

# Insurrection & the Cult of Personality: A Truth-Reckoning and Call for Accountability

*Matthew 2:1-18  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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Today was supposed to be a celebration of Baptism of the Lord Sunday, the First Sunday after Epiphany. The working title of the sermon I was preparing was, "New Beginnings". Just as baptism marks an initiation, a starting point, into following the ways and teachings of Jesus, I was going to explore the hope and the calling to new beginnings in this new year.

But on Epiphany Day itself, which is always on January 6, twelve days after Christmas, all that was tossed out in order to respond to the violent insurrection and desecration of our nation's Capitol building. An insurrection is defined as a violent uprising or assault against civil authority or an established government. And sedition, by the way, is defined as conduct or speech inciting people to rebel against the authority of a state.

So, instead of reading the story of Jesus' baptism today, I decided to use the assigned lectionary scripture passage for Epiphany itself, the story of the magi and their encounter with King Herod. Why this passage? Because I find a connection between the leadership of the lying, paranoid, power-hungry, fearful, threatened, angry, and violent King Herod, and the leadership (the words and actions, as well as their resulting consequences) of our current president. **The recent words and actions of President Donald Trump have been almost universally accepted as stoking and inciting that insurrection.**

Let me set the stage for what this sermon is and is not intended to be. First, what we all need to hear is a word from God, not me. But it is my prayer, nonetheless, that God will use my words to speak a meaningful and perhaps needed word to you, and us together as a community of faith. I want to be clear in stating that my words are not meant as an attack on conservative Republicanism, and not even about partisanship or differences in ideology. But yes, my words are indeed political in nature. For they address issues of corrupt leadership, the lack of truth-telling, the abuse of power and authority, the use of incendiary rhetoric, and the need for accountability. There is another, perhaps selfish reason for this sermon. Years from now, may it never be said that the pastor of College Hill Presbyterian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was silent on the matter of insurrection fueled by the cult of personality of President Donald J. Trump. And yes, I confess that I posted on my Facebook page on the evening of the defilement of our Capitol, "The President of the United States has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is a national security threat. #removetrump" Therefore, **I claim and take**

**responsibility for this sermon. And I do so as an ordained pastor, a minister of Word and Sacrament, a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA).**

I want to start with a political editorial cartoon posted a couple days ago that seems to sum it all up nicely. It has two panels. The first panel states, "January 2017". It is a depiction of Donald Trump speaking at his inauguration in front of the U.S. Capitol. It includes his actual quote, "This American carnage stops right here...and stops right now..." The second panel states, "January 2021". It has no words but dramatically depicts our U.S. Capitol in flames, overrun by people wearing red hats and carrying signs reading, "Trump 2020", "MAGA", and one person flying a Confederate Flag.

I find this depiction of the past four years represents well the biblical principle, **we reap whatever we sow**. Yes, this current carnage of American democracy must stop right here, right now – and we must be active participants. A primary concern for us at this time must be **demanding our elected officials be held accountable**, and must be held to a very high standard of truth-telling – something unfortunately rare in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere. **Imagine what this country would be like if there was no more lying to promote one's own agenda and self-ambition, no more spin to twist the interpretation of events to justify one's own perceived advantage over the position of an opponent.**

After order had been restored at the Capitol late Wednesday evening, **Mitt Romney**, Republican senator from Utah, displayed what real leadership looks like. He stated:

The objectors have claimed they are doing so on behalf of the voters. Have an audit, they say, to satisfy the many people who believe that the election was stolen. Please! No congressional-led audit will ever convince those voters, particularly when the President will continue to claim that the election was stolen. **The best way we can show respect for the voters who are upset is by telling them the truth. That is the burden, and the duty, of leadership.**

Amen to that. So, let's look at some facts. Let's tell some truth. In the days leading up to the certification of Wednesday's Electoral College votes, President Trump had bashed the election process as inherently corrupt, claimed that he had won the election, framed Biden's win as a fraud, and encouraging his supporters to come to Washington to protest. On the morning the U.S. Capitol was stormed on Wednesday, the president addressed thousands of those supporters outside the White House, vowing never to concede defeat and urging the crowd to march on the Capitol. "You'll never take back our country with weakness," he told the cheering crowd. "You have to show strength and you have to be strong." How do you suppose the extremists in the crowd, who Trump knew were present, interpreted those words? I suspect as a call to take drastic action.

After the smoke — literal and figurative — cleared, members of both parties cast blame on Trump for egging on rioters to protest at the Capitol, and continuing to falsely claim that he lost the election due to voter fraud. As the violence unfolded, Democrats, Republicans and former White House officials alike pleaded with Trump to defuse the mayhem by urging his supporters to leave the Capitol premises. Trump later released a video telling his supporters to "go home" but added: "We love you, you're very special." He also amplified again the false claims that the election was stolen.

**Rep. Liz Cheney** of Wyoming, the third-ranking House Republican declared, **"There is no question that the president formed the mob, the president incited the mob, the president addressed the mob. He lit the flame."** A bit to my surprise, but most likely still out of self-interest, Education Secretary in Trump's cabinet, Betsy DeVos, in her resignation letter on Thursday blamed Trump for inflaming tensions in the violent assault on the seat of our nation's democracy. In words directed to the president she wrote, "There is no mistaking the impact of your rhetoric had on the situation..."

Following suit, major social media outlets temporarily suspended Trump's accounts, including his favorite, **Twitter**, stating the president had **"violated its rules of service by inciting violence"**. Later, Twitter banned him for life. That's something that should have happened years ago, even in the face of heated debates over free speech. So yes, as we all know, **words do indeed matter**. And let us not forget that **silence in the face of inflammatory rhetoric also matters. That's called complicity.**

Yet, **where's the accountability?** And who should be held accountable? The president? Absolutely. But also accountable are all those who enabled his words and behavior either by their explicit support of his lies, or by their cowardly silence. Yes, they too should be held responsible. For this is where a cult of personality raises its ugly head.

Originally tied to figures such as Roman emperors, and more recently to the likes of Mussolini, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Hitler, and Kim Jong Un, **cult of personality**, as defined in encyclopedia.com is "A pejorative term implying the concentration of all power in a single charismatic leader within a totalitarian state, and the near deification of that leader in state propaganda." America, however, is not a totalitarian state but a democracy. **How, then, in the greatest and oldest democracy in the world, has our country allowed a cult of personality to take hold and to do so much damage?** As Wikipedia defines:

A cult of personality, or cult of the leader, arises when a country's regime – or, more rarely, an individual – uses the techniques of mass media, propaganda, the big lie, spectacle, the arts, patriotism, and government-organized demonstrations and rallies to create an idealized, heroic, and worshipful image of a leader, often through unquestioning flattery and praise.

So, as they say: if the shoe fits. Or, as once stated by Maya Angelou, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time."

Now, from a religious perspective, what we are dealing with here is a serious sin, **the sin of idolatry**. So yes, this is where **we, as the church, not only have a unique witness and perspective to bring to the conversation, but also the prophetic duty to speak truth to power**. Idolatry is the worship of an idol or cult image. In Judaism and Christianity, it involves the worship of something or someone other than God. Connected with a cult of personality, it becomes an act of overt adoration, loyalty, and devotion on the level that should only be extended to God the Creator. Our own John Calvin, nearly 500 years ago during the Protestant Reformation, fought primarily against the idolatry the reformers discerned had infiltrated the Roman Catholic Church.

**It is my belief that the extremists who have supported Trump at all costs have fallen prey to the same temptation, the same evil.** They see in Trump a superhero who can lift them out of whatever it is they believe is oppressing them, and return to them that which they believe has been taken from them. They put their full faith in the hope that Trump will indeed Make America Great Again, which of course comes with its own

interpretation. In his 2013 paper, "What is character and why it really does matter," Thomas A. Wright states, "The cult of personality phenomenon refers to the idealized, even god-like, public image of an individual consciously shaped and molded through constant propaganda and media exposure. As a result, **one is able to manipulate others based entirely on the influence of public personality**... the cult of personality perspective focuses on the often shallow, external images that many public figures cultivate to create an idealized and heroic image." Therefore, I posted another image on my Facebook page a couple days ago. It was a silhouette of Donald Trump's head. Inside was a quote from 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Voltaire, "**Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.**" How apropos to the events last Wednesday, and many more before that.

I want to return to this entire issue as conveyed in the campaign slogan, "**Make America Great Again,**" and what we all have always known it really represents. For many, beyond a shadow of a doubt it stands for unbridled white supremacy. After the destructive mob had been cleared by the Capitol Police, congress got back to its constitutional duty of certifying the Electoral College votes, hence Joe Biden's official victory. I, perhaps you as well, watched and listened carefully to several rousing speeches on the floor of both the Senate and the House of Representatives. More than one spoke eloquently in addressing the insurrectionists' efforts to disrupt our enshrined constitutional process with often-repeated mantra, "**This is not who we are.**" President elect Joe Biden made a similar comment earlier in the day. **That in and of itself is a lie.** It's a lie we've all been told since the day we were born. But **the reality of the history of our nation, time and time again, demonstrates otherwise.** It may not be who most of us hope we are as a country, but yes, it is exactly who we are, and have been, as a nation. Perhaps, then, we should thank President Trump for making this reality clearer to us as a nation.

**So, where do we go from here?** From a faith perspective, the first step is the honest and humble recognition and acknowledgment of our own national sin. That involves intentional personal and public **confession**, something our national leaders rarely attempt. And if they try they are usually called unpatriotic for lifting the veil from our eyes. After confession, the often-forgotten (or intentionally neglected) step is **repentance** – the turning away from such thoughts and actions that have caused harm to others, and ourselves, in the first place. But no, **we want to simply jump straight to absolution and the appearance of reconciliation, skipping the hard parts, like working toward true equity and restitution.** And before getting too perturbed about hearing the word restitution, let me say this. **Restitution simply means restoring that which has been lost or stolen to its proper owner.** It involves some sort of recompense for injury or loss, no matter when that injury or loss occurred, or whether or not we were directly involved personally.

I've read dozens of articles reflecting upon the events of this past week. And many, yes many, have immediately **classified this insurrection as a gross display of toxic dominance, distorted masculinity, and nothing less than white domestic terrorism.** A headline from NBC News, "'Vintage white rage': Why the riots were about the perceived loss of white power." From the Washington Post, "Did you see the law enforcement response to the rioters taking over the Capitol? This is what White privilege looks like." A USA Today headline: "'Double standard': Biden, Black lawmakers and activists decry police response to attack on US Capitol." Perhaps you, too, have seen the **photos of the overkill police presence during the Black Lives Matter protests last**

**summer, contrasted with their presence and response last Wednesday.** And an online TIME magazine headline, "**White Supremacism Is a Domestic Terror Threat That Will Outlast Trump.**" As shared by its author, Jonathan Greenblatt:

It was not a First Amendment-protected protest. It was not a political rally. It was a seditious and treasonous act...

In the five years since Donald Trump descended the escalator at Trump Tower and announced his candidacy for President, we have seen an unprecedented and abnormal rise of violent right-wing extremism in the United States and beyond...

We've also seen right-wing extremists increasingly emboldened in shocking ways...their rage has been fed by the divisive language and [false conspiracy theory] rhetoric of President Trump. **He has helped to normalize their extremism in ways that once seemed implausible.**

To that, I want to add the role of the President's enablers, including **the role played by extreme right-wing media and extreme right-wing preachers.** They have been major contributors in spreading such false and divisive rhetoric.

Indeed, hate has found a comfortable home in our nation, especially in our politics. So, **while the insurrection itself was shocking, sadly it was not all that surprising. Many, including myself, found it the unimagined yet inevitable consequence and conclusion to this presidency.** And while all responsible must be held accountable, **we must also put greater emphasis on how we ourselves treat others the way we want to be treated.**

Folks, we have work to do, a LOT of work to do. That included working harder to put into action Jesus' command to love one another. We are beyond the time to engage in an honest truth-reckoning. What happened on January 6, the Day of Epiphany – when we focus on how God is made manifest and recognized in our midst – is not the end, it's the beginning. **As people of faith, our call is to be part of the resistance that speaks up and takes action against the silence, the complicity, and yes, the evil of toxic dominance, distorted masculinity, and white supremacy. May God strengthen us in the resolve and capacity needed for these efforts.**

Amen.

#### Resources:

Jonathan Greenblatt, "White Supremacism Is a Domestic Terror Threat That Will Outlast Trump.", time.com, 1-7-21.

Kerry Connelly, "The time for white work was yesterday: thoughts on the mob that stormed the capitol." Blog/2021/1/7.

Wright, Thomas A.; Lauer, Tyler L. (2013). "[What is character and why it really does matter](#)". Fordham University: Business Faculty Publications. 2: 29. Retrieved 13 June 2019.

