

As Trump demands apology, Episcopal bishop explains her call for mercy toward those living in fear

by [David Paulsen](#)

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Mariann Budde, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, preaches January 21 at the Service of Prayer for the Nation at the Washington National Cathedral. (Photo: Washington National Cathedral, via Facebook)

The sermon's duration was less than 15 minutes. Its theme—a call for unity grounded in faith at a time of political division—was hardly out of the norm for a post-inauguration service at Washington National Cathedral, which has hosted similar services 10 times before.

It was the sermon's final four minutes that struck a chord. Mariann Budde, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, issued a [final plea directly to President Donald Trump](#) as he sat in the front row, a moment that would [generate national headlines](#) and intense reactions, both positive and negative.

Her calm plea to the president: "Have mercy."

Later in the day, Trump made clear his distaste for the sermon [when asked about it by reporters](#), saying he "didn't think it was a good service." Then early January. 22, he [amplified his complaints with a social media post](#) that demanded Budde and "her church" apologize.

Without using Budde's name, the president labeled her "a so-called bishop" and a "Radical Left hard line Trump hater" whose sermon was "ungracious" and "nasty in tone."

Budde, in her sermon, had asked Trump to show mercy to "the people in our country who are scared now," and she specifically held up the fears felt by many LGBTQ+ people and immigrants at the start of Trump's second term.

After his January 20 inauguration, Trump had issued a series of executive orders, including several intended to address what he declared was a national emergency on the US-Mexico border. During the campaign Trump had promised to enact mass deportations, and in his social media post about Budde's sermon, he added, without evidence, that a "large number of illegal migrants" had entered the United States and killed people as part of a "giant crime wave."

The bishop, whose diocese includes the United States's capital city and part of Maryland, discussed her sermon [in an interview with CNN](#) that aired January 21, after Trump's initial comments but before his demand for an apology.

Budde confirmed she was looking directly at Trump while speaking to him from the pulpit.

"I was also, frankly, as you do in every sermon, speaking to everyone who was listening, through that one-on-one conversation with the president, reminding us all that the people that are frightened in our country . . . are our fellow human beings and that they have been portrayed all throughout the political campaign in the harshest of lights," Budde told CNN. "I wanted to counter, as gently as I could, with a

reminder of their humanity and their place in our wider community.”

She [later told NPR’s All Things Considered](#) that she didn’t see a need to apologize.

“I regret that it was something that has caused the kind of response that it has, in the sense that it actually confirmed the very thing that I was speaking of earlier, which is our tendency to jump to outrage and not speak to one another with respect,” she said. “But, no, I won’t apologize for what I said.”

Trump, though not a member of the Washington National Cathedral, had attended the cathedral’s Service of Prayer for the Nation with his family and members of his new administration, including Vice President JD Vance.

An Episcopal Church spokesperson released a statement January 22, saying that Budde has been a “bishop in good standing” since her consecration in 2011. “She is a valued and trusted pastor to her diocese and colleague to bishops throughout our church. We stand by Bishop Budde and her appeal for the Christian values of mercy and compassion.”

Some critics of Budde’s sermon argued it was inappropriate for her to preach directly to Trump—or to any individual member of a worshipping community. However, Ruthanna Hooke, [a professor of homiletics at Virginia Theological Seminary](#), noted preachers commonly address individuals in other types of services, such as weddings, baptisms and ordinations.

A post-inauguration service isn’t just about the president in the same way that an ordination is about the ordinand, Hooke said, though she thought Budde “built the case carefully” to justify the direct plea to the president. The first part of Budde’s sermon was rooted solidly in scripture, Hooke said, specifically the [passage from the Gospel of Matthew](#) about “a wise man who built his house on rock.”

“When people are going to preach a sermon that might be controversial in this context, basing it firmly on scripture is the solid ground, to use that same metaphor,” Hooke said. The preacher’s message may not reach every member of a congregation immediately, but “sometimes a sermon is planting seeds that are going to grow and sprout much later.”

Some of Budde’s fellow bishops were [among those who came to her defense](#) and commended her sermon.

“I encourage you to listen to the whole sermon, which is a reflection on Godly unity, and what it means to be united across disagreement,” Arizona Bishop Jennifer Reddall [said on Facebook while sharing video of Budde’s sermon](#). “It’s a vision of the Kingdom of God, deeply rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Los Angeles Bishop John Harvey Taylor went further [in his Facebook post about the sermon](#), saying Budde had “held Trump accountable to his face for ten years of hate speech.”

Judging by the look on Trump’s face, “you could tell she got through to him,” said Taylor, who previously served as former President Richard Nixon’s chief of staff and [executive director of the Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace Foundation](#). Taylor urged his followers to “resist colluding with the second-day story,” presumably referring to the outrage from Trump’s supporters.

Plans for the cathedral’s post-inauguration service were announced in October, before Trump defeated Vice President Kamala Harris in November to win the presidency for a second time. The service was not open to the public because of security concerns, though it was livestreamed and is available as a video [on the cathedral’s YouTube channel](#).

Washington National Cathedral is the seat of the Episcopal Church’s presiding bishop and of the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington. Budde was joined at the altar by National Cathedral Dean Randy Hollerith, as well as Ann Ritonia, the Episcopal Church’s bishop suffragan for armed forces and federal ministries. The service also [featured leaders from a diverse group of faith denominations](#), including Mennonite, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist leaders.

Budde, in her sermon, did not identify or criticize any specific policy promoted by Trump. Rather, she invoked familiar Christian themes of compassion, respect for human dignity, and welcoming the stranger.

“I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here,” Budde said. “Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers in this land.”

Later, in her interview with CNN, she explained why she thought it important to address Trump directly at the end of her sermon.

“I felt that he has this moment now where he feels charged and empowered to do what he feels called to do, and I wanted to say there is room for mercy,” Budde said. “There’s room for broader compassion. We don’t need to portray with a broad cloth in the harshest of terms some of the most vulnerable people in our society, who are in fact our neighbors, our friends, our friends’ children.”

Those neighbors “are not abstract people for me,” she added. “These are actual people that I know, so I wanted to speak on their behalf. I wanted to present a vision of what unity can look like in this country that is transcending of differences and viewpoints and acknowledging our common humanity.” —Episcopal News Service