

## **Excuse Me? Rev. Dr. Robin Meyers. 2/20/2025**

### **We are running out of time.**

Forgive me for sounding so apocalyptic, so alarmist, so much like that cartoon of the man wearing one of those sandwich board signs that says, THE END IS NEAR. Except this is how it feels—and I'm not the only one. What is essential for civilization, and in particular for democracy, is not just slipping away. It is imploding. The plutocratic autocracy has arrived in the form of billionaires who eliminate programs that feed poor children while stuffing their pockets with billions in government subsidies. Cue the black curtain to fall over the Sermon on the Mount.

You, Mr. President, would not know a “beautiful Christian” if you saw one. And if you heard one preaching the gospel, like Bishop Marianne Edgar Budde, you would say she should be fired--like a guest on your old reality TV show. In the name of government efficiency, you will extend the largest tax cut ever given to people who don't need it, ballooning the deficit by 9 trillion dollars over the next ten years. Since Elon Musk was not elected to anything, this government “of the people, by the people, and for the people, so help us God” might want to clear its throat and start screaming.

This is how I felt the morning after the election when I woke to learn that we had decided to elect the first felon ever to be president over the first black woman ever to be president. If Dr. King were still alive, he would be talking about more than just the “fierce urgency of now.” He would be telling us that this is no time for compromise, no time for appeasement, no time for capitulation. To the progressive church, he would say, “As important as self-care is, this is no time for spiritual yoga or the empty promise of “thoughts and prayers.” Don't let anybody steal your joy, but don't go looking for it on social media. Use it to help us derail this train by throwing everything we can find on the tracks.

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In the fall of 1976, in my first year of seminary, I traveled from Enid, Oklahoma, to Oklahoma City to meet a peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia, who was making his only campaign appearance in a state he knew he would not win. He looked me straight in the eye, shook my hand, and smiled that toothy grin. Where have people like Jimmy Carter gone?

I recently read a new book forthcoming by Joe Bessler, who teaches at my alma mater, Phillips Theological Seminary. Dr. Bessler and I share an interest in rhetoric, not the kind that so many equate with hot air, but the kind that, as he put it, “seeks to challenge and change the normative content in any system”—even if this is a dangerous undertaking.

**Think of this as the essential task of preaching—not partisan politics, but the politics of the gospel. Bessler put it this way: “Here the spiritual and the political begin to**

**weave together, and an audience of resistance informed by a commitment to the unconditionality of justice begins to emerge.”**

The unconditionality of justice? Now, there’s a flag we could all march under. And please, Mr. President, don’t join the chorus that advises no politics from the pulpit. What that means is “no politics I don’t like from the pulpit.” But when politics is properly defined as 1) who has the power, 2) how it is exercised, and 3) to what effect on all God’s children—then everything Jesus did was political. He wasn’t looking for a vote for a new Temple administrator. He was recruiting foot soldiers for the reign of God.

Bessler says this requires that we step out into public life and risk standing for, and calling for, justice. Rhetoric in service to justice is concerned with “magnitude.” From the Latin for “great of size or extent.” We love the word “great” in America. Who’s the GOAT (the greatest of all time)? **But preachers and teachers of the way of Jesus know exactly what MAGA means: Make America White Again.** Now, we stand at the threshold of the long night of American totalitarianism. We can hear the voice of Jimmy Carter calling to us from beyond the grave: **Make Lying Wrong Again.**

One rhetorical scholar put it in a memorable way. He said that rhetoric performs an act of “critical interruption,” where the taken-for-granted practices of a culture are concerned. One might consider preaching the way of Jesus to be an act of divinely inspired interruption. Why not? The Christmas story is a cosmic interruption. Jesus himself is an interruption. “We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin: Shepherds have received the good news ahead of the New York Times!”

I told my colleagues at Phillips that they could even consider renaming the seminary. They could call it Phillips Theological Interruption. After all, aren’t we training to be interrupters on behalf of the unconditionality of justice? The parables were interruptions, especially after we decode their hidden offense against the status quo. Praying for Caesar but not to Caesar was a dangerous interruption, and the New Testament is a divine interruption for those who “go along to get along.” Then, of course, there is the rhetoric of interruption that Jesus himself uses again and again: “You have heard it said, but I say. . .”

What is the radical claim of the resurrection but a divine interruption? What is a God “made perfect in weakness” but a divine interruption? What is the boundary-breaking mission to the Gentiles if not a seismic cultural interruption? Perhaps the best way to do this divine interrupting is to know when and where we should say, “Excuse me?”

Not in a polite way, mind you. Not in the tone of voice that we use when we bump into someone, but with an urgency that matches the darkness we are staring down and the even darker urge to give up, to look out only for ourselves, to check our stock portfolio every day instead of our moral pulse.

When we preach in the tradition of call and response, we might say, “Can I get an ‘excuse me?’” The poet Antonio Machado said the essential message of Jesus can be summed up in two words: Wake up. Not just because you like the sound of it, or want to feel like a mad prophet decrying the hypocrisies of our time. But so that you can do some strategic, nonviolent interrupting. Walking with clever signs held high (mostly saying “Hurray for our side!”) won’t cut it anymore. We must find a way to be in noncompliance with the “principalities and the powers.” We have to say it with our bodies: “Excuse me?”

**The deadly enthymemes of our time are killing us:** Money trickles down. More guns will make us safer. The unregulated marketplace can solve all the problems of life. Excuse me? Ronald Regan beats Jimmy Carter in a landslide because we can’t handle the truth. A B-movie actor in Hollywood, divorced, with a profoundly dysfunctional family, defeats a Baptist Sunday School teacher in a nation yearning for the return of family values. Excuse me, can I get a little critical thinking here?

Isaiah dreamed of a shoot that would grow out of the stump of Jesse, and animals that would lie down together instead of tearing each other to shreds. And this, perhaps the most beautiful line in the Hebrew Scripture: “They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea?” Excuse me?

Where exactly is this holy mountain? Not in Gaza, where a “riviera of the Middle East” is just another word for ethnic cleansing. Not in Ukraine, where Trump’s misty-eyed affection for a fellow dictator excuses using civilian apartments for target practice. Not in Syria, where decades of the unthinkable has come to light as we looked the other way. Excuse me?

The president wants to close the southern border with Mexico and erase the northern one with Canada. This has nothing to do with race, of course. Christian nationalists now have their own key to the White House, and in Oklahoma, every public school student, regardless of their religious identity, must now see the Trump Bible displayed in every classroom. Taxpayers are being asked to buy 55,000 copies. Excuse me? He says he wants to make Christianity “powerful again.” That’s an oxymoron. California is burning down, and Trump’s response is to link emergency response with a promise to treat the forest more like a golf course. As for the self-inflicted existential crisis that is climate change, Trump rewards his fossil-fuel contributors with a frat-house refrain: drill, baby, drill! The American King is back, and his decree from on high is that there are only two genders: male and female. How is that going to turn out?

**We are running out of time.**

Calling all interrupters on behalf of the unconditionality of justice. Interrupt with your voice, with your body, with your soul. **When the sign-up sheet gets passed around asking**

**if you will show up to stand between ICE and your neighbor facing deportation—sign it.  
Because either all of us matter, or none of us do.**

**~ Rev. Dr. Robin Meyers**

### **About the Author**

Rev. Robin R. Meyers, Ph.D, is pastor of First Congregational Church of Norman, Oklahoma, after serving 35 years as Senior Minister of Mayflower Congregational UCC Church of Oklahoma City. He is Distinguished Professor of Social Justice Emeritus in the Philosophy Department at Oklahoma City University, where he teaches public speaking and ethics. He is the best-selling author of eight books about religion and American culture, a fellow of the Westar Institute (home of the Jesus Seminar), a newspaper columnist, and a commentator for NPR. Recently named a trustee of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Robin is married to Shawn Meyers, MFA, an artist and retired professor, and they are the parents of three children, Blue, Chelsea, and Cass, and grandparents to three remarkable granddaughters, Iris, Hazel, and Eleanora.