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On the morning of the presidential inauguration, the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde pretty much had the structure of her sermon for the next day finished. The Episcopal bishop of Washington had ruminated on it ever since she was announced in October as the preacher for the interfaith prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral that traditionally concludes the presidential inauguration festivities. Budde had decided to focus on three values she believes are important for national unity: honoring the inherent dignity of every human being, honesty and humility.

But as she watched Donald Trump's inauguration Monday (Jan. 20) and the executive orders he signed immediately after, she realized she needed to add something else.

"I found myself thinking, there's a fourth thing we need for unity in this country — we need mercy," she told RNS in an interview on Wednesday. "We need mercy. We need compassion. We need empathy. And after listening to the president on Monday, I thought, I wasn't going to just speak of it in general terms."

The result was a sermon, delivered from the cathedral's pulpit on Tuesday morning as President Trump and Vice President JD Vance sat quietly just a few feet away, that pleaded with the president to have "mercy" on people who stand to be disproportionately impacted by his administration's policies — namely, LGBTQ people and immigrant families.

"In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now," Budde said. "There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in both Democratic, Republican and independent families who fear for their lives."

She also made a plea for immigrants and refugees, a reference to Trump's promise to enact sweeping deportations and his executive order [stopping almost all refugees from entering the country](#) starting Jan. 27. The majority of immigrants, Budde said, are not criminals, but "people who pay taxes, and are good neighbors."

It was a largely unsurprising message for anyone who has watched Budde's long career of ministry, activism and advocacy.

Born in New Jersey, Budde was an evangelical Christian in her youth before becoming an Episcopalian in her 20s and eventually earning her Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry from Virginia Theological Seminary. A soft-spoken cleric and avid cyclist known for wearing wide-brimmed hats on sunny days, she went on to

serve for nearly 20 years as a priest in Minneapolis before coming to the nation's capital, where, like many of her fellow Episcopal bishops, she has participated in protests and spoken out on issues important to her. In 2020, she garnered headlines for condemning the forced clearing of demonstrators, including an Episcopal priest, from Lafayette Square shortly before Trump walked across the empty park and conducted a photo op in front of St. John's Church, an Episcopal congregation in her diocese.

**[Related: In sermon to Trump, Bishop Budde pleads for immigrants, transgender rights](#)**

As she processed down the cathedral's cavernous halls on Tuesday, crook in hand, Budde said she was more worried about potential liberal detractors than conservative ones.

"I actually thought I would get a lot of criticism for pleading to the president," she said, imagining other progressives may have preferred she preach a more defiant sermon. "But I felt like, you know, he has room to be generous here. He could nuance."

What happened instead was a cavalcade of criticism from the political and theological right. Several of Trump's evangelical Christian supporters condemned Budde, with the Rev. Franklin Graham dismissing the cathedral as having been "taken over by gay activists" on a podcast and telling RNS in a separate interview that he believes the bishop should have approached Trump privately.

Rep. Mike Collins, a Georgia Republican, [published a post on X](#) suggesting Budde, a U.S. citizen, should be deported.

By early Wednesday morning, Trump — who told reporters late Tuesday that the inaugural prayer service was "not very exciting" — [posted a diatribe against Budde on Truth Social](#), a social media platform he owns.

"The so-called Bishop who spoke at the National Prayer Service on Tuesday morning was a Radical Left hard line Trump hater," he said, going on to insist Budde and the cathedral issue an apology.

The volume of criticism — some of which has been vitriolic — has led some to express concern for Budde's safety. But the bishop, whose position

often puts her in the public eye, was largely unmoved on Wednesday, noting she discussed the polarized nature of modern political discourse in her sermon.

"I spoke about the culture of contempt, the outrage that is so prevalent in our society now — it's just how we respond to each other when we disagree," Budde said.

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But neither appears interested in issuing any apology for what they insist was a profession of faith. What's more, a spokesperson for the Episcopal Church — which has long taken liberal positions on various topics — told RNS on Wednesday the denomination stands by the Episcopal bishop of Washington.

"The Rt. Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde was elected in 2011 by clergy and lay leaders of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington to serve as their 9th bishop," the spokesperson said in a statement. "She was ordained in November of that year, and has served as a bishop in good standing since that time. 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."



Bishop Mariann Budde, head of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, speaks during a vigil opposing the Israel-Hamas war, Nov. 20, 2023, at the White House in Washington. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

RNS also reached out to nearly 20 Episcopalian members of Congress to gauge their response to Budde's sermon and the pushback. Republicans who responded were largely critical of Budde: Rep. Beth Van Duyne of Texas accused the bishop of espousing "radical political ideology," and Rep. Scott Desjarlais of Tennessee derided her as a "political activist."

Similarly, a staff member for Rep. Andy Barr pointed RNS to the congressman's statement on X, in which he suggested Budde's remarks were not in keeping with the denomination's message.

"The only message Bishop Budde delivered through her unwelcoming and hypocritical words to the President was that the Episcopal Church's motto of 'All are Welcome' apparently doesn't apply to the majority of Americans who voted for Donald Trump," Barr [wrote](#).

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Budde said her friends had reached out to her to make sure she was OK, but the prelate was more concerned about the people she mentioned in her sermon — namely, LGBTQ people and immigrants.

"The people who are in danger are the people who fear for their lives and their livelihoods," she said. "That's where the focus should be."

And despite all the criticism, Budde's message has resonated with a broader audience of supporters. In fact, lawmakers chastising Budde may have run afoul of their own local religious leaders: When RNS reached out to the Rt. Rev. Mark Van Koevering, the bishop who oversees the Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky, where Barr resides, the prelate said he respected the congressman as a "faithful Episcopalian" but voiced strong support for Budde's preaching.

"I support Bishop Budde's gospel message of unity at a time when our nation continues to be so deeply polarized," the bishop said. "Her heartfelt appeal to President Trump to show mercy toward the stranger and the vulnerable is not partisan politics, but the genuine witness of a pastor for her people. Our people. The people."

**[Read this next: Bishops condemn Trump's immigration orders for stoking fear, anxiety](#)**

Meanwhile, Democratic Episcopalians, such as Sen. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, were quick to praise Budde and her message of mercy.

"I commend her for appealing directly to the President, asking him to recognize the universal Christian principle, shared by many other faiths, that we are all God's children. Instead of taking this to heart, Trump responded with cheap personal insults — once again rebuking the principles of love, mercy, and compassion," Van Hollen said in a statement.

Rep. Julia Brownley of California was similarly critical of Trump, saying in a statement that "rather than disparage one of the most respected women in spiritual leadership in this country, it would be more appropriate for President Trump to reflect on her message of empathy, understanding, and inclusion."

A spokesman for the National Cathedral — which, like many older universities and institutions in the District of Columbia, was initially established by Congress but now operates under a private foundation — said the church's office has been awash with messages of support for the bishop. Budde is in high demand, the spokesman said, and her homily has even spurred some to rekindle their faith.

"We've heard from people saying, 'I stopped going to church years ago, but what I heard yesterday has made me rethink that decision,'" the spokesman said.

And Budde's detractors may yet find themselves in agreement with broader concerns highlighted by her preaching. During an interview about Budde's comments, Franklin Graham said he was unaware of Trump's executive order largely freezing the federal refugee program — a program that, according to faith-based refugee resettlement groups, also welcomes persecuted Christians. News of the executive order, which a cathedral official confirmed Budde was referencing in her sermon, caught Graham by surprise.

"I wasn't aware that this is under Trump, but if it is, I certainly will speak to that issue — privately," he said, laughing.

As for Budde herself, she appears to be largely untroubled by it all. She is trying to focus on what she deemed a more pressing matter: a diocesan convention on racial justice to be hosted at the cathedral later this week.

"I need to turn my attention to that," Budde said. "So I'm trying to maintain the dignity and humility and honesty that I spoke of, let people have their reactions and try not to over-respond to them."

"It's not just the one sermon," she added. "We just need to continue to believe what we believe in and stand for the things we stand for — and that's the work, right?"

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. [View the full series.](#)