Thanks for taking time out in a busy life to reflect with me on one of the many dimensions of Christmas.

This Advent much of my prayer has centered on the very different spiritual approaches of John the Baptist and Mary, the Mother of Jesus, knowing that we need both approaches.

John is the austere prophet who calls us all to, “Repent.” That is the way to get ready for the Messiah and the coming reign of God. Be honest about the darkness within ourselves and within our society so we can take in the Light of the World when he comes.

Mary, after her initial fear at encountering the angel Gabriel, is exuberant. In the midst of her pregnancy when she greets Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, she proclaims “My soul magnifies the Lord, and rejoices in God my Savior.”

I’m reminded of a story told by another preacher about the rehearsal for the Christmas Pageant. The seven year old girl playing Mary is told, “Here, in the back of the church, you will be told by the angel you will bear God’s Son. Then, you go down the aisle to the front of the church to greet Elizabeth and you say, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” The little actress looks intently at the director and says, “Ok. I can do that. Just one question. How do you want me to go down the aisle? Should I walk or should I fly?”

In the Scriptures, after Mary magnifies the Lord, she recognizes that God is transforming her AND the whole world.

How was Mary being transformed? Perhaps the answer lies in that word “magnifies.” God acted in her life and Mary “magnified” it. She thought about it. She prayed about it. Later, the night Jesus was born, shepherds came to her with news from angels. We are told “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” The same thing happens when the young Jesus teaches in the temple. “His mother treasured all these things in her heart.”
We all know about magnifying. We know about dwelling on something that happens. Many years ago, our children had a book called THE HURT. It was about a little boy who was hurt by the words of another in school. Those words did hurt. But he kept thinking about them. Soon the “hurt” became a physical thing – a “blob” which filled his room, took up all his space. Eventually he talks about the hurt with his parents and it begins to shrink.

We all know how to magnify things. Perhaps we could join Mary in magnifying the many ways we are abundantly blessed. We could dwell on those realities until they fill our lives and transform us.

The spiritualities of John and Mary are very different. But we need both. And I believe they both come together in this powerful prayer by the Jesuit Daniel Berrigan. It is sometimes called the “Advent/Christmas/Epiphany Credo.”

It is NOT true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss. THIS is true – for God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

It is NOT true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction of the earth. THIS is true – I have come that they may have life and that abundantly.

It is NOT true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever. THIS is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of Peace.

So let us enter Christmas in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage – Jesus Christ, the Life of the World.

Merry Christmas.

+Doug
Thank you for all your dedication to Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope. Thank you for the time, effort and love you put into 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 it. Thank you. Your work and prayer means so much.

In June I was at the Tri-annual gathering of deacons throughout our country which was being held in Providence. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry was there and, as always, he rocked the house with his keynote address. At one point he was talking about St. Paul and how everywhere St. Paul went with the message of Jesus, there was a revolution. The crowd was riveted as Michael brought that revolution of love and resurrection to the present day.
He started shouting out, as only Michael can, to the bishops in the gathering. He would shout out the name of a bishop and say “can you imagine what a revolution would look like in …and then names the bishop’s diocese.” He did this for several bishops –“Bishop- name- can you imagine what a revolution would look like in – name the diocese.” The he gets to me. “Doug, can you imagine what a revolution would look like …wait, there is already a revolution going on in Western Massachusetts.”

When I die, please put that on my tombstone.

Michael never did go on to describe what is revolutionary about Western Mass. That leaves it open to me to speculate what he meant in this convention address.

Could it be the day to day commitment you all make to following Jesus? Could it be the hospital visits, the hours of sermon prep, the choir rehearsals, the bible studies, the pastoral counseling, the millions of prayers you say privately and publically, the loving care of church property, the reaching out to the lonely or hurting neighbor, the generous financial commitments you all make to the mission of the church? Faithfulness in this era is revolutionary. You inspire me.

Here is some other revolutionary activity in Western Mass. This is not an inclusive list. You will see other examples in the videos throughout the day.

In Western Mass, we dare to go where the people are and where the need is. We have chaplains to the Appalachian Trail – because if people are coming from around the world to walk from Georgia to Maine (or some part of it) you know they are searching for something.

We go to the challenged Main South neighborhood in Worcester through our Walking Together ministry – addressing the opioid crisis and addictions through Twelve Step programs, providing counseling and getting people the help they need, which includes a lot of prayer. And, sometimes, it includes saving lives with Narcan.

Our chaplains for the Women’s Correctional facility in Chicopee and to the Worcester House of Corrections fulfill Jesus’ revolutionary statement; when we visit the imprisoned we visit him. And we do that in another way with Reconciliation House in Webster – a facility for men coming out of jail with addiction issues.

Some revolutionary ideas are simple – like gathering veterans for lunch. A number of our churches do that once a week. Together we serve 500 vets every week. Some of those vets are doing fine and they come for the companionship. Others are literally living under bridges. And some suffer from PTSD and Moral Injury. I’m studying both those afflications and I
invite other church leaders to do so as well that we might listen with understanding and compassion. It is where our church is called to be.

There are many other revolutionary ministries that change lives like Lawrence House, outdoor liturgical communities, Laundry Love and others you will hear about in this convention.

But perhaps Michael Curry was referring to the revolution of his Revival with us last year. It was a phenomenal day with our celebrations in Pittsfield and Worcester – marked by inspirational music, witnesses to our faith and of course Michael reminding us that "if it is not about love, it is not about God."

That revolution was not a one day event. We followed up on that day in many ways with Revival Year 2. And one of the lasting effects of Year 2 is a new spirit of collaboration in our diocese. For Easter Vigil this year, all the churches in the Berkshires got together in Lenox for one glorious service. The Church was packed and we had baptisms and confirmations and receptions. And then in Pittsfield on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, over 100 people from many different parishes gathered to put together 20,000 meals (yes, 20,000) for the hungry.

I invite you to consider continuing the revolution of Episcopal churches working together. This is not about mergers or closing churches. It is because we are stronger together. And it is a lot more fun. Christ Church Rochdale, Grace Church Oxford and St. Thomas Auburn are doing this right now. In the last few years the churches in Chicopee, North Grafton and Sutton, Wilbraham, West Springfield, Greenfield and Turners Falls have come together with their neighbors and it all looks like Resurrection.

A great example of this is the Small Church Summit which has had two very successful meetings of devoted followers of Jesus who have come together to share the challenges and opportunities of being small churches.

As a sign of my commitment to collaboration, how about this idea? For any neighboring parishes that want to do this, I volunteer to walk from one parish to another, ending with Evening Prayer, a meal and a discussion as to how those two parishes can work together. After all, you are in walking distance of each other!

Another collaboration that came out of revival is our Pilgrimage Project. Members of our Diocesan Council called every church in WMA and asked them about a ministry they are particularly good at. They range from food pantries to farmer’s markets to Celtic liturgies and many others. If your parish is considering a new ministry and want to know how to do it, you are invited to a Pilgrimage to one of the parishes that is already doing it. It is part of an ancient tradition – go to a holy place and grow in mission and spiritual depth. Those holy places are right here in revolutionary WMA. You will hear more about this in the next issue of our diocesan magazine.

I’m excited to announce here that Bishop Mark Beckwith is our new Missioner for Spirituality and Leadership. Mark brings great gifts to our diocese. He is spending time in our congregations, preaching and teaching.
This is all part of a big commitment we all have to parish renewal. In past Convention Addresses, I have invited us to “double down” on social justice, and to “double down on prayer.” Let’s add to that “double down on parish renewal. We have a whole range of ways to make this happen. Already 10 of our parishes have done Renewal Works, 5 are enrolled in the College for Congregational Development. One is doing Natural Church Development. 7 parishes are working with Peter Swarr and Sue Schneider in “Explorations into Christian Leadership.” And we have 11 coaches to work with parishes leaders to fulfill our hopes and dreams for the holy mission Jesus has given us. If you want to know more about any of these programs see Pam Mott. Yes, let’s double down on parish renewal.

Let’s collaborate with Episcopal Churches and with the Lutherans, Congregationalists, Methodists and anyone else that wants to share prayer and mission. Recently I was at a meeting with other “heads of churches” brought together by the Mass Council of Churches.

We told stories of parishes working together across denominational lines. One example is that this year we are merging our popular Leadership Day with the UCC’s “Super Saturday” where there will be dozens of workshops that can be helpful to any UCC and Episcopal church and there will be a few particular to our Episcopal Church. When so much in our world is coming apart, we are coming together.

Michael Curry has given us a clear definition of the Church. I mentioned it earlier. “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.” Could our humble efforts at that be what he means by revolutionary?”

Religious scholar Thomas Cahill has written several books about key moments in the history of Western Civilization and how different communities contributed. He wrote The Hinges of History series, and The Gifts of the Jews. Twenty-five
years ago he wrote, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland’s Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*. He tells the stories of how monks formed communities of peace and prayer, with farms to feed the poor displaced by the many wars. Monks spent their lives copying the bible by hand to preserve God’s word for future generations. Without the efforts of the Church, what was known as the “Dark Ages” might never have ended.

The Church responded to the needs of the time. We have not always. When the General Convention of the Episcopal Church met in 1860, they said nothing about slavery or the impending Civil War.

We now have another “hinge of history” moment. We face a climate change crisis. And as the monks saved Western Civilization, it is our challenge to save the earth. Listen to the words of our Michael Curry and Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and Archbishop Jackelén, head of the Church of Sweden:

“…the link of unprecedented climate change to human action rests now on insurmountable scientific evidence. In human societies, these climate changes compound social injustices, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable among us. Yet the burdens are not borne by humans alone: acceleration in the disappearance of species of plants and animals underlies the intertwined struggles of all life on Earth, and the destructive exploitation of resources leaves a diminished planet for all time to come.”

_A Call to Join in the Care of Creation From The Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Church of Sweden (Lutheran)_

These religious leaders go on to say, “We claim the deep resources of our Christian faith to meet this challenge. We worship a God who created all that exists, who rejoices in its flourishing and blesses its diversity.”

They issued a call to action which involves: advocacy, education, prayer and collaboration. That sounds like the work that our [Margaret Bullitt-Jonas](#) has been doing for so long.

Now I invite us to make a commitment to joining her in this earth saving work. One way to do that is for all our clergy and lay preachers to make a commitment to preach about creation care. And to do so in the spirit of Michael Curry who says, “We acknowledge the dire urgency of this moment not through the lenses of despair, but through lenses of hope and determination.” We will be providing resources on how to do this.

We have a public health crisis of gun violence in our country. Over 100 people a day die from gun violence in our beloved USA. Our diocese is acknowledged by the network called [Bishops United Against Gun Violence](#) as a leader in this cause.
One of The Episcopal Church’s top priorities is racial reconciliation. Our Beloved Community Committee is working hard at education about white privilege. Several of our churches had services marking the 400th anniversary of the arrival of African slaves in our country. They came from Ghana where we have a companion relationship. Friends, we have a long way to go in this work before we can be anywhere near revolutionary, but we are committed.

And we have a long way to go in being revolutionary in standing with immigrants and refugees — check all the references in the Bible about “welcoming the stranger” for why we do this. A shout out to Grace, Amherst for their embrace of a refugee family and for their support of the Congregational Church as they provide sanctuary for Lucio Perez, a father of four who has worked and paid taxes here for over 20 years. I went to the ICE offices with several UCC ministers and a rabbi to advocate for him. Thank you to our many churches that have signs saying “immigrants are welcome here.”

The mission before us is daunting which is why we need prayer and one another. Rachel Held Evans, a wonderful young Episcopal writer who died all too soon this past year, writes “The only way to work for justice in a sustainable way is to be rooted in the nourishing soul of contemplation and community.”

When we do that, really do that, we recognize God’s presence among us. And here I want to thank our brothers and sisters who tell me I am too political. They tell me we should be about saving souls. In my heart I believe this work IS about saving souls. But I do thank you for faithfully calling us to a life of prayer. If we lose our center in Christ, our work for creation, addressing gun violence, welcoming immigrants and refugees, promoting racial reconciliation becomes about power instead of following Jesus who has merged loving God and loving neighbor.

A few weeks ago a video about a boy anxious about school and what his parents did about it went viral. They dressed him up as a different super hero every day.
I think St. Paul would like that video because he had a similar idea. He told the early Christians to “put on Christ.”

Galatians 3:27 “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Ephesians 6:10 “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God.”

Romans 13:14 “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”

And 75 times we are told we are “in Christ.”

Prayer, deep, sincere prayer leads to a resurrected life. We know this from theologian Bruce Springsteen. You knew I was going to get Springsteen into this address somewhere. In “My City in Ruins” he sings:

Now with these hands, with these hands, with these hands, I pray Lord.

I pray for the strength Lord.

I pray for the faith Lord.

I pray for your love Lord.

I pray for the strength Lord.

I pray for your Love Lord.

And then he sings “Come on, Rise Up.” Eleven times. “Come on, Rise up.”

You see, praying leads to resurrection – for our souls, for our society, for God’s creation.

My spiritual director often says to me “Doug, you are capable of more than you think you are.” And I say to all of us in the revolutionary diocese of Western Massachusetts – “We are capable of more than we think we are.” And if you don’t believe my spiritual director, believe Saint Paul, who in his second letter to Timothy wrote, “We have not been given a spirit of fear, but a spirit of love and power.”

We say that every time we pray Evening Prayer. It’s 9 am but let’s pray these words.
“Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from
generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.”

AMEN.

+ Douglas Euler
As summer fades into fall, we are always taken aback by the sudden changes in color, the cool mornings and warm afternoons. Western Massachusetts is some of God’s most beautiful earth – from the Blackstone to the Housatonic. We are observing Creation Season with ecumenical partners all over the world. It is a time for gratitude and for conversion.

We are slowly waking up from our denial about climate change. Young voices are calling to us to do now what will profit the world we will leave to them. Like many I have been moved by Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish climate activist who captivated the UN, sailed across the Atlantic to avoid the carbon exuded by airliners, and who speaks for an entire generation. This young voice and many others are calling the adults in this world to act – to give climate justice pride of place in the long global to-do list. And a little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6b). Thunberg in no child, but neither is she, by our standards, a person with power. Yet, she is using her voice in a way that is moving hearts and changing minds. It's time for the adults “in charge” of things to get with the program. We have limited time now to reduce our carbon footprint. It's time to move from “business as usual” to a new mode of awareness and activism.
For months now young people have done monthly school walk-outs to witness to the urgency of climate change. On September 21st our young people are leading a global climate strike. They are asking adults to leave their places of business and their homes and to join them. There will be events for seven days all around the world to highlight the plight of the earth and share problem-solving platforms and strategies.

On Friday, September 20, Springfield folk can participate in the Climate Strike Solidarity Vigil 12:30 PM, Court Square. Later that day in Northampton, join the Climate Emergency March for a Just Future will start with a march at 4:30 p.m. from Sheldon Field, Northampton, followed by a rally at 5:00 p.m. at City Hall. Our Missioner for Creation Care, the Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, will speak at both of these actions. Visit globalclimatestrike.net and you’ll see that there are strikes scheduled in Greenfield, Williamstown, Pittsfield, Worcester and more!

The climate strike rally in Boston will be among the largest in the nation. The schedule below shows you what’s happening throughout the day.
I will be at the fall meeting of the House of Bishops that day. Bishop Marc Andrus and I are organizing a public witness in which the whole HOB leaves our meeting at 1 pm on Friday. We will walk across the bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry will speak.

Not everyone can leave work. If you can’t join the strike locally or in Boston, why not make September 20th a day for personal climate action?

- Have you joined sustainislandhome.org? This platform helps each household to track and reduce its carbon footprint.
- Are you getting Creation Care Network news?
- Have a look at the Creation Care resources offered by the Episcopal Church?

September 20th will go down in the history of this movement as the day adults walked away from the important in deference to the urgent. It’s time for us all to have their backs – the youth who lead this movement and will live with the consequences of our inaction. Be part of the Global Climate Strike and be a witness for the earth, our fragile island home.

Doug
The Body of Christ is bleeding.

September 7, 2019

Homily at the September Requiem for Those Who Died By Gun Violence

When you gathered in June, (I believe it was the first of these monthly Requiems for victims of gun violence), you spoke the name of Meaghan Burns in this sacred place. She is one of Western Massachusetts’ own. I confirmed her five years ago at St. James in Greenfield. She went on to serve her country in the Navy. She was stationed in Virginia. On the night of her death she went out to dinner with another sailor who had recently broken up with her boyfriend. As they left the restaurant, the ex-boyfriend shot them both dead and then turned the weapon on himself.

Friends, the Body of Christ is bleeding. The public health crisis of gun violence is exactly that – a crisis. A clear and present crisis. It is not far away. It is here. And it demands a response on so many fronts. Including that of faith communities. Bruce Springsteen has a song about gun violence called “Forty One Shots.” One of the lyrics is,

“We are baptized in these waters and in each other’s blood.”

The Body of Christ is bleeding. In a few minutes we will say the names of 1000 of the more than 3000 people who died last month in gun violence in our United States. As we do it, we are doing what faithful women did 2000 years ago at the cross of Jesus. They were going there in sorrow, to bear a witness of love to the one who was dying.

In one of those gospel accounts about the women at the Cross, there is a man with them -the one called the beloved disciple. With his dying breath, Jesus says to Mary, his mother, “Behold your son.” To the beloved disciple he says, “Behold your mother.”

When Jesus does that, he unites all of humanity in the blood of the Cross. We are truly brother and sister to each other. When we say these names, we are naming our brothers and sisters. We are baptized in these waters and in each other’s blood.

And what happened after they went to the cross and after they went to the tomb? What happened after they spoke the name of the dead? The dead one appeared to them and they launched the greatest mission of mercy, compassion and hope that the world had ever seen. Their baptism in the water and the blood inspired multitudes to say that the world cannot stay the same. They refused to say, “it is what it is.” The world holds the possibilities of transformation, of new life, and of a new way of being. Or as the royal wedding preacher Michael Curry constantly reminds us, “if it is not about Love, it is not about God.”
I have a wonderful spiritual director. Sometimes I go to her feeling discouraged. And she says to me “you are capable of more than you think you are.”

Now we say the names of the victims of the public health crisis of gun violence aloud. We go to the place of the dead. We acknowledge them as our brothers and sisters. We state clearly that the Body of Christ is bleeding. And that we are baptized in these waters and in each other’s blood. And perhaps we will hear the dead whispering back to us. “You are capable of more than you think you are.”

Amen.

+Doug

*For those interested in doing a similar service, [click here](#) to request an updated list of names each month.*
Meaghan Burns and her family are members of Saints James and Andrew in Greenfield, MA. I confirmed her in 2014. Meaghan joined the Navy and was out with a Navy friend who had recently broken up with a boyfriend. When they left the restaurant, the boyfriend shot and killed Meaghan and her friend and then himself. Meaghan was 23 years old.

The Burns family and the parish of Sts James and Andrew have long been active in the movement to address the public health crisis of gun violence. In honor of Meaghan they organized a Gun Violence Prevention Vigil and invited me to speak. Hundreds of people came to the vigil. The family has given us permission to publish my brief remarks at the event for the sake of raising consciousness of this crisis.

My name is Doug Fisher and I serve as the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts. I was blessed to confirm Meaghan five years ago. I’m here to grieve with you and pray to our God who loves us in life and in death and in New Life. I’m here to tell you that all of our 51 churches in western and central Massachusetts are praying for Carolyn and Matthew and Kylie and James.

The Burns’ family and this Church have long been engaged in calling for action to prevent gun violence that is so rampant in our beloved country. They organized this vigil and asked me to address the public health crisis of gun violence.

It is not my first inclination at a time such as this. This is a time for celebrating the brief but joyful, kind, always energetic life of Meaghan. And in a few minutes family friend and UCC minister Will is going to do that.

My second inclination is to stand in silent support with you, Meaghan’s family and friends. Silence because words are inadequate to express our grief. Silence because words are inadequate to express the support we want to offer.

But Meaghan’s parents have told me we have had too much silence in the face of the massive problem of gun violence in the United States. Let’s honor their wishes and break the silence.
97 people a day die from gun violence in our country. Over 35,000 a year. And many more are injured. This often is described as a political issue. But it is not. It is a public health crisis. If 97 people a day were dying of a disease, wouldn’t we all – Republican and Democrat and Independent address it? Wouldn’t we put all manner of resources to discover the sources and the cure? Yes, this problem is complicated. But should we fail to address it because it is complicated? Should we allow complexity to paralyze us?

Last week Carolyn met with Reverend Heather to talk and pray. She recalled vigils here in this church about gun violence and how candles were lit and names of the deceased were read. She said “My Meaghan is now one of these candles.”

But Meaghan is not a number. She is our beloved daughter, sister, friend. You will all develop ways of honoring Meaghan and her Spirit in a life cut short. The Burns family invites you to honor Meaghan by thoughts and prayers and more – by taking action.

Just a few days ago in Boston, Episcopalian organized the annual March for Peace on Mother’s Day. Hundreds of mothers and others marched to witness to the losses we have suffered through gun violence. Placards were held high with names of those who have died in this crisis. Some of those placards had the name ‘Meaghan Burns” on them.

In the past year, thousands of young people have turned out for the March for Our Lives. Some younger than our Meaghan. They are survivors of school shootings and young people who have witnessed daily gun violence in urban neighborhoods. All saying we want a different future. A future where we don’t have to leave in fear. Would you, to honor Meaghan, join them?

And will you call our legislators to demand universal background checks, and closing loopholes in gun sales, and making assault weapons illegal and advocating for “smart gun technology”? Will you be willing to honor Meaghan in that way?

We remember another who died by violence – Jesus. And our God raised him up and showed us that love is stronger than death. Death cannot stop God’s love for us and the life God gives us eternally. And your love for Meaghan is stronger than her death. May Meaghan Rest In Peace and Rise in Glory. Amen.

+Doug  

Resources for the Prevention of Gun Violence

- Bishops United Against Gun Violence
- Massachusetts Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence
- Wear Orange for Gun Safety – June 7
A place of awe and vulnerability

May 2, 2019

Sunrise near the road to Jericho.

I have often said that Luke 3:1 is the most important verse in the entire Bible. “In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was king of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to a man named John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.”

It is the most important line because it is saying our faith is not based upon "once upon a time." It is not a fairy tale. It is not make-believe. It is not "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away."
No. It is clear. In this time and in this place, the word of God came to John. And Mary. And Joseph. And Mary Magdalene and Jesus. The Spirit acts in real people, in real time. Theologically we call it, “incarnation.”

WMA pilgrims gathered on the Temple Mount, at the Dome of the Rock.

Knowing that makes our WMA pilgrimage to the Holy Land a deep spiritual experience. In this time and in this place God acted. Now sometimes there are conflicting stories as to where things happen. It is said “holy sites tend to move.” But there is no doubt that it is the Sea of Galilee where so many powerful stories of Jesus and the disciples happened. No doubt that it is the Jordan River where John baptized. No doubt that it is the Jericho Road featured in the Good Samaritan story. And no doubt somewhere in old Jerusalem is the Temple built by Solomon, destroyed by the Babylonians, rebuilt by Herod and destroyed by the Romans. Lots of sacred sites have very old churches built over them because oral history said “this was the place where…”

I will reflect more on this experience over time. But here are two immediate impressions.

I never knew how much caves and rocks were part of the housing in the times of Jesus. That barn where we say Jesus was born was really a cave. Families lives in homes homes built with hewn rocks and carved out caves.
For the first time I appreciated the mysticism of the desert. Pictures never do it justice. The desert of Israel is not plains of sand. They are mountains of rock and sand and sparse vegetation. To be in them is to be in a place of awe and vulnerability.
And there is a lot to say about the political conflict in Israel and the oppression of the Palestinians. But a few words would not do justice to a complex situation with many conflicting dimensions. And there is much to say about the tension of the three major religions jockeying for position in this holy land. I will tell those stories in future reflections.

In a couple of days I will leave here with deep gratitude for this experience and for the way my traveling companions engaged this trip not as tourists but as pilgrims on a spiritual journey together. And looking forward to the Spirit who continues to speak in our time and in our place.

+Doug
Welcome. Thank you for taking time away from sermon prep, acolyte wrangling, bulletin proof-reading, pastoral care and answering questions about when IS the Easter Service, to come together in mutual support of one another in ministry.

Welcome Lutherans and UCC. Some of our liturgical language may be different, but the mission is the same. Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope. When so much in our world seems to be coming apart, we are coming together. I am grateful for you.

Renewal of vows makes me think of Holy Week 1998. Betsy and I and our very young children were at Holy Innocents in Highland Falls New York and I was the Episcopal West Point chaplain. We had a Holy Week evening service in the church with only the candles on the altar for our light. At that service most of the congregation were West Point cadets and we all stood around the altar for the Eucharistic Prayer. Grace, four years old, stood next to me at the altar, her chin level with the top of the altar. She was captivated by the scene. For her it was magical and mystical. Looking out at everyone, looking at me leading prayer. Afterwards Betsy asked Grace “Did you like being up at the altar with daddy?” To which Grace responded “Oh yes, mommy. I loved it. I felt just like a pwiest!” Betsy said, “Would you like to be a priest someday?” Grace was very clear in her answer. “Oh no, mommy. I want to stack the groceries at the supermarket. That’s a cool job.”
A humbling reminder on the day we renew our vows as ordained leaders in the church.

Bishops get veteran bishops for coaches. A question my coach would ask me in every session was “why did your diocese choose you?” It is a way of getting clarity and setting priorities. I think it was because I said a lot about social justice and about trying new things in ministry. 50 new things even if 49 fail. And there is one more. After the election, one of our church leaders said to me: “You know, bishop, no one in my parish was going to vote for you when the slate was announced. You were the only candidate with a doctorate (in ministry) and we knew we didn’t need some academic lecturing us in something abstract when the needs are so real.” Now that is not my perspective but it was his. And then he added “But when we went to the walk-abouts and you were asked questions, you would leave the stage and come into the middle aisle and answer the questions from there. From where the people were. That night in the parking lot, we all decided we were voting for you.”

Notice it wasn’t because of what I said. No great insights or pearls of wisdom changed their minds. It was being in the midst of the people. Going to where they are.

That’s what I will be praying about today when I renew my vows.

How about you? Priest, minister, deacon. The Holy Spirit, working through so many people around you and through sponsoring parishes and commissions on ministry, called you. Maybe it was a few years ago or maybe it was forty. Why did they choose you? In all your quirky uniqueness. Why did they choose you?

And what made you say yes?

While you are thinking about that, let me provide a structure for your particular answer.

Mariann Budde is the Bishop of Washington D.C. She points out how often the Bible contains a “so that” statement. Here are a few examples:

Matthew 5:16 Let your light shine before others, SO THAT they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, SO THAT you may discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, SO THAT everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.
I was ordained so that… What comes next? I hope you answer that with something spectacular. Something worth giving your life to.

A couple of weeks ago, I put that question to a few of our clergy in an email. Here is what they said:

- I will renew my vows SO THAT I can offer my spiritual gifts to a community of faith that has richly blessed me and that helps me to grow in ways that matter.
- I will renew my vows SO THAT I might share and testify to the love that saved me and made me and holds me.
- I will renew my vows SO THAT the hope and justice of God in Christ would be made known.

We were called by God, loved by Christ SO THAT we may understand the power of His Resurrection.

I was ordained SO THAT I could help spread the light and hope of Christ.

What is it for you? I was ordained so that…

While you think of your answers I’m going to ramble on about a couple of other things.

Whatever that great, holy, Jesus-centered, Holy Spirit inspired statement is for you, know that to get there we need to cultivate resilience, and persistence, or what some in leadership circles are referring to as “grit.”

Here’s another quote from the wise Mariann Budde. It is a long quote and we all know you should never use a long quote in a sermon. So don’t tell the bishop.

“Here’s why we need resilience. Because we are called to lead others from where they are now, as a body, to where God is calling us, a preferred future or a necessary sacrifice. That process, by definition, invokes resistance. Resistance is not all bad; nor is all change good. As a result, those of us called to lead have no choice but to live and move and have our being in what might be called ‘the messy middle.’ That place where nothing is clear, where what you thought was a God inspired idea goes nowhere, where those who called you to lead are now resisting you with everything they’ve got, and it occurs to you that working as a barista in your neighborhood coffee shop seems like a more fruitful place for ministry than the church.” Or you long to stack the groceries in the supermarket.

When that happens, not if, when that happens, have friends, deep friends, to confide in. And a disciplined prayer life. And maybe some scripture verses that can serve as a mantra. Like Paul’s in the second letter to that conflicted, confused, hungry for the Spirit community in Corinth. “Since it is God’s mercy that we are engaged in ministry, we do not lose heart.” Or in Genesis, Jacob wrestling with that angel “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

Now for a few minutes on today’s gospel. I won’t be long. I know not all the Holy Week bulletins are done.

I chose the Gospel about what Walter Brueggemann calls “the riot in the Temple.” I chose it because I believe it is a pivotal part of the Holy Week story and it gets overlooked. And I think it is a key story for the ministry we share.

I just learned a few days ago that the Cathedral in Connecticut is doing something new and meaningful with this story. On Palm Sunday we begin with the triumphant entry into Jerusalem and then at the time for the Gospel we read the Passion which continues the story beginning with the Last Supper. We go from the hosannas of the crowd to Jesus agonizing over his impending death. We leave out a key part of the story that explains this very severe change of tone. The riot in the temple. Here’s what Connecticut is doing. The usual opening of the service with the entry into Jerusalem. Then at the time of the Gospel the story of the riot in the Temple is read. And then at the very end of the service, the Passion is read and the congregation leaves in silence to continue their Holy Week journey.

This story suffers too from a superficial understanding. How often has this passage been used as “you see Jesus is human like us. He got angry.” The same way the Martha and Mary story gets reduced to “we all need to balance out our busy Martha lives with Mary-like contemplation.” We interpret the verse this way SO THAT we don’t have to acknowledge the social revolution Jesus began in bringing women into the male-only circle of religious thinkers.

This passage has meanings so deep that the four evangelists take three approaches to it. Mark and Luke just tell it and then go right away to the chief priests looking for a way to kill him. John uses it to illustrate the scripture “Zeal for your house will consume me.” And an early reference to the Resurrection. Only Matthew follows the Temple cleansing with healing stories. Throwing over tables creating a space for healing. I will come back to that. But the heart of it was an unjust sacrificial system that made demands on the poor. In words and with very clear action, Jesus drew our attention to a societal problem and acted on it. Jesus didn’t just offer thoughts and prayers. He overthrew tables. He disrupted the system. A system that many believed to be sacred.

On this day in which we renew our vows, I will ask another question: Do you ever feel like throwing over some tables?
Here's some I feel like throwing over.

- The public health crisis of gun violence. 97 people a day die from gun violence in the United States. Many from suicide. Several children every day from accidents. Many in our urban communities as victims of what Michael Curry calls the “Unholy Trinity” of racism, poverty and guns. And some in our growing number of mass shootings – the ones that get our attention. America loves her guns and her guns are killing her loved ones. Many loved the theology and culture and economy of the Temple sacrifices but that did not stop Jesus.

- Then there is crisis of creation around climate change. I could quote our own Margaret Bullitt Jonas on this but in the spirit of ecumenism I will go with Pope Francis: “Human induced climate change is a scientific reality, and its decisive mitigation is a moral and religious imperative for humanity. In this core moral space, the world’s religions play a very vital role.” If we commit to passing the faith down from generation to generation then we have to commit to a sustainable island home for future generations.

- The plight of immigrants in our immigrant nation. Children in cages at the border. Lucio Perez in sanctuary at the UCC Church in Amherst for a year and a half, forced to live apart from his wife and their four children. What would the Jesus we follow- the table over thrower- tell us to do about that?

In the ordination of a bishop in the Episcopal Church, eight questions are asked and answered. One is “will you shake up the conscience of your people?” Another is “will you defend those who have no helper?”

My actions are never closely adequate to the depth and expanse of the question. Thank you for all the times you have inspired me in this work of overturning tables.

And we do this not just as a voice crying out in the wilderness, not out of righteous anger, but as Matthew makes clear, SO THAT healing becomes possible. The royal wedding preacher says “WE are 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.”

On this day, as we renew our ordination vows, let’s return to that wisdom of Paul. Since it is God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. And as my go-to-theologian Walter Brueggemann adds “Do not lose heart. God has not quit, and will not until our joy is reflective of God’s own.”

Amen.

+ Doug
We have our “why”.

February 9, 2019

Preachers should never read long quotes in a sermon. But bloggers can! Here is a quote from Brian McLaren in his book, **THE GREAT MIGRATION: HOW THE WORLD’S LARGEST RELIGION IS SEEKING A BETTER WAY TO BE CHRISTIAN**.

“Now imagine: if you wanted to find an organization well positioned to encourage change on all of these four levels (intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural, and cultural), whom would you call? You would need an organization that is both local and global. It would need to involve people from all sectors of society – agriculture to government, health care to education, for profit to nonprofit, science to the arts. It would need to specialize in personal development, community building, deployment for mission, and public communication. What organizations would fulfill these diverse requirements? As soon as you answer the church, you have to ask why so many of our churches remain ineffective and complacent about this potentially transformative role. The gap between the church’s potential and actual impact can make you cry.”

“But far better: the gap can make you cry out, determined to see the church fulfill its potential. That’s why we need movement-building
initiatives that help individual Christians, congregational leaders and denominational leaders and network leaders come together and work together for intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural and cultural change.”

Brian McLaren

Or as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says “We are the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the Dream that God has for it.”

Or as Jesus says “I make all things new!”

In a time when the Church is seen by so many as having outlived its purpose, I believe our purpose is as essential as it has ever been. We are called to dive deeply into the life of the Spirit, build community and follow Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. This is why we pray together, take care of our neighbors, bless journalists, care for creation, stand with refugees and immigrants, address the public health crisis of gun violence, celebrate diversity, combat racism and on and on.

Our Church has a “why”, a “purpose”, a “mission.” Come Holy Spirit and enliven our hearts.

+Doug