

“Transforming Christianity”  
May 17, 2026

Amos 9:5-8  
Romans 12:2, 9-18

There’s been a discussion recently about whether or not religion is “back in fashion” in America, as CNN put it. I don’t know much about current styles—and in an era of “fast fashion” what is in one week is out the next. But this weekend is once again bringing religion to the fore in our nation.

Daniella Greenbaum Davis wrote this past week that the President recently did something extraordinary—and she meant that in a good way! “As part of National Jewish Heritage Month,” she said the President “called on the United States to observe a national Sabbath, calling it Shabbat 250, in honor of the nation’s semiquincentennial this year.” Ms. Davis has been observing Shabbat for 32 years, but, she said, “It is the first time in U.S. history that a sitting president has designated such an observance.”<sup>i</sup>

And I thought, well, as much as I am skeptical of any proclamations about religion from any administration, maybe that *is* a good thing. In this time of growing antisemitism, people throughout our nation could practice with and learn from our Jewish neighbors. We could all benefit by taking some time to pull back from the constant pressure of work and the unending striving and addicting hold that our electronic devices have on our lives. Those who are religious might rest in God and those who are not might simply rest.

It was short notice—I read about this on Wednesday and the sabbath, of course, started on Friday evening. Still, I was kind of on board.

Then I read the fine print. Actually, *all* Americans weren’t invited into this Sabbath rest. It was Jewish Americans in particular who were encouraged by the President to “observe a national Sabbath from sundown on May 15 to nightfall on May 16.” Those who would be marking the Sabbath anyway were given a gratuitous invitation to do so. And the rest of could ignore it.

Yes, the President’s call did acknowledge “the contributions that Jewish Americans have made to our way of life,” adding, “we honor their role in shaping the story of our Nation.”

All good.

But something more is happening. It, too, is extraordinary—and I *don’t* mean that in a good way.

The call to a “national Sabbath” was merely a nod to Judaism on this weekend of what is being touted by the administration as “Rededicate 250,” “a national jubilee of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.”<sup>ii</sup> The call to Sabbath observance on Friday was mostly a cover for the main event: a very conservative Christian, even *Christian nationalist*, gathering on the National Mall today, hosted by the administration.

It’s been reported that “Organizers say [this event] will reflect the country’s Christian origins and, they hope, spark ‘a movement of renewal’ in America.” Cabinet Secretaries, the Speaker of the House, and the President will address the crowd.

“Critics say the Rededicate 250 event is shaping up into an occasion to promote the false idea that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and should be so today.”

Not that most people go along with this. Only 2 in 10 U.S. adults and about one-quarter of Republicans, said the federal government should declare Christianity the official religion of the nation, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in April.<sup>iii</sup> But that’s still a troubling number of people.

Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, said: “I’m unaware of anything like this, with this involvement of senior government officials, on this scale, trying to paint this false picture of the United States as a Christian nation.”<sup>iv</sup>

As people of liberal faith, we affirm that a nation cannot follow God. A nation cannot be led by God. We are troubled by any who would impose their version of God’s will on all people.

A nation cannot be led by God, but we also affirm that individuals can be responsible before God as we live our public lives.

This perspective is not limited to people of liberal faith. Some time ago, the conservative magazine *Christianity Today* summarized the differences between the Christian faith and an uncritical nationalism: “The American flag is not the Cross. The Pledge of Allegiance is not the Creed. ‘God Bless America’ is not the Doxology. Sometimes one needs to state the obvious” the editors concluded—“especially at times when it’s less and less obvious.”<sup>v</sup>

These are such times.

So, if I might speak personally for a moment, let me say that I love the United States, with all its goodness and flaws and possibilities. I’m as proud to be an American as any country-western singer.

And I am a Christian, with my own unique goodness and flaws, like you, seeking to follow in the way of Jesus Christ, known and to be made known to us.

I recognize, however, that being an American and being a Christian are not one and the same thing. I am sure that being an American shapes my understanding and my lived expression of Christianity. And my being a Christian shapes and critiques what it means for me to be an American.

But again, my citizenship and my faith are not the same thing.

In spite of the words added to the Pledge of Allegiance in the 1950’s under pressure from the Knights of Columbus, we are not a nation “under God.” We have never been one—except to the extent that all nations are under the God who is Sovereign over all creation.

In such a time as this, then, it might have seemed strange or even troubling for us to cry out with the Psalmist: “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord!” This psalm is often used in a self-congratulatory manner. Hearing some people talk, you’d think that the ancient Hebrew poet had the United States of America in mind when those words were written. A wrong reading of those words will lead only to idolatry, not faithfulness.

Listen closely, then. The Psalmist sings, not of national greatness, but of the forgiving grace of God. This grace is the “real power behind illusions of power.”<sup>vi</sup> The nation whose “God is the

Lord” is also the nation that recognizes that a ruler is not saved by a great army; a warrior is not delivered by great strength; and that the war horse—or a cruise missile or a drone—is a vain hope for victory. This Psalm is not a call to American exclusivism nor is it a support system for encroaching authoritarianism.

This Psalm tells of the God who “frustrates the purposes of the nations and foils the plans of the people.” This same God is the one whose “own purpose stands forever.” God is, as the choir sang this morning: “High above all nations”—not the plaything or mascot of the United States or any other nation.

Sometimes, I despair over our nation—as I did this past week. But in such despair, I find the beginning of hope.

When we are stripped of our illusions, American exceptionalism gives way to a recognition that we are one in a world of nations, aware of the power that we hold and its potential for abuse as well as its many benefits.

I find hope when God speaks to ancient Israel through the prophet Amos, “Are not you Israelites like the Ethiopians to me?” Faithfulness to the message of the prophet would mean a voice rising from the National Mall today asking: “Are not you Americans like the Iranians to me?” The prophet was clear that even God’s “chosen people” are not beyond the judgment of God. All the other nations are also under God’s care. All people—*all people* are the objects of God’s love and mercy.

There are those who would transform Christianity into a small, even heretical religion that would boost nationalist desires.

Let us, instead, affirm the transforming Christianity that calls us to a new way of life.

Paul’s words to the early church in Rome still help and challenge us today: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds.”

Conforming suggests going along with the prevailing winds, being shaped by the imagination of others, and being shaped *into the image* of others. Out of our liberal Protestant tradition we instead faithfully bring the good news of God’s love *to* the world rather than being shaped into the world’s mold—which increasingly is shown to be a mold of hatred and violence.

In the face of the pressures that would force conformity, Paul urges the followers of Christ to seek transformation—an act that suggests a change into something previously unknown.

Now, transformation has become something of a buzzword in the United Church of Christ. Websites of our denomination and of individual congregations announce that they are “transforming lives,” that they are “transforming congregations,” and that they offer “transforming worship.” People go on at length talking about “transformational leadership.”

And, of course, you know that anytime something becomes a buzzword, I worry about it and tend to avoid it.

Whenever we see the word “transformation” we need to ask: “What, really, do you have in mind?”

Again, Paul gives some direction, telling the early Christians in Rome how they—and we—are to live not only in congregations but also in the world. He gives us a long, although not exclusive, list. It contains many things that Christian nationalists find repugnant—offering hospitality to strangers, showing mutual affection, blessing those who persecute you, being patient. At the same time these are the very acts that we in the liberal church believe are signs of faithful following in the way of Jesus Christ—they are how *transformed* people live.

We are not, as Paul writes, to be conformed to the world. We will not be celebrated on the National Mall. But we will live out our changing faith in this always changing and challenging world.

By the grace of God, in Jesus Christ we have been given a whole new way of thinking about how we live in and address the problems of our society—not by force but by actions that call all people to a higher destiny, raising our nation to a new plateau of compassion: countering evil with good, confronting violence with peace, and offering the possibility of repentance and new life to everyone involved.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2026/05/13/forget-digital-detox-spa-retreat-try-this-ancient-solution/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.presidentialprayerteam.org/2026/05/09/president-designates-a-national-sabbath-observance/>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/2026/05/14/trump-prayer-gathering-conservative-christians-nationalism/6410ec04-4f8f-11f1-97e7-22c6c29ff0d8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/2026/05/14/trump-prayer-gathering-conservative-christians-nationalism/6410ec04-4f8f-11f1-97e7-22c6c29ff0d8_story.html)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2026/05/13/trump-administration-host-rededicate-250-jubilee-mall-sunday/>

<sup>v</sup> Donald Shriver, *America*, July 2, 2007.

<sup>vi</sup> “Psalm 33,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*