News



The Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, the Episcopal bishop of Washington, center, passes President Donald Trump while processing into the national prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral, Jan. 21, 2025, in Washington. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

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President Donald Trump attended the inaugural prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral Tuesday morning (Jan. 21), finishing off the festivities marking the beginning of his second term with an interfaith service filled with prayers and hymns — and a sermon that offered a religious challenge to his administration's stated goals.

About halfway through the service, Trump, seated in the front row, heard a sermon that functioned as one of the first public criticisms of his second administration. After beginning her homily by exploring the difficulty of forging a "kind of unity that fosters community across diversity and division, a unity that serves the common good," the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, the Episcopal bishop of Washington, singled out three foundational principles for the task: honoring the inherent dignity of every human being, honesty and humility.

Near the end of her sermon, Budde directed her remarks to Trump himself, noting the declaration in his inaugural address that he believes he was "saved by God" from an assassination attempt last year.

She then expressed concern for LGBTQ people who may feel targeted by his administration: On Monday evening, Trump signed a blitz of executive orders, including one that condemned "gender ideology" and declared, "it is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female."

"Millions have put their trust in you. As you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now," Budde said in her sermon. "There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in both Democratic, Republican and independent families who fear for their lives."

Budde also made a plea for immigrants, a group under fire from Trump's incoming administration, saying they include people who "pick our crops" and "work the night

shift in hospitals," among other vital roles.

"They may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals," she said. "They pay taxes, and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches, mosques and synagogues, gurdwara and temples."

It was a forceful rebuttal of Trump's approach to immigration: He has pledged to enact the largest deportation in history, with early reports that his administration may begin conducting deportation raids as early as Tuesday. In addition, among Trump's first executive orders included a move to end birthright citizenship and a measure declaring a near-total halt of the U.S. refugee admissions program — a move widely opposed by Trump's religious critics.

Budde then implored the president to "have mercy … on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. Help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here."

She added: "Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land."

Budde concluded: "May God grant us all the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, speak the truth in love and walk humbly with one another and our God, for the good of all the people of this nation and the world."

When Budde processed by the president as she left the service a few minutes later, Trump stared straight ahead.

Other prayers in the service also made reference to immigrants, refugees and the poor.

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The service — which Trump officials call a "National Prayer Service" but which cathedral sources referred to as "A Service of Prayer for the Nation" — featured

prayers, invocations and Scripture readings from Episcopalian, African Methodist Episcopal, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Mennonite, Jewish, Indigenous, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh traditions as well as members from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Attendees, who did not fill the space, also sang a range of hymns and songs, such as "For the Healing of the Nations" and the national anthem.

In addition to Trump, first lady Melania Trump, Vice President JD Vance and second lady Usha Vance were also at the service. So were members of Trump's family, as well some of his longtime evangelical supporters and advisers, including pastor Paula White, former head of his White House faith office; pastor Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church, in Dallas; pastor Jentezen Franklin, head of Free Chapel in Georgia; Sean Feucht, a musician and activist; and Pastor Lorenzo Sewell of 180 church in Detroit, who prayed during Trump's inauguration on Monday shortly before launching his own cryptocurrency.

Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the Vatican's ambassador to the U.S., was also spotted in the room, as was Pete Hegseth, an evangelical Christian and Trump's pick to lead the Department of Defense.

The service differed from past iterations in that the preacher — Budde — was announced before Election Day, and the incoming administration generally had less say over the event. The changes were unveiled in October, with cathedral dean the Very Rev. Randolph Marshall Hollerith insisting in a statement that "This will not be a service for a new administration."

The move may have been an attempt to preempt the kind of pushback the cathedral faced from liberal-leaning Episcopalians when it agreed to host Trump's first inaugural prayer service in 2017, including public criticism voiced by the cathedral's former dean — who left in 2015 — the Rev. Gary Hall.

"This will have the effect of legitimizing his presidency, which is something I don't think the Christian community should give him," Hall said at the time.

But Budde defended the decision at the time, saying she was "trying to create a church where we actually speak to people who see the world differently than we do."

Even so, Budde was an outspoken critic of Trump during his first term, particularly when racial justice protesters were forcibly cleared from Lafayette Square just before Trump convened a photo op that included holding up a Bible in front of St. John’s Church (an Episcopal congregation within the diocese). Budde condemned the actions, noting that among those forcibly cleared were an Episcopal priest and a seminarian who were there handing out water to demonstrators at the behest of the diocese.

"The symbolism of him holding a Bible … as a prop and standing in front of our church as a backdrop when everything that he has said is antithetical to the teachings of our traditions and what we stand for as a church — I was horrified," she told RNS at the time.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.