

Anna Burnham:

Good morning, and welcome to morning prayers at Memorial Church. Today's service will begin with the responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter book. Psalm 67, found on page 34. Please remain masked and stand as you are able to read responsibly by the whole verse. May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us.

Congregation:

So that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.

Speaker 1:

Let the peoples praise thee, oh God. Let all the peoples praise thee.

Congregation:

May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth.

Speaker 1:

Let the peoples praise thee, oh God. Let all the peoples praise thee.

Congregation:

The land yields its harvest; God, our God, bless us..

Speaker 1:

God has blessed us. Let all the ends of the earth fear him.

Choir:

(singing).

Diana L. Eck:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Don't use your freedom as an excuse to do anything you want. Use it as an opportunity to serve each other with love. All that the law says can be summed up in the commandment to love others as much as you love yourself. Galatians 5. This past Saturday, I, along with many of you perhaps, watched some of that day-long commemoration of the attacks of 9/11, the gathering solemn crowds with their photographs of beloved dead, the procession of policemen and fireman with drums and [inaudible 00:08:33], the invocations, the singing of beloved anthem, America the Beautiful, the reading of the name, the solemn ringing of the bell to commemorate the exact moments of impact. There were speeches, among them, the most moving perhaps, was that of President Bush. But the tone and the sense, the ritual dimension, was the same in New York, in Washington and in Pennsylvania.

So my question on this day of religious observance is what kind of religion is this, this national religion? We are after all, a secular nation in which the non-establishment of religion is right there in the First Amendment. And yet we bring ceremony and solemnity to these moments that I would definitely call religion. When Robert Bellah wrote his much discussed piece, Civil Religion in America in 1967, he

suggested that America does have a religion after all, a national religion, a civil religion, despite the clear separation of church and state. He explained while it draws upon Jewish, Christian and biblical heritage, it is not Christian or Jewish at all, not any particular religion, but the broader and deeper religious ethos of our society.

Bellah studied the great addresses of presidents from George Washington to Lincoln to JFK, who articulated what he called the religious dimension of American experience in speaking to the self-understanding of a diverse nation. They spoke of God to be sure, but none of these presidents mentions Jesus Christ or the Bible at all. Rather, America's civil religion is based on an ethical consensus, the subordination of the nation, the ethical principles that transcended, and in terms of which it will be judged. This American civil religion, Bellah writes, has been severely tested. To be sure, there are great tests of American self-understanding, perhaps the greatest, the Civil War, testing us on our fundamental dedication to the proposition that all people are created equal, as Lincoln put it at Gettysburg. Testing whether that nation or any nation, so conceived can long endure.

9/11 and the aftermath was certainly another time of testing, did our fundamental commitment to the free exercise of religion really extend to our growing population of Muslims and Hindus and Sikh immigrants? People of every religious tradition, after all, died in those attacks. I'd been studying Americans' growing religious diversity for 10 years at that time, tracking the emerging histories of new religious immigrant communities here in America.

And in the days after 9/11, some of these very communities were under attack by our own homemade violence, fire bombs, beatings, murders, targeting turbans, hijabi women, places of worship. It was Barack Obama who articulated a new America's self-understanding of civil religion when he said in his first inaugural, "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Jews, and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every corner of this earth." It was a breathtaking moment of inclusion. And he went on, "Because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war, we still believe, cannot help but believe, that the old hatred shall someday pass and the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve."

But January 6th and the aftermath was certainly another moment in the testing of our civil religion, this time from Christian nationalism, white Christian nationalism, so clearly on display in the violence of that day, taking aim again at the foundations of our complex pluralist society, religious freedom, religious diversity. We watched the assailing of the US capital with battering weapons, with crosses lifted high, and Jesus 2020 banners waving. Who were they? Had they seen the overt evidence of our growing and confident diversity? Hadn't they seen the mosques and temples in cities and towns from sea to shining sea? Haven't they witnessed the growing participation of new immigrants in American public life? From Keith Ellison, who took his oath of office on a copy of the Quran, to Tulsi Gabbard, who was sworn into Congress on the Bhagavad Gita she had carried with her in Iraq.

I think they had seen. I think they took the full measure and scope of our diverse communities, our new immigration, and outright rejected it, embracing once again what one author speaks of as the biggest fraud in Christian nationalism, that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. This is the test

of our time. "I wasn't alive on 9/11," said a student last week, a Gen Z student. "But I do remember exactly where I was on January 6th."

Let us pray. Oh God of many names, support us all the day long as we walk our path today, as we meet challenges and find friends, as we reach out to one another, as we join together in new adventures and find new community with gratitude for life and breath. Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against [inaudible 00:15:24]. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, power and the glory [inaudible 00:15:34]. The hymn is number 36. My soul [inaudible 00:15:42].

Congregation:

(singing)

Anna Burnham:

The Lord be with you. The service has ended. Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.