party that loses steam at this point will be the party that loses.

There will be some who say this sermon is too political, or too partisan.

This sermon is about morality, dignity, compassion, justice, equity, and spiritual generosity. It is about ethics and lifting up those who are oppressed, calling to account those who would further harm people described as "the least of my people."

Ministers can either be prophets for truth or mouthpieces of the Empire.

I will always choose to side with those who need support as opposed to those who want to hurt others. Always. A minister cannot serve both the divine and Caesar, and I choose to serve the divine.

Democratic activism is a spiritual practice. It is a gift from a generous heart. It is an act of collective liberation.

We have 72 days.

Let's do something.