The following is the text of The Bishop’s Address to the 121st Annual Diocesan Convention given on November 5, 2022, at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

In reflecting on our convention theme, “Sing a New Song,” my mind turned to two old songs that might help us to do that. They were written by….Bruce Springsteen. One is “Radio Nowhere” which includes these lyrics:

This is radio nowhere
Is there anyone alive out there?
This is radio nowhere
Is there anyone alive out there?
Is there anyone alive out there?
I was spinning around a dead dial
Just another lost number in a file
Dancing down a dark hole
Just searching for a world with some soul

_Bruce Springsteen_

Although we have some churches that have come out of these two and a half years of COVID-19 stronger, many of our churches are hurting. Some churches of all different sizes are down in Sunday attendance by 30-50 per cent. Many
Sunday Schools are really hurting. And it is so hard to get volunteers. Some clergy have told me how discouraged they are and are wondering if they have done all they can do in their present situations.

And so we sing, “is anyone alive out there? Is anyone alive out there? Dancing down a dark hole, just searching for a world with some soul.”

But there is another Springsteen song that he wrote in response to the tragedy of September 11, 2001. It’s called, “The Rising” and starts off with a firefighter going up the stairs:

  Can’t see nothing in front of me
  Can’t see nothing come up behind
  I make my way through this darkness

*Bruce Springsteen*

Then he segues to:

  Come on up for the Rising
  Come on up lay your hands in mine
  Come on up for the rising
  Come on up for the rising tonight
  I see you Mary in the garden
  In the garden of a thousand sighs
  There’s holy pictures of our children
  Dancing in a sky filled with light
  May I feel your arms around me
  May I feel your blood mix with mine
  A dream of life comes to me

*Bruce Springsteen*

How can we get from “Radio Nowhere” to “The Rising?” How will God working in us get “The Rising” to be our song? I’ll spend the rest of this address wondering and exploring that.

The great theologian Karl Barth says the basic human response to God is gratitude. Everything else flows from there. When our kids were little and would get overly upset about something Betsy and I would say to them: “Stop. Tell me five things you are grateful for.” Recently, I have begun a simple practice when the wake up alarm goes off of thanking God for five things before I get out of bed.

It is amazing what gratitude can do. The preacher David Lose says: “Gratitude frees us from fear. Releases us from anxiety. It emboldens us to do more than we could ever imagine.”

What would happen if we started every vestry meeting, every diocesan meeting going around the room asking for expressions of gratitude.

A remarkable example of this recently took place in Pittsfield. Jenny Gregg tells me that all the churches in the city got together and wrote ‘thank you’ notes to all 1,200 people who work in the school system. Teachers and school workers continue to be so very challenged because of how COVID shut-downs effected children’s development. And the churches of Pittsfield responded with gratitude for the hard work being done there.

And that flows into my next wondering about how to go from “Radio Nowhere” to “The Rising.” And that is collaboration. No one church could have written 1,200 ‘thank you’ notes. But together they could. Long before COVID I was preaching the benefits of collaboration – between Episcopal churches and with churches and synagogues and mosques of all traditions. Yes, we are experiencing in our society the Great Resignation. Our ministries might be understaffed. And working with other churches might be the solution. We learned during the pandemic that we don’t have to start a much needed food pantry. Maybe we can send volunteers and financial support to the church across town or down the block that already runs
a food pantry and is struggling to meet the growing need. I’m really humble about presuming to know what God thinks, but I think it is possible God would love that.

Do you know that more times than Jesus said, “love one another,” he said, “stay awake,” “look,” “see.” What is going on right now for us to see? Something I have spoken of many times in the past year is the depression many of our young people are suffering. I’m often invited to speak at campus ministry gatherings and I ask the campus minister what they would like me to speak about. Always the answer is the same — “hope.” In a four month period of time earlier this year 7 students died by suicide at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. The early church, in the very first years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, looked around and saw the great need of the widows in a culture where women could not earn money. They saw and they responded to that need with the ministry of deacons. What is God calling us to in our 32 college campuses and for those young adults who are not in college? I don’t have an answer but maybe you do. Let’s stay awake to what God wants us to do.

Stay awake. Do you know that 10,000 baby boomers in the United States retire every day? I know we want to invite young families to our churches so we might live out the mandate to pass the faith on from generation to generation. I’m inspired by all our churches trying to do that. And could it be that some of those non-church going baby boomers might be searching for faith formation in this next stage of their lives? What would outreach to them look like?

And staying awake also means curiosity about ministries that are working so well within our diocese. This is not a full list. Just a few. Building Bridges – our ministry with veterans – is growing and growing and growing. We have 13 churches now that offer a free meal to veterans every week or every month. Approximately 500 vets attend. Many don’t need a free meal but they go for the companionship. And some really do need the food. Through the years I have met so many who literally live under bridges on the Connecticut River. We see that. What is God calling us to?

Stay awake. See. Look. Climate change isn’t just in the future. It is now. I’m so grateful for the ministry of Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, her Leadership Circle, AND for your response to that ministry. See the awesome work that several of our churches have done welcoming Afghan refugees. I’m blessed to hear the stories of my Executive Assistant, Lainey Hurlbut, as she drives a refugee family cared for by our Cathedral and St David’s in Agawam to many appointments and to their mosque. See the work we do to stand up for the rights of immigrants including our advocacy for driver’s licenses for the undocumented.

See the work we are doing to get ghost guns and AR 15’s off the streets. See the inspirational work of our street ministries in Springfield, Worcester, Northampton, and Pittsfield.

See the incredible energy that is put into our Good News Gardens in ten of our parishes and the food given to local food banks.

See our Loving The Questions experience for those discerning where God is calling them. It is an incredible process that has impacted many lives and focused the gifts of lay and ordained leaders for Jesus’ mission.

See our Human To Human ministry (what in the old days would be called Episcopal Charities) which financially supports outreach ministries. (You will hear from the director, Mark Rodgers, later today.)

See our 80 Sacred Ground circles – congregational groups that have honestly and faithfully engaged the impact of white supremacy on our nation and church. Sacred Ground is changing us and shaping our work for racial justice.

See that our Latino faith communities have grown from one – Christ Church Cathedral – to three. San Marcos in Worcester and St. Paul’s in Holyoke are growing with the Holy Spirit and sharing the Gospel of joy.

See our Indigenous Peoples Justice Network with the Diocese of Massachusetts. We are telling the truth of our history, listening to Native voices, and naming what we owe to those whose land was taken with violence and lies.

Go to Sheffield in the summer and witness our ministry to hikers on the Appalachian Trail. Last summer over 740 hikers stopped by our tent.

In a time of clergy shortage, see the work of Rich Simpson to get us great clergy. See the ministry of our clergy who are working in two churches. See the so-called retired clergy who are serving our churches.

And see the wonderful collaboration of our diocese with that one to the east with even more Red Sox fans than we have here. We have joined together in ministry to be stronger together.

I could keep on going with what we see, but we have a lot to do today. And I have two more things I’m curious about.

Our hard working chaplains chose to make this liturgy an All Saints liturgy due to our proximity to that holy day. Which leads me to wonder: if our diocese had a patron saint what would it be?
I looked through the whole Great Cloud of Witnesses (trust me – it took a long time with many possibilities) and I offer for your consideration – Mary Magdalene.

Mary loved Jesus. We love Jesus. And when he died a terrible death, she stayed faithful. Stayed faithful at the cross. She faithfully went to anoint the body on Sunday and was stunned that he was not there. She asked the gardener where he was because she just wanted the old body back. And the gardener turned out to be the Risen Jesus. She embraces him but the Risen Jesus tells her he needs to keep on moving. But tell the disciples he is Risen. And she becomes the apostle to the apostles.

I think Mary Magdalene is our saint for WMA in 2022. We, too, want the old body back. 2019. Or 1955. But the old body is gone and Resurrection to something unknown and a little scary is here. And Mary Magdalene goes with this new reality and gives a message to the apostles that changes the world. Friends, that could be us. That is how we are invited to go from “Radio Nowhere” to “The Rising.”

Marianne Budde, the bishop of Washington DC, says this: “You are a unique expression of God’s creative genius.” I love that insight. “You are a unique expression of God’s creative genius.” Thank you for bringing that gift in service of Jesus’ Mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope.

We began with the song imagery, so let’s end with it. I’m going to end with a much-loved prayer from The Book of Common Prayer. I invite someone in this gathering today who is musically talented to make this a song. Make this our new song.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.
Zacchaeus: When We Find our Sycamore Tree

October 27, 2022

Let's look at some of the history of Halloween, the story of Zacchaeus in the Sycamore Tree, and All Saints/All Souls Day. Then let's see if the Holy Spirit makes a connection. Most historians agree that Halloween began with the pagan Druids in Ireland many, many centuries ago. In their calendar, influenced so much by the harvest, October 31st was the last day of the year. November first was New Year's. The Druids believed that on the last night of the year the spirits of the dead would rise – just for that one night. That was both a good thing and a scary thing. People looked forward to experiencing the presence of their deceased loved ones. But they also didn’t want some spirits to come back. Hence costumes to hide from the unwanted spiritual visitors.

The "night of the dead" was popular in Ireland and it was also practiced in a variety of ways in numerous cultures. It seems to be a universal belief that the dead are alive somewhere and they can still contact us.

In the same era, the Church celebrated All Saints Day but it was celebrated in the spring. In the 800's the Church absorbed the pagan practices (something we have done frequently) by moving All Saints to November first and renaming the "night of the dead" to "The Eve of All Hallows (saints)."
Soul, soul for a soul cake, 
Pray you, good mistress a soul cake.
That created a problem and an opportunity in Ireland. All Saints Day was a feast day requiring just that – prayer followed by a feast. But many in Ireland were poor and had little available for a feast. So on The Eve of All Hallows (Halloween), they went door to door begging for food for the next day’s feast. Later this practice evolved. The Church added “All Souls Day” to follow “All Saints Day.” That meant praying for the souls in Purgatory. As the beggars would go door to door, they would promise, in exchange for food, to pray for the souls of the deceased in that family. This door-to-door journey was known as “souling” and the cakes given for the prayers were called, “soul-cakes.”

In the 1700’s one skeptical woman thought, “I bet a lot of people eat these cakes and forget to pray for the souls in Purgatory.” She came up with a solution. She put a hole in the middle of her cakes so that when the recipient would eat through the cake and get to the hole, he would be reminded to say the prayer he promised. Doughnuts were born.

You may be wondering what this has to do with Sunday’s gospel story of Zacchaeus. Stay with me. You know the story. Zacchaeus, “chief tax collector and rich”, hears Jesus is coming to town. He goes to see if he can get a glimpse of him but the crowd is dense and he is short. He climbs a sycamore tree to see above the crowd. Jesus sees him, goes to the tree and tells Zacchaeus that he wants to have dinner with him. At dinner Zacchaeus appears to have a great conversion and promises to give half his wealth to the poor and if any are defrauded he will repay them back four times as much. But, and here’s the key, some linguists say the text should not be, “I will do this” but, “I already do this.” Zacchaeus is telling Jesus he already gives half his possessions to the poor. He already repays defrauded people four times what they are owed. In other words, he is a good man. But he is still unhappy. There is still something missing. There is an emptiness in the middle of his soul.

And that is true for all of us. The woman who invented doughnuts is onto something. We are built with an inner emptiness and we try to fill it in so many ways. Some of those ways might be self-destructive. Some of those ways might be good – like giving half of what we have to the poor. But nothing will ever fill that hole except a relationship with the Living God. That is why Jesus can say to Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to this house.” Now Zacchaeus is connected to the source of all life.
Theologians have expressed this in many ways through the years. St. Augustine wrote, “my heart is restless until it rests in You.” Dag Hammarskjold, the philosopher and philanthropist wrote in his diary:

“I don’t know who – or what – put the question. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer yes to someone – or something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.”

Dag Hammarskjold

Paul Tillich, in a famous sermon fifty years ago, put it like this:

“Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, ‘You are accepted. Accepted by that which is greater than you. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!’ If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement.”

Paul Tillich

Sounds like Zacchaeus to me.

Now let’s take this doughnut spirituality and move it to All Saints/All Souls Day. On this day we will think of those we love but see no longer. There is an acknowledgement that someone is missing. How do we say, “yes” to that truth and say, “yes” to Eternal Life? Let’s turn to that great theologian, Bruce Springsteen. The Boss wrote a song – Terry’s Song – when a friend and E Street band member died. Here are some of the words:

“They say you can’t take it with you
But I think they’re wrong.
All I know is I woke up this morning and something big was gone
Gone to that dark ether
Where you’re still young n’hard and cold
just like when they built you brother
And broke the mold
Now your death is upon us
And we’ll return your ashes to the earth
And I know you’ll take comfort in knowin’
You’ve been roundly blessed and cursed
But love is a power greater than death.”

Bruce Springsteen

If you don’t believe Springsteen, then believe the words of The Book of Common Prayer:

“If we have life, we are alive in the Lord. If we die, we die in the Lord. So then whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s possession.”

The Book of Common Prayer, Christian Burial, Rite II

We are saved by relationship with the Living God. Forever. The emptiness is addressed when we find our sycamore tree, that place that allows us to see and meet God. For some of us that place might be our local church.

There is a story told of a little five year old whose family was visited by relatives who lived far away. The family took the relatives on a tour of their town. As they drove near the church, the five year old said to his cousins, “That’s where God gives us bread.”

God will give us bread – inviting us into a relationship that gives life. Salvation has come to this house. Amen.
A key moment at the House of Bishops meeting at General Convention began with a question. Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows asked Presiding Bishop Michael Curry this question:

“What should the agenda of Episcopal Bishops be? Michael thought for a moment and then spoke from the heart. Here is part of what he said:

“I’m very concerned about this country that I love, potentially being on the verge of living out the opposite of unselfish, sacrificial love. How can we help this country to bind up our wounds, to learn to live democracy, and to be truly a country where there is liberty and justice for all. That’s at stake... If we can help our people to find their voice and claim the values and ideals that most people probably believe... we can help to heal this land, and help this country join with others and heal God’s creation... I believe this House, the people in this room, you are so smart, so capable, and faithful. There may be the capacity to find our voice – not a partisan voice, but a follower of Jesus voice- that might help our people and our churches, and then, maybe in turn the sensible center that is in this country, and in this world, to find its voice... I can’t sit back and watch this country self-destruct, and neither can we.”

The Most Reverend Michael B. Curry

His statement came from his soul and speaks to the present moment in our country. One example of following up on this call to heal, was the statement we adopted two days later called, "Climate and Our Vocation in Christ."

The statement says “Climate change and environmental degradation are manifestations of our tuning away from God.” Then it lists the many ways that so much is made worse by climate change. And then calls on us to act:

“If we hope to treat all migrants with dignity, we must address climate change so droughts, floods, and extreme weather don’t force people to flee.
If we hope to build peace, we must address climate change so that competition for scarce resources doesn’t drive further violence
If we hope to ensure that every child of God has enough to eat, we must address climate change so that the bountiful earth can continue to support and sustain food systems that nourish people and the soil.”

*House of Bishops: Expressing the Mind of the House on Climate and Our Vocation in Christ*

The statement continues with our belief in the Resurrection of Jesus that gives us a message of hope to tell the world.

“Climate and Our Vocation in Christ” serves as an example of finding our voice and calling for healing in our country and our world. But we have more to say and, more importantly, more to do as Church.

For many reasons, I think The 80th General Convention will be a significant one in The Episcopal Church. Thank you for reading my reflections in these daily blogs. It’s been good to share this experience with you.

God bless you.
Day 4: Resolutions are about God’s dream for us

July 11, 2022

Yesterday, among the many resolutions passed by both the House of Bishops and House of Deputies was one proposed by me. It is B003 – Regulating Ghost Guns and 3D Printed Guns.

B003 Regulating Ghost Guns and 3D Printed Guns

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Here is part of what it said:

“That the parts and kits used to build ghost guns- unserialized and untraceable firearms that can be built by anyone using unfinished frames- should be banned, and until that is possible, should be subject to full regulation as firearms and subject to all federal regulations that apply to firearms, including all oversight related to provisions of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act.”

Tens of thousands of these guns have been sold in the U.S. in the last two years. It is simple and legal. Purchase a ghost gun and receive all the parts to the gun but they are not all put together yet. In some cases it means screwing in one screw and it is a fully functional gun. To buy one, no background check is required and there is no serial number so the gun is untraceable.

The resolution continues with information about about manufacturing guns using 3D printers.

In the last resolve, we ask our Office of Government Relations, members of the Episcopal Public Policy Network and individual Episcopalians be encouraged to advocate for state and federal legislation that would ban these weapons.

There are many other resolutions advocating for desperately needed changes in the way we live. Now some people say these resolutions are meaningless. They don’t accomplish anything. But our Office of Government Relations, led by Rebecca Blachly, says that is not true. Just the opposite. Here is what Rebecca and OGR says:

“When a resolution passes on a public policy issue, OGR communicates the Church’s stance to Congress and the Administration, as we are requested to do. But it doesn’t end there! In the months and years ahead, we engage with and build relationships with specific Congressional offices, often prioritizing members who sit on relevant committees. We work with Congressional offices before legislation is introduced; we help to find co-sponsors for legislation, and then we advocate for hearings and ultimately a vote on legislation that is in line with the General Convention resolution. We have private meetings with career and foreign government officials, including in the White House, on the Church’s public policies, shaping the conversation and adding a valuable perspective for policymakers to consider. We send action alerts on
legislation that comes from General Convention resolutions, enabling tens of thousands of messages to be sent to Congress from engaged Episcopalians that amplify the Church’s voice. Resolutions don’t just end when Convention ends – that is when our work in the Office of Government Relations – and your work as members of the Episcopal Public Policy Network – begins! In the coming weeks, we will explore many ways that the work of General Convention resonates in the political and policy advocacy sphere and demonstrate how much of an impact our Church has. We hope to show the impact of the Church’s advocacy! We will share some ways that the Office of Government Relations ensures that General Convention resolutions are carried out and that Episcopalians have the opportunity to help implement them. We all have an opportunity to amplify the Church’s public witness on important issues of the day.”

Rebecca Blachly, Office of Government Relations

Resolutions like mine are not shouting into the wind. They are about God’s dream for us. Please God may they make a difference. The Jesus Movement Rolls On.
Here’s the big fear I had going into General Convention this year. Because our time together was dramatically shortened to lessen the risk of Covid infections, I feared we might rush through the 425 resolutions. There would be no time for serious conversation. There would be no time to deal with complexity. There would be no time to distinguish between what is important and what is foundational. There would be no time to hear all the diversity of voices in the room. Prayer time would be greatly reduced. There would be little time to listen for the Spirit, no room for the Spirit to breathe.

This fear has not come true. On Saturday the House of Bishops had some of the most profound and productive dialogue in my experience. This is just my limited perspective but I believe people felt heard. There were disagreements that we worked through. Some bishops admitted changing their minds because of the testimony of others! The newly ordained bishops of the last three years (many of whom are female, many of whom are people of color) participated with holy energy that is so very welcome and needed in this community. Several times when there was no consensus, the decision was to wait and come back to the issue instead of having a vote where a resolution would be accepted or rejected by a tiny majority. That was not “kicking the can down the road” but leaving the question open for a while to give subcommittees time to work out a compromise and time for all of us to pray and let the Spirit breathe in us. Last night around 9:30, after deep dialogue about what we are called to do in a highly fractured country, several bishops asked our Presiding Bishop what he thought. As always, he offered holy wisdom and then paused and said, “let me sleep on it.”
We still got a lot done. There are many places where you can find full reports, but here are some highlights:

- With the House of Deputies we made a serious commitment to Racial Equity within our Church and within our society. A plan is in place and substantial financial resources are allocated for it.

- The House of Bishops developed a process that should allow for continuing expansion and inclusivity of our prayers and giving us a structure as to what goes into The Book of Common Prayer (acknowledging that The Book of Common Prayer includes, but is more than, the physical book itself).

There is a growing concern in our country and in Canada about abuse in "Indian Boarding Schools" run by the Church. The Anglican Church in Canada has, and is, facing this traumatic reality. As is the Roman Catholic Church.

- Today, The Episcopal Church took a major step in committing ourselves to uncovering the truth of what went on in those schools, the continuing trauma in families and doing everything we can to work towards healing.
Total Resolutions: 425 | complete: 176 | Incomplete: 249

Here is where the work stands at the beginning of Day 3 of #GC80

Those are just a few decisions made today. I could keep going but I need to exercise and pray before another full day. I'm blessed to be in this Church.

+ Douglas Ember
As expected, the first day of business for General Convention was very full with prayer and voting on resolutions. So much voting. And serious dialog about key issues in our Church. As we will do everyday, our WMA delegation met at lunch time to discuss what was going on in the House of Bishops and in the House of Deputies. We shared insights, wisdom, prayer and humor.

What touched my soul the most on this day were two prayerful witnesses against the plague of gun violence. (Bishops United Against Gun Violence used to call it “the public health crisis of gun violence.” Now in our country, with 400 million guns and averaging more than 110 deaths by gun everyday, “public health crisis” is an inadequate description.)

In the early afternoon, the bishop and deputies of Alabama solemnly gathered at the podium. On June 16th, three members of their St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Vestavia Hills had been shot and killed by a man with a gun who came to their monthly potluck supper for Baby Boomers. Several people at the supper extended hospitality and kindness to a stranger who sat alone. And then he opened fire and was stopped by a hero who threw him to the ground until police arrived.
A resolution was proposed and accepted which read in part:

“The Episcopal Church recognizes and honors the faith and sacrifice of Walter Rainey, Sharon Yeager and Jane Pounds, whose witness demonstrated the call of God’s reconciling purposes by welcoming and eating with a stranger at a church potluck supper…we pause in lament for those who died and for the 18 in attendance who survived and mourn…That we would renew our hope in God’s call to us to embrace the stranger, show kindness to the disheartened, and forgive those who have trespassed against us.”

Resolution A226
Honoring St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church and the Victims of June 16, 2022

The second event of the day concerning the plague of gun violence in our country came at the end of the afternoon legislative session. Yesterday (July 7), just two blocks from the Convention Center, in the very busy and usually peaceful Baltimore Inner Harbor, a man came out of his car with a baseball bat. He was angry at the squeegee workers who come up to the cars. As he approached them, one of the squeegee workers pulled out a gun and fatally shot him.

Bishops United Against Gun Violence led a procession of many bishops and deputies to pray at the sight. Bishop Eugene Sutton of Maryland mourned the person who lost his life and a society in which the poor need to turn to cleaning car windows on the street to survive. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry (who served in Baltimore as a parish priest) gave a powerful call to live as Jesus lived – a man of peace and compassion. And we prayed:
"We gather together to call to mind those who have lost their lives, their lives and their loved ones through the scourge of gun violence. We gather from different backgrounds, understandings and cultures to stand together, to dream together, to pray together, to act together. We are angry. Angry at the seeming powerlessness of our leaders and communities to prevent violence. We are tired. Tired of inaction, easy answers and superficial acts of compassion. We are sad. Sad for those who suffer in needless pain the loss of all they cherish. However, we are hopeful. Hopeful that by our prayers, our presence and our persistence, that change will one day come. We gather in vigil and prayer with so many across the nation and across the world to stand as bearers of the light of hope and the flame of peace."

BUAGV Baltimore public witness July 8, 2022

Addressing gun violence has been a big part of my ministry and yours in WMA. Two weeks after I was ordained bishop, the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut happened. Mass killings everywhere in our country have increased dramatically since then, as have daily murders by gun in our cities, as well as suicides by gun. It is truly a plague.
And we follow and believe in the Prince of Peace. We follow and believe in the one who died a violent death and returned not with vengeance but offering peace and forgiveness. And as we say at evening prayer from the Book of Common Prayer:

“Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do INFINITELY more than we can ask or imagine.”

_The Book of Common Prayer, p. 101_

Reducing gun violence in a country addicted to guns, with politicians addicted to getting votes, sometimes seems impossible. But we gather and witness like we did twice today. We pray as we did today. And when we leave this place, we will advocate over and over and over again. And we believe in God “working in US, who can do INFINITELY more than we can ask or imagine.”
The 80th General Convention of the Episcopal Church begins this morning in Baltimore, MD. Each morning, Bishop Fisher will blog about the important deliberations of both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops. He will also be reflecting on the experience, the worship and the often palpable presence of Holy Spirit. He bids your prayers for our Deputation and for the holy work ahead.

Greetings from Baltimore where 412 resolutions will be considered in 4 days!

Because of the continued presence of Covid among us, the Triennial General Convention of the Episcopal Church has been shortened from 8 days to 4. That work begins today. The work is so important and I’ll address some of those 412 resolutions in these daily blogs. But just as important as the work are the relationships in this community as we gather.

Camden Yards (still one of the best parks in Major League Baseball) is right next to my hotel. Last night numerous bishops and deputies went to the game. I sat with my brother Massachusetts bishop Alan Gates. Since neither the Yankees nor Red Sox were playing, Alan
and I decided to be on the same baseball side for a night and root for the Orioles together. That
did not prevent me from pointing to the out-of-town scoreboard that showed the Yankees
beating the Red Sox at Fenway. Always gracious, Alan did not pour his beer over my head.

Yesterday was filled with meeting so many old friends in the hallways of the hotel and the
Convention Center. People who go back to my New York days. Bishops and Deputies that I
have served with these ten years – on committees and in liturgy and on marches for social
justice. We have prayed together and shared family stories. So many want to know how our
grandchildren are doing. And I look forward to seeing Larry Provenzano today, our good friend
who will be presiding at our daughter Grace’s wedding in a few weeks. And Jeff Fisher from
Texas who was elected bishop the same day I was in June 2012. “Four Elections, Two Fishers, “
ran the headline in The Living Church. We have had many laughs over the times our meeting
credentials get mixed up.

I look forward to working with our deputation from WMA led by the always faithful Tanya
Wallace. We will gather everyday to discuss the issues and share stories.

And I miss those who have entered into Eternal Life. Including the Rev. Dr. Diane Vie. Like me,
Diane is a priest married to a priest. Diane and I were co-chairs of a committee that helped to
educate the Church on the opportunities and challenges of having over 500 clergy couples.
Diane died far too young a week ago. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

To limit our numbers during Covid, the spouses of bishops are not included. I certainly miss
Betsy and we both miss all the spouse friends we have made in this decade of supporting one
another. But those relationships run deep and transcend this moment.

And I will miss music. Another Covid restriction is the elimination of singing. The music at
General Convention has always been awesome and inspiring. My favorite non-Springsteen
song is one we always sing in the House of Bishops. It is “The Canticle of the Turning.” It is one
we really need for our country and our world right now. So I will keep the lyrics in my soul this
week. Here is the powerful first verse:

My soul cries out with a joyful shout
That the God of my heart is great
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things
That you bring to the ones who wait
You fixed your sight on your servant’s plight
And my weakness you did not spurn
So from east to west shall your name be blest
Could the world be about to turn?
My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn
Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

*Text: Rory Cooney
Tune: STAR OF THE COUNTY DOWN*

It's early morning and in two hours we will begin with liturgy and a sermon from our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. As always, he will be inspiring. And he will undoubtedly remind us who we are. “We are the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for us.”

I’m blessed to be in this Movement. So blessed.

And when someone says to me today, “How are your grandchildren?” I will happily say, “There is a third one on the way.” And then I promise you I will resist being that guy who says, “You want to see pictures?”

The Jesus Movement rolls on.
This Lent, remember and go deeper.

March 4, 2022

In 1891 the famous preacher, Bishop Phillips Brooks, preached an Ash Wednesday sermon at All Saints in Worcester. His sermon was entitled, “The History of Sin.” I read the sermon and it is very good. It is what the title indicates and also about God’s forgiveness. But this year I’m choosing to preach on “A Very Partial History of Grace” in Lent 2022. Here’s why.

Lent is about “our mortal nature.” “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” And it is about sin and repentance. Psalm 51 tells us: “I have been wicked from my birth, a sinner from my mother’s womb.”

Doesn’t it feel like we have been living through Lent for the last two years? We have remembered we are dust as 900,000 people died of COVID-19 in our country and we lived in fear of the disease. And we have been very aware that sin is all around us as well as within us. The sin of the unimaginable insurrection at our Capitol. The sin of racism which has been with us for hundreds of years. The sin of failure to address climate change. The sin of the invasion of Ukraine.

Maybe a way to address the lived Lent of this time is with an old/new approach. The Book of Common Prayer tells us that for the first Christians “Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.” Tom Synan, Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Amherst, writes this:

“For these converts, I can’t imagine Lent was a sad time. Lent was an exciting and important time. Why? Because they were on their way to becoming Christians. They completely understood that transformation was theirs to have and by the end of the season they would be a new creation. Through the water of baptism their old selves would die and they would be raised to a new life of grace.”

The Rev. Thomas P. Synan
Perhaps, we could respond to the Lenten life of these two years by committing ourselves to a renewal of our baptism, to recommitting ourselves with the enthusiasm of those early Christians to following Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope that is out to change the world. Even in these challenging and difficult times. As my new favorite author, Greg Boyle S.J. writes: “St. Paul tells us to ‘put on Christ.’ Putting on Christ is the easy part. Never taking Him off is the hard part.”

In this “Very Partial History of Grace,” let’s look at two ways to do that.

The first is to remember. “Remember you are dust and to dust you will return,” states the Prayer Book. Jesus also asks us to remember. When the apostles were confused about things Jesus did, he would tell them, “You will understand if you remember about the loaves.” That is a reference to the Feeding of the 5000. 5000 people in a deserted place. At the end of the day they are hungry and the apostles want to send them away because all they have are five loaves and two fish. Jesus takes what they have, thanks God for it, blesses and breaks it, and gives it away. God multiplies the Grace and all 5000 are fed and there is food left over.

Jesus did that again and again. Remember the wedding feast at Cana. They run out of wine to the embarrassment of the bride and groom. Mary asks Jesus to do something about this. He orders the six stone water jars, each holding 20-30 gallons to be filled with water. Jesus blesses it and the water becomes wine. Six stone water jars holding 20-30 gallons each. Jesus gave them 120-180 gallons of wine. In September our youngest daughter is getting married. It is a big wedding. We have a large family and Grace and her fiancé have many friends. But Betsy and I are not ordering 180 gallons of wine!

Jesus, like his Father, creates more than we need. We don’t have just enough grace to get through the day – even in these troubled days. We have more than enough grace. And, at the end of our lives, we will have more life. Not because we earned it, but because we can’t use up all the life God has prepared for us.

Another “remember” from Jesus. Praying over bread Jesus says, “This is my Body. Given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.” Given FOR YOU. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and author, had an experience of FOR YOU when he was out shopping in downtown Louisville Kentucky on March 18, 1958. He wrote:

“In Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs. It was as if I suddenly saw the beauty of their hearts, the core of their reality as loved by God. And if only everyone could realize this! But it can’t be explained. There is no way to tell people that they are all walking around, shining like the sun.”

Thomas Merton

Or as Phillips Brooks writes, “the more you become radiated with the divinity of Christ, the more you are truly human.” This Lent, starting with ashes on our forehead, may we know we are radiant with Christ.

The second invitation for Lent this year is to go deeper – go deeper into the faith we already have. Here is an example from history, an example from the life of another Episcopalian, George Washington.

In 1777 in New Jersey, American soldiers encountered British troops. It was not a planned battle. The troops just happened to cross paths. A battle broke out and the American troops were forced to retreat quickly. As they did so, they left seven wounded soldiers on the battlefield. They assumed those soldiers would be taken prisoners. But to their horror, as the soldiers looked down from the high place they had fled to, the British soldiers massacred the wounded Americans. And they did so in the most brutal ways – smashing heads, stabbing them repeatedly with bayonets.

Word of the massacre spread quickly. The Americans wanted revenge. But immediately General Washington sent out orders to all American troops that all prisoners of war were to be treated humanely and with dignity. American soldiers were
never to do what British soldiers had done on that terrible day in New Jersey.

Throughout the war the American soldiers obeyed that order from General Washington. There were numerous stories that resulted from the respectful treatment of prisoners. When the war ended, many freed British prisoners decided to stay in America, build homes and start families.

Maybe Washington himself wanted revenge, but he did not act on those feelings. He went deeper. He went into his soul and responded with dignity and honor. Washington gave those orders from a thoughtful, prayerful place of depth.

Let’s make this holy season of Lent a time to go deeper. Deeper into our God-given souls where grace is unlimited. Where we remember we are the beloved of God. And recommit ourselves to our baptism. Recommit ourselves to our new life in Christ. Recommit ourselves to the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for us.

+Doug
The following remarks were given by the Bishop at Winter Clergy Day.

It is always good to be with you. You inspire me. And it is my sincere hope we will be together in person for Holy Week’s Renewal of Vows and our clergy conference in May at the Bishop Harris Center. The Omicron numbers are going down dramatically and I am hopeful.

And I also know how unpredictable this virus can be. Back in July 2021 I wrote a column for our Abundant Times magazine which was published in the fall. Things were looking so good in July. I remember writing about resurrection and joyfully welcoming our people back to the church building. By the time it was published, Delta was on the rise and I sounded so tone deaf.

Two things can be true at the same time. We are suffering from the trauma of the last two years. There have been real losses in lives and in emotional, psychological distress. And we are so much better now than we were at this time last year.

There is a prayer we say at baptisms that seems perfect for this time of “both and”.

“Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.”

BCP p. 308
I think this prayer list holds the secret to our time. I'll begin with the last one. “Give then the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.” Ever since most of our churches went back to in-person hybrid services, visitations have given me great joy. Yes, there are fewer people in church, but there is a depth and vitality to our worship – even while singing with masks on. It is so good to see each other and unite in common prayer. I've come to appreciate the little things like greeting people at the back of church. I was at Sts. James and Andrew in Greenfield this past Sunday. I was grateful that people patiently waited in line to talk with me about faith and Springsteen and baseball. I will never take those conversations for granted ever again.

Where do you find joy now? I invite you to be intentional about finding joy and acknowledging it.

“Sustain them in your Holy Spirit.” In the past year I have read a number of books by the Jesuit priest, Greg Boyle. He has spent 40 years working with gangs in Los Angeles. I highly recommend Tattoos on the Heart, Barking at the Choir and The Whole Language. They are filled with powerful stories and great theology. A line that has become part of my prayer is this: “Christ protects me from nothing and sustains me in everything.”

Christ protects me from nothing. Stuff happens. Jesus himself was not protected from a brutal death. Many of us pray Compline on line. We pray in Psalm 91: “Because you have made the Lord your refuge...There shall no evil happen to you, neither shall any plague come near your dwelling.”

But the plague did come near our dwelling. We were not protected but we are sustained. We are invited to go deeper into our faith and be sustained by the Living God who is always near.

Last week Betsy and I were in Virginia, serving as Faculty for the gathering of New Bishops and Spouses – 9 bishops who were elected in 2021 and their spouses. Betsy was the chaplain and one day she offered this KOAN. “What do I do when nothing I do will do?” Have you ever felt that way in this time? And yet we are sustained by Christ even when “nothing I do will do.”

Our Baptism prayer asks God to give us “the courage to will and persevere.” Very recently I read a NY Times article about acknowledging the trauma of this time. The writer says some deal with that by taking a well-deserved vacation or rest. They take a break. I hope all of you have done that. For some, they came back renewed and refreshed. But for others, after that time away, that time out, they still feel the heaviness of our times. The author prescribes “behavior modification.” When I read it, I was reminded of the wisdom of the 14th Century mystic – Meister Eckhardt. He was asked “what do you do when you are depressed or grieving?” He answered “do the next thing.” Whatever that is, however small, just do it. And then the next thing after that. His wisdom looks like “the courage to will and persevere.”

And finally, we prayed for “an inquiring heart.” In other words, be curious. Many are asking what the Church and the mission of Jesus will look like coming through this pandemic. I’m not sure. I do know that our society, despite the heroism and generous selflessness of so many, has become meaner and crueler. Gun violence is up dramatically. A recent report says that fatalities from car accidents are way up as people are driving more aggressively. Look at the behavior in airplanes and at school board meetings. Could it be that our faith communities can be places of kindness sending kind people out into the world? That is a simple thing we can do.

The prayer also asks to “know and love Jesus.” It used to be that church people longed for the glory days of the 1950’s (which were not glorious for many of God’s people) and now we long to bring back 2019. But Jesus says over and over that he is doing a new thing. He speaks of a New Creation. And “I will make all things new.” The Jesus we know is still acting, still bringing about a New Creation. Even now. A pandemic can’t stop Jesus.

So many of us are worried as fewer people are returning to follow Jesus. Jesus knows all about this. He has been there before. Our Epiphany Season lectionary tells us often about the great crowds following Jesus. Remember a couple of weeks ago? Jesus was preaching on a beach and the crowd was so enormous and pushing in on him that he had to ask Peter to take him in his boat so he could preach from off shore. And yet just a couple of years later, when Jesus went to the cross, there were only a handful of followers left. Jesus knows our fears in this time. And then came a movement born of Resurrection – the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it.
We all remember where we were January 6, 2021. I was working from home with a full schedule of Zoom meetings. When the attack on the Capitol Building began, I postponed all the afternoon meetings and sat with Betsy in front of the TV, shocked by what I was seeing. Little did I know that as bad as it looked, videos later released would show it was far worse despite the heroism of the Capitol Police. We all witnessed an insurrection inspired by a president who refused to accept the results of an election. January 6 is a date that will go down in our nation’s history along with the tragic dates of December 7, 1941 November 22, 1963, April 4, 1968 and September 11, 2001.

January 6 is a day of domestic terrorism and on the church calendar it is the celebration of The Epiphany. January 6, 2021 was a day of destruction, death and an assault on democracy itself. January 6th in the church is a day of humility (the magi kneeling before the Christ child), joy, hope, and an expression of the Oneness of our God with all humanity and all creation.

The Gospel passage for Epiphany ends with the Magi giving their gifts and then, warned in a dream not to return to King Herod who wanted to know where the child was born, they “left for their own country by another road.” What is the “other road” we are invited to on January 6th? Some of it is expressed in the prayer the Church gives us for the Epiphany.
“O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen”

The Book of Common Prayer, 214.

Perhaps another dimension of that “other road” is revealed to us in the passages that follows the Epiphany story. Joseph is warned in a dream that King Herod “is about to search for the child to destroy him.” Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus flee to Egypt. “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger.” The violence we witnessed one year ago was no dream, but truly a living nightmare. How might what we witnessed move us to protect our children now? And what would that look like on January 6, 2022? It would look like a strong democracy where every vote counts. It would look like an unparalleled movement to stop the ravages of climate change by caring for God’s creation. It would look like an honest confrontation of the Unholy Trinity of poverty, gun violence and racism and a “room at the inn” for immigrants and refugees. Could it be that a nightmare could awaken us to God’s dream for our world?

January 6, 2021 will be remembered as a day of domestic terrorism. January 6th – The Epiphany – will always be an invitation to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).”

+Doug