Tweet the reign of Jesus

December 1, 2017

Eternal vigilance is the price we pay for liberty. — Thomas Jefferson

President Donald Trump re-tweeted three videos from the far-right group, Britain First. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, reacted quickly and critically.

"It is deeply disturbing that the President of the United States has chosen to amplify the voice of far-right extremists. Britain First seeks to divide communities and intimidate minorities."

I join the urgent call for President @realDonaldTrump to remove his Britain First retweets and make clear his opposition to racism and hatred.

facebook.com/archbishopofcanca ...

This has been another big week for our President on Twitter. He has attacked other politicians, NBC, CNN, and implied Joe Scarborough was involved in a murder.

Presidents have always used the communication tools of their times to tell us what is important to them.

The speeches of the earliest presidents were published in newspapers. That was true for Abraham Lincoln and he also used the telegraph. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was famous for his weekly “fireside chats” on the radio. (Calvin Coolidge was actually the first President to address the nation on radio.) Harry Truman was the first to use television. Ronald Reagan brought back weekly radio broadcasts. Barack Obama did short videos designed for the Internet.

It is obvious the current president’s preferred mode of communication is Twitter.
At first I dismissed his Twitter rants as nonsense. Pay attention to what he actually does, like gutting the Environmental Protection Agency, I thought. But I realize now that the President wants us to take his tweets seriously. This is his mode of communication to our nation. I have changed my mind. Like the Archbishop of Canterbury, I will see these tweets as an expression of the President’s values, his intentions and his state of mind.

In my preaching, writing and prayer I keep coming back to the first verse in the third chapter of Luke’s Gospel.

“"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

May it be said many years from now, “In the first year of the Trump Presidency, the word of God came to the Church in the wilderness.”

May it be said that we proclaimed the reign of Jesus’ mercy, compassion and hope.

Let’s Tweet that.

+Doug
Gratitude is the posture of the Christian life. Because of Jesus – because of all he did and said and what he was willing to die for – we know the infinite depths of God’s love for us. We know that whatever happens, the risen Lord is walking with us toward a world transformed by love and justice. So, as Thanksgiving approaches, I wonder how this elemental gratitude can inform my experience of our chaotic world, how I can keep watching the news and still say, “Thank you, God.”

It is complex, isn’t it? We have so much for which to be thankful, but we are weighed down by fear.

Talk of nuclear weapons at the ready, regular mass shootings, scandals in leadership, the abuse of power and the sexual violation of women – it’s more than any one of us can carry. I know that I carry these concerns with the Church – with God’s people – and we carry them to God in prayer. I know that when I participate in some good work like a veterans’ lunch or speak at the Islamic Society or celebrate at “Church Without Walls”, I know the Body of Christ is in motion toward the dream God has for us.

Our family Thanksgiving is redolent with tradition – special foods, fine wine, the gathering of dear ones at table. This very American celebration reminds me of Isaiah’s prophecy:

Isaiah 25:6-8

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
   a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
   of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
7 And he will destroy on this mountain
   the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
   the sheet that is spread over all nations;
8 he will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
   and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
   for the Lord has spoken.

We believe this day is coming. We believe that what we do matters. Soon, we will begin a new liturgical year and celebrate the Advent of the Lord. This Thanksgiving, I am grateful for our faith. I am grateful for the Word of God that calls us to
prayer and action. I am grateful for God's faithful people praying and doing no matter what the headlines say, no matter the hashtag of the moment. I am grateful that we all follow Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope.

+Doug
Bishop Fisher: Why We Kneel

September 25, 2017

Pilgrims kneel at the site of the murder of Jonathan Daniels, during the 2015 remembrance of his martyrdom in Alabama. Photo: Montgomery Advisor

For those who are able, while some of us pray standing, sitting or lying down.

We kneel…

To pray in gratitude for God’s abundant blessings – for that which goes beyond what we can ask or imagine.

To pray for forgiveness for things “done” and “left undone” – our failure to love, to forgive, to serve, our hypocrisy, our exploitation of human beings, our greed, our dishonesty, and our spiritual laziness (*BCP, Ash Wednesday*).

To pray for those who “work or watch or weep this night (*BCP, Compline)*.”

To pray in repentance for the sin of racism.

To pray in repentance for our abuse of creation.

To pray for refugees and for the generosity to help them.

To pray for the victims of hurricane and earthquake.

To pray for those who mourn, for all who have died, and entered the glory of God.

To pray for those in need of medical care and for those responsible for legislating healthcare.

To pray for all who serve our country, and work for peace.

To pray for educators and health care workers.

To pray for wisdom for our government leaders.

To pray for Jesus’ Mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope.
To witness to the presence of the Spirit in our midst.
To proclaim the transforming reality of God's kingdom.
That is why we kneel.
Jonathan Daniels: Following Jesus all the way to the cross

August 7, 2017

There will be a pilgrimage commemorating the life and witness of Jonathan Daniels on Saturday, August 12. Click here for more information.

Do you know that a saint was born and raised in nearby Keene, New Hampshire?

His name is Jonathan Daniels. He is recognized as a “martyr” by the Episcopal Church and he is memorialized in A Great Cloud of Witnesses with his own “day” – August 20. That was the day he suffered martyrdom in 1965. Here is a brief summary of a short but remarkable life.

Jonathan was born March 20, 1939 in Keene. His family attended St. James Church. He left Keene to go to college at the Virginia Military Institute where he was valedictorian. After a brief time in graduate school at Harvard, Jonathan felt called to the priesthood and studied at the Episcopal seminary in Cambridge, MA. It was the 1960s and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. invited northern clergy to come to the South and work in the Civil Rights Movement. Jonathan went with several other seminarians for a short three-day visit. In that brief time in Selma, Jonathan was not particularly inspired but he missed the bus taking his group back home. He had to stay another week and in that week he recognized the sin of racism and made a commitment to address it.

In the summer of 1965, Jonathan lived in Alabama where he worked to integrate the Sunday school of an Episcopal Church (his efforts were not well received), tutored children, worked to register voters and protested outside “whites only” businesses. It was during one of those protests that he was arrested along with 20 others. They were taken to a jail in Haynesville. The conditions in the jail were horrific. Overcrowded, no running water.

After six days, Jonathan was in the last group to be set free. They went around the corner to a store that served all people – regardless of color – to get a soda. But Tom Coleman, a volunteer deputy, stopped them at the door, threatening them with a shotgun. He pointed the gun at Ruby Sales, a seventeen year-old black girl. Jonathan sensed he was about to pull the trigger. As he pushed Ruby out of the way, Coleman fired, killing Jonathan.

When Martin Luther King was told what happened, he said,
“One of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels.”

At Coleman’s trial, an all white jury declared him “not guilty.”

Ruby Sales went on to seminary and many years of service among the poor.

In 2015, I went on a pilgrimage to the places Jonathan worked in the Selma area. The last stop was the jail in Haynesville and the exact place where he died. With other pilgrims I knelt there to pray. And as I did I felt the spirit of one who had followed Jesus all the way to the cross.

Photo: Montgomery Advertiser

The work of the Civil Rights Movement is far from done. The attempts to roll back voting rights, the mass incarceration of black men (The New Jim Crow), income inequality are just a few examples of the work that remains. We all know this is a national injustice, not simply a southern problem.

The Episcopal Church is committed to addressing the sin of racism. Our Church has put vast resources behind an initiative called, “Becoming Beloved Community”— a set of commitments around which Episcopalians may organize our many efforts to respond to racial injustice and grow a community of reconcilers, justice-makers, and healers. A group called Bishops United Against Gun Violence speak about the “Unholy Trinity” – poverty, racism and gun violence.

Maybe, if you and I can grow in awareness, and hang on to the idealism of our saintly neighbor, Jonathan Daniels, who remains forever young, a path of action for justice will be revealed to us in the “beloved community” he described in a Bible he gave to friends on Easter Sunday 1965:

“We dream of a beloved community in which white men and black men, old men and young men, whole men and sick men, will join hands in the way of the Cross and find there the life broken, shared and renewed for them all, the unspeakable glory of God.”

+Doug

There will be a pilgrimage commemorating the life and witness of Jonathan Daniels on Saturday, August 12. Click here for more information.
I was abundantly blessed to spend six days on the Connecticut River with my son and a couple of other pilgrims as part of the 40-day River of Life Pilgrimage. Those days were marked by inner peace, deep connection to the Spirit that breathes in God's creation, and a keen awareness of the beauty and dynamic grace of nature. In my last blog I wrote that one hymn was the soundtrack of this trip for me.

“The River is flowing…Holy Spirit guide me, your child I will always be”

That sense of peace and being “the Holy Spirit's child” was there even on the one stressful day. After massive rain storms in New Hampshire which left many without power, the river in Massachusetts and Connecticut rose dramatically and the current was very fast. There were downed trees and large limbs floating in the water. Our guides gave paddlers the option to sit out that day if they were worried about handling these conditions. My son Geoff and I (and most other pilgrims) decided to "go for it." I did not feel stressed. I felt “alert” and trusting. After a few early challenges, everything went smoothly.

Within that sense of peace and trust, another reality surfaced. During one of our breaks, sitting on the bank of this beautiful river, Lisa, one of our chaplains, read this poem:

It's 3:23 in the morning
And I'm awake
because my great great great grandchildren won't let me sleep my great great great grandchildren ask me in dreams what did you do while the Planet was plundered?
what did you do when the Earth was unraveling?
Surely you did something when the seasons started failing?
As mammals, reptiles, birds were dying?
Did you fill the streets with protest when democracy was stolen?
What did you do once you knew?
What did you do…once…you knew?
That poem would have haunted me anytime, anywhere; but read in the context of this sacred journey down the river, it touched my soul deeply.

“What did you do once you knew?” I wrote a lot of letters with Massachusetts bishops and UCC leader Jim Antal.

- *An Opportunity for which the Church was Born*
- MA Episcopal bishops oppose E.P.A nominee

I followed the lead of our Creation Care Missioner, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, and participated in public prayer witnesses in several venues.

- Bishop Fisher speaks at Springfield climate rally
- We Are The Earth: Prayers for the Planet
- Bishop Joins Interfaith prayers for the Planet at B’nai Israel

I tried to reduce my own carbon footprint.

Is that enough to respond with integrity when my great great great grandchildren keep me awake at 3:23 am? No, not even close.

“Guide me Holy Spirit, your child I will always be.” We are not in charge…and everything we do matters.

+Doug
On the river I can breathe Spirit.

July 2, 2017

“The River is flowing,
Flowing and growing.
The River is flowing,
Back to the Sea.”
Holy Spirit carry me.
Your child I will always be.
Holy Spirit carry me
Back to the Sea.”

Those words were sung by an angelic voice as my son Geoff and I were paddling with 16 other pilgrims down the Connecticut River. It was the 30th day of a 40 day journey, but was our first.

The first hour of each day on the river is spent in silence. This hymn breaks that silence. We have all had the experience of a song that stays in our heads and keeps repeating itself. That is true for me with this hymn. It has been the sound track for my blessed time in this journey which is as spiritual as it is physical. (And that might be the same thing.)

Sure, we have been doing a lot of paddling – 19 miles the first day, 17 the next and 10 for a half day on Saturday. But even without paddling, the river would move us – just as the Spirit moves us, carries us. “Your child I will always be.” We are connected to the Living God and will be forever. Being on this river makes that seem so obvious. I don’t have to think my way to Spirit. I can breathe Spirit.

More times than Jesus said, “love one another”, he said, “look”, “wake up”, “see.” It is amazing what you see on a river when you take time to look. I have traveled over this river hundreds of times in the last five years. This is the first time I have been on it and seen eagles, hawks, ducks, and fish that jump out of the water. Here you can experience what theologian Walter Brueggeman calls, the “aliveness of God.”

Here, on the river, the opening words of the Prayer of St. Patrick take on special meaning:

“I arise today
Through the strength of heaven;
Light of the sun,
Radiance of the moon,
Splendor of fire,
Speed of lightning,
Swiftness of the wind,
Depth of the sea,
Stability of the earth,
Firmness of the rock.
I arise today
Through God’s strength to pilot me.”

Another big part of this pilgrimage is being in community. It is a special blessing to have Geoff with me. We have never spent this long a stretch of time together in his adult life.
But it is also a great gift to be with other pilgrims and experience the river with them.

A challenging and fun thing to do was attempt to enter the city of Springfield by creating a formation of our canoes and kayaks that resembled a cross. "Resemble" is the key word.
It was a wonderful exercise in teamwork. There are probably a few sermons in that one, as there is in paddling against an adverse wind. But that is for another blog. We have three more days of paddling and praying. “The River is flowing, Back to the Sea. Holy Spirit carry me, Your child I will always be.”

+Doug

_A brief video recording of the hymn can be heard_ [here](#).
The Fast That I Choose

May 19, 2017

Fasting, as a spiritual practice, has long been with the Church. But depriving ourselves of food is no gift to God unless it yields some good. Spiritually, fasting can “clear the deck,” make space for God in our normally fast-paced, hunger-driven lives. Many of the holy ones in our rich tradition fasted regularly and found the practice nurtured gratitude and contemplation.

But human beings can always find a way to make something “all about me.” Jesus warned us not to advertise our fasts by looking grim and hungry. He challenged us to fast with joy. Even more important is the idea that a fast should be a blessing for the world, for God’s people. The prophet Isaiah, Jesus’ go-to prophet, gave us a profound insight into God’s heart. In a passage, that we usually proclaim at the very beginning of Lent, we get a deeper understanding of the relationship of fasting to the work of justice.

Is not this the fast that I choose:
    to loose the bonds of injustice,
    to undo the thongs of the yoke,
    to let the oppressed go free,
    and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
    and bring the homeless poor into your house;
    when you see the naked, to cover them,
    and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Isaiah 58:6-7

Yesterday, our Presiding Bishop, the Most Reverend Michael B. Curry, invited the Church to begin a regular fast on the 21st day of every month.

“We fast to fortify our advocacy in solidarity with families who are struggling with hunger. We fast to be in solidarity with neighbors who suffer famine, who have been displaced, and who are vulnerable to conflict and climate change. We fast with immigrants who are trying to make a better future for their families and now face the risk of deportation. We fast in solidarity with families on SNAP, who often run out of food by the last week of the month.”

Watch the full video here.

Michael believes that the Church was made for “a time such as this.” A fast of this nature places us in relationship with strangers whose lives are lacking the things we often take for granted. Learn more about the causes of, and fight against, hunger here. But know that the 21st of the month is very significant for persons who live in poverty. That’s when families receiving SNAP benefits begin to struggle with food security. We will be in solidarity with hungry families. And, with God’s help, our fasting will move us to some concrete action. We won’t know what that looks like until we open our hearts in prayer.

Read more about For Such a Time as This: A Call to Prayer, Fasting, and Advocacy.

While this is clearly an individual practice, we will be united with Episcopalians and Lutherans all over the country. The fast will be on the 21st of every month – beginning this Sunday, May 21 – through the end of the 2018 legislative session. I hope you will consider joining the fast. I know that you will be blessed. And that blessing will find its way into the nightmare so many live.

Fast with prayer.
Fast with hope.
Fast with joy.
+Doug
The week after Easter four of us from the WMA Social Justice Commission went to Chicago to an event organized by Bishops United Against Gun Violence. It was a gathering to study the “Unholy Trinity” of racism, poverty and gun violence. My friends will share their reflections and wisdom from those remarkable days here in this blog. I’ll save my thoughts for the last.

Alexizendria Link

I left the conference with a spiritual understanding that garnered the urgency for Church reflection, movement and support for action against injustice in society. A call for Christians to return to moral leadership and service by partnering with oppressed communities rather than serving ourselves within church communities was highlighted.

The Rev. Julian DeShazer, adjunct professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School and McCormick Theological Seminary and University Church senior pastor reminded us poverty, racism and gun violence are moral issues and the church needs to be a moral voice. He says,

“The we have turned our churches into think tanks but not action centers and consider our pastors as theologians rather than community leaders.”

He reminded us the church once represented a moral center in the community and as a result provided a moral compass in our cities and towns. Now it appears as if the church has shifted to primarily condemning. The Church condemns racism, injustice, poverty, gun violence, climate issues and etc. but rarely are we physically doing anything in and with oppressed communities.

I believe we need to intellectually revisit, spiritually reflect and physically return to moral leadership while partnering with communities outside our church walls.

Jane G. Tillman

Attending the conference “The Unholy Trinity: The Intersection of Racism, Poverty, and Gun Violence” in Chicago was an amazing experience of listening, learning, singing, praying, weeping, and marching. The conference included three contextual bible study sessions which began in a large group led by Dr. Dora Mbuwayesango, a professor of Old Testament and Languages at Hood Theological Seminary. We then went to small groups each day, to study a selected biblical text, trying to understand the characters in the story, the relationship of the characters to one another and to God, and the role of violence and conflict in the story of God’s people. Moving from understanding the biblical text within an historical framework, we then explored how the ancient story of God’s people is like the pain we face in our current time with intergroup conflict, violence, murder, child sacrifice, political scheming, and the ongoing sin of racism, violence, and poverty.

Photo: Lee Cheek

I felt fortunate that the facilitator of my bible study group was the Rt. Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows, an African-American-Indian priest, who was attending the conference the week before her ordination and consecration as the Bishop of Indianapolis and the first African American woman to be a diocesan bishop. There were moments of deep sadness as well, such as when the Rt. Rev. Eugene Sutton announced that the State of Arkansas would execute one of their prisoners that first evening of the conference. The death penalty is where racism, poverty, gun violence, and state-sanctioned murder all intersect and this was a powerful moment for me.

Lee Cheek

Two common narratives about guns emerged: (1) gun violence is mainly a problem with blacks (2) unrestricted white gun ownership and "stand your ground "is God-ordained. We were called to challenge these narratives from a faith-based perspective.
The Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, canon theologian for the Diocese of Maryland, challenged a mostly white church to give up resting in the comfort of believing that the problem of gun violence lies only within the black urban community. She asked us to get to know their stories and see their humanity. The violence there is a legacy of a system of unjust privilege and penalty. The inequalities of racism and poverty are something each of us is on the hook for. Eliminating these systems is “not a work of choice for us but what is necessary to be Christian.”

The Rev. Rob Schenck, an evangelical pastor from Washington, D.C., who was featured in the 2015 documentary, The Armour of Light, declared that unrestricted white gun ownership and violence against what is perceived as threat is “a theological problem” with which many evangelicals struggle. He urged us to build relationships that help them disentangle their theology from the culture of “ferocious autonomy” and individualism.
My thoughts on the “Unholy Trinity” event…

For me, the quote I will remember most came from Rev. Julian DeShazier, pastor at University Chapel and a hip hop artist. He said, “Too many Christian churches have become ‘think tanks’ when they should be ‘action centers’.” I’m challenged and inspired by that line.

Part of being an “action center” is to take our faith to the streets in liturgies of witness. I have shared many times in this blog and in Abundant TIMES about the value and indeed, the necessity of public prayer witness. These are not demonstrations. They are not marches. They are prayer. They are processions. As one speaker put it: “We impoverish ourselves if we limit our symbols and sacraments to just what is possible in the walls of the church.” Liturgy is a strength of the Episcopal Church, so why not take that gift and bring it to the streets? We did that in Chicago.
Two hundred of us processed through a section of Chicago’s South Side. Drums loudly announced our presence. Bishops wore vestments. Dozens of crosses were carried high. Banners clearly stated why we were doing this. We sang hymns. We chanted.

People joined us along the way. Some stood and watched. Many took out their cell phones and recorded it. Why? Because the Church was in the streets. We were not a think tank. We were a moving “action center”, witnessing against the Unholy Trinity and witnessing for Jesus mission of mercy, compassion and hope.

+Doug
The Russian Orthodox have a wonderful Easter tradition. After the church service (which is far longer than this one), they gather for dinner and every person who comes to the dinner has to tell a joke. That is because Easter is a great and joyful event. Jesus has triumphed over evil. Laughter is a sign of his victory and the Russian Orthodox believe laughter drives the devil out of the house. So let’s borrow from that tradition and begin this sermon with an Easter joke – one that is also a true story.

One Easter morning at another church the priest invited the children to gather around him and he asked this question: “What is Easter?” Hands shot up. The first child said, “Easter is when we get chocolate bunnies.” The priest said, “True, but that is not what Easter is really all about.” The next child said, “Easter is when the bunny leaves us eggs.” The priest acknowledged her but was getting frustrated. He called on another child who said, “Easter is when Jesus died on the cross for us.” “No,” said the priest, “But thank you, we are headed in the right direction.” Finally a child said, “Easter is when Jesus came out of the tomb!” The priest was so happy someone got it. But then she added, “And if he sees his shadow and goes back in the tomb, we get six more weeks of winter.”

The devil has just left the church.

Let’s reflect on Easter. I’ll base these reflections on Scripture but let’s put them in the context of what Franciscan Richard Rohr calls the “first source of revelation” which is nature itself.

You all know I spend a lot of time on the Mass Pike – a lot of time. For my first four years as bishop, I spent most of that time doing one of four things: taking phone meetings, listening to NPR, listening to the music of Bruce Springsteen, or thinking about the next place I was going to and what I needed to do there. But then one day, a few months ago, I noticed the sky. This is easy to do on the Pike since there is nothing blocking it in front of you as you drive along.
Cloud formations are amazing! They are moving. They have layers upon layers, depth upon depth. And, they are of infinite variety, as the time of day or the weather changes. As I look at that sky, I am filled with a sense of wonder – wonder at God’s creation. Now don’t worry. I can still see the road while seeing the sky. And I still do one of the four things mentioned above. But more and more, I just want to check in on God’s sky, and wonder with it. What do you see in creation that captures your imagination? What leads your soul to awe and wonder?

Now, we go to the second source of revelation – Scripture. The readings for Holy Week take us on a journey from weeping…to wonder. Ponder that with me.

The weeping begins before we ever get to the cross. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus himself weeps over Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. After the arrest of Jesus, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times; when the cock grows, he weeps. As Simon Cyrene carries the cross, behind Jesus, women follow him “wailing.” And in John’s Gospel, when Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb early Sunday morning, the body of Jesus is not there, and she weeps.

The Holy Week story begins in weeping but it does not end there. The discovery of the empty tomb by grieving women turns to wonder. It is a wonder that is both exciting and frightening. Mark’s Gospel is so clear about this. A young man in a white robe at the empty tomb tells the women that Jesus is not here. He has been raised. They are given instructions to, “go tell, he will see you in Galilee.” The women “fled, for terror and amazement had seized them. And they said nothing to nobody, because they were afraid.” Mark’s Gospel ends with that sense of wonder.

But the other gospels take the wonder further. Let’s look at John’s gospel. Mary Magdalene knows the tomb is empty but still she weeps because she fears the body has been stolen. A gardener asks her why she is crying. When she verbalizes her fear, the gardener says her name, “Mary!” She knows at that moment that the gardener is the risen Lord. Mary embraces him; but he won’t let her cling. Jesus has to move on – throughout all the world.

The late theologian, Marcus Borg, puts it so well:

“The tomb could not hold him. He is loose in the world. He is still here. He is still recruiting for the kingdom of God.”

I invite you to wonder about this during these holiest of days. The Risen Savior is on the loose and he knows all our names.

Now, I know this video message is getting long, and you have so much to do to prepare for these Holy Days. But let me bring out one more dimension of weeping and wondering. Don’t worry; I’m bringing this reflection home.

In John’s Gospel, the weeping and the wondering all happen in a garden. In the opening of John’s Gospel, he invites us to reflect on what happened “in the beginning,” in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve – you know the story. Why do they leave the garden? They are banished in shame and tears after the sin of eating the forbidden fruit.
Another garden – Gethsemane – is where Jesus prays on the last night of his life, as the disciples sleep, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke. Why does Jesus leave that Garden? He was “seized” and bound by the Temple police as the disciples deserted him in their fear.

Now to the last garden – the garden that contained the tomb which could not hold Jesus. If the Garden of Eden was the beginning of Creation, this garden is the beginning of the New Creation. If the Garden of Gethsemane was a place where the disciples slept and deserted Jesus, the Garden of the New Creation finds Mary awake – she recognizes the presence of the Risen Christ in the gardener. Jesus does not leave this Garden “seized” and in the hands of the violent – but free to appear anywhere and anytime bringing God’s imagination. Mary does not desert Jesus – she wants to cling to him. She leaves the garden not in shame and fear but with wonder and a mission.
May we leave this Easter with wonder and a mission. May we leave ready to go to those who weep – the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the refugees, the addicted, and the people in our everyday lives who are weighed down in burdens – ready to wonder what God’s New Creation might look like for them and for us. May we go forth committed to the New Creation in which our endangered earth demands respect and care. May we go forth waking ourselves up to the wonder of cloud formations and to all the grace that comes into our lives everyday if we but look.

I can’t end this sermon without quoting St. Paul about the difference the Resurrection of Jesus makes in our lives. I know this sermon is getting long but I promise you I’m bringing it home.

All preachers have a “go to” line. After all these years, you know mine is “Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope.” St. Paul had a “go to” phrase. It was “…but now.” As in Ephesians – “For once you were in darkness, BUT NOW in the Lord you ARE light.” Later in Ephesians: “Before you were far from God, BUT NOW you have been brought near by Christ.” Paul writes “but now” 27 times in his epistles.

The Risen Jesus changes things. He transforms weeping to wonder. You have met Jesus. What is your “but now?” How is your life different in Christ?

Let me offer you some possibilities:

- I was anxiety ridden. BUT NOW I keep hearing Jesus with his “go to” line: Be Not Afraid. I am with you.
- I was addicted to (fill in the blank). BUT NOW I have been set free.
- I used to think of people in stereotypes. BUT NOW I recognize the dignity of every human being.
- I used to keep whatever I earned. BUT NOW I live generously.
- I used to complain a lot. BUT NOW I am grateful.
- I used to be cynical BUT NOW I live in hope.

Easter tells us that Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope is unkillable. Commit to the Jesus Movement that is out to change the weeping of this world into the wonderful dream God has for it.

Amen.

+Doug
Throughout Holy Week, I invite you to see the awesome strength of love unfold in the life of Jesus – a love that is stronger than the violence and the powers of this world, a love that is stronger than death, a love that includes and does not exclude, a love that reconciles and heals, a love that changes the lives of you and me. Notice too, during this week, how Jesus’ sacrifice is not intended to change God’s mind about humanity. It is about changing humanity’s mind about God.

Palm Sunday — On this day, as Jesus enters Jerusalem humbly on a donkey, Pontius Pilate enters in grand style with his horses and heavily armed troops. Pilate is there to “keep the peace” at a time when the city is overflowing with those who are gathering for the Passover. He will keep that peace by crucifying anyone who might oppose the Roman Empire. Two parades – one offers a new way of living and creating a world of mercy, compassion and hope, and another parade celebrating power for some and oppression for most.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday — During these days Jesus teaches in the Temple. Perhaps the whole key to the drama of Holy Week and why Jesus becomes so dangerous to the Roman authorities and the Temple leadership lies in the “riot in the Temple.” Many theologians have written insightfully about this event. One book I recommend highly is Rabbi Jesus by Bruce Chilton. The money changers had replaced the area of the Temple where the Gentiles could worship. That is why Jesus screams, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers!” On an even deeper level, Jesus was challenging the whole “sacrificial system” of the Temple which was intended to appease a God who did not need appeasing. It avoided the divine calls of their own prophets down through the centuries who proclaimed, “Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”
Maundy Thursday — Could it be at the Last Supper, as Jesus gave away his Body and his Blood, he was bringing about a great escape? Oh yes, Jesus really died the next day, but before Pilate and his executioners killed him, **he had already given himself away.** Jesus had given himself to us – Body and Blood. His mission would continue to live even as he died because he made us the Body of Christ; we are the ones who continue to do what he did. Pilate could not kill the mission of Jesus.

Good Friday — Theologies of the Cross have many dimensions. One dimension I heard in a sermon by The Rev. John Osgood several years ago. He said “the reason we spend hours and hours praying before the Cross, is to instill in us that
when we see the Cross we see suffering. That means when we see suffering, we will see the Cross.” In other words, in the suffering of this world, we will see Christ present. We will see Christ; the one who did not run from the cross but embraced it so there will be no place that is ever God-forsaken.

Easter — Easter is the life changing reality that with God nothing is impossible. As our Presiding Bishop has said “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is about the eternity of hope.” It is the eternal “Yes!” of God to all that is and will be. Love is stronger than death. This truth – this gift of life that never ends – allows us to live and love in freedom. We open ourselves to new possibilities, to new hope, to new ways of living. And, isn’t that Resurrection – a new way of living?

We can share the resurrection when we ask the hurting people of this world the same question the risen One asked Mary Magdalene: “why are you weeping?”

- Resurrection begins when we ask immigrants and refugees, “Why are you weeping?”
- Resurrection begins when we ask the families who have lost loved ones to gun violence, “Why are you weeping?”
- Resurrection begins when we ask our earth dying of global warming, “Why are you weeping?”
Resurrection begins when we ask people of color, “Why are you weeping?”
Resurrection begins when we ask transgender persons, “Why are you weeping?”

The Great 50 Days

Remember Easter is not a day but a whole season. It seems to me that we give an ample effort to the holy season of Lent and to the great feast of Christ's passage from death to new life. We don't tend to plan the Easter season with equal energy or passion. What might mark these days with great joy in your congregation? How might your prayer deepen with gratitude for the mystery of Easter? We can start with Easter 2.

Momentum Sunday

Easter 2 is for the survivors – the remnant who never miss a Eucharist no matter how “high” or “low” the celebration. What if we kept the momentum of the resurrection in our life together and made Easter 2 a joyful, engaging event? It’s good liturgy and it’s good for the mission of Christ’s Church, so I encourage you to transform “Low Sunday” into “Momentum Sunday.” Bring the choir back. Keep the liturgy highly spirited. Consider having an adult education class on Sunday morning about the basics of prayer and the varieties of prayer for those who might have come to church on Easter for the first time in a long time.

- “How to Pray” or “Prayer 101”
- “The Five Bible Stories Everyone Should Know”
- “Why the Church Makes a Difference in the World.”
Have ministry tables in the church hall to provide information about the many things your church does. Don’t slow down when the Resurrection invites us all to New Life in Christ. **Expect them to return.**

My prayers are with all our congregations, with all our ministers – lay and ordained – as we prepare to enact the most sacred mysteries of our faith. Be as certain as I am that we who have died with Christ will be raised with him in glory. This is our faith. This is our most precious truth.

+Doug
My friends,

It is with great sadness that I inform you of the sudden death of Maggie Addai, Superintendent of the Mampong Babies’ Home, Kumasi, Ghana. Maggie collapsed at the dinner celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Babies’ Home. This terrible shock leaves family, friends and co-workers lost in grief and longing for God’s peace. I know you will pray for them. I know the bond we have with the Church in Ghana is strong. I know you will continue to support the babies who will never know Maggie’s love and care.

In Proverbs we hear about the “virtuous woman.” Maggie’s spiritual and professional leadership of the Babies’ Home is echoed in this biblical description.

She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Proverbs 31: 20, 26-27


Maggie is a saint in our time – a tireless, faith-filled servant of the Word of God. Those of you who knew her, because of your mission visits or generous fund-raising, know that she was special – that Maggie was responding to a call from God. The Rev. Annie Ryder, her mission companion and dear friend for many years, recognized that Maggie was blessed by God for this work. “I have never known anyone who was as faithful in prayer, as certain of God’s will in her life, and as generous with her time as was Maggie. She gave all the credit for her amazing works to the Glory of God.”
Maggie with John Miller and Annie during her visit to the US in 2015.


The Rev. Betsy Fisher, Maggie and me at a welcome party hosted by Christ Trinity Church, Sheffield.

We will never forget Maggie’s work for God’s children, the depth of her faith, nor the way we felt in her presence. Today, we join the people of Kumasi as we say, "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all (Proverbs 31:29)."

+Doug
Woman at the Well, African Mafa

The following sermon was given on the 3rd Sunday of Lent at St. John’s, Williamstown.

John’s gospel is filled with powerful one-liners.

- “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”
- “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”
- “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

The key line in today’s gospel is, “It was about noon.” There are a couple of reasons why. Let’s explore them.

In the summer of 2015, I had the great blessing to be among a group of bishops who brought college students to North Carolina to study the Civil Rights Movement and to visit places where liberating history was made – places like Greensboro and Selma. Bishop Michael Curry, now our Presiding Bishop, was the bishop of North Carolina at that time and he was our gracious host. The schedule was very full and one day I did not have time for my early morning run. The only free time was lunch – at noon. So, I ran in the 90 degree heat. At the end of my run I was drenched and breathing in gasps. Michael Curry saw me, gave me a quizzical look and said, “Brother, do you know you are in North Carolina…at noon…in July?”

Why was the Samaritan woman, carrying a large bucket, coming to draw water from a well at noon time in the Middle East? In the culture of that time, women would have the responsibility of getting water for the family, but they would have done it early in the morning to avoid the midday heat. This woman goes at noon to avoid the other women. She has been married five times and is now living with someone not her husband. Now we don’t know if her husbands died or abandoned her. We do know that in those times a woman was sure to live in poverty unless she was in relationship with a man. The Samaritan woman does not want to be with others because she is ashamed and/or marginalized. Hence, she goes at a time when no one will be at the well. But at the end of her encounter with Jesus, her life will be transformed. This woman who was avoiding others will go to the city and tell everyone she meets about Jesus. She will go from isolation to community. She will go from silence to proclamation. The Bible does not tell us her name, but the Eastern Orthodox gave her one. They revere her as an Apostle and call her Photini which means “Enlightened One.” The Eastern Orthodox point out that up until this moment in John’s Gospel, all the apostles were bringing in one person each to see Jesus. Andrew went and got Peter. Philip went and got Nathaniel. But Photini, she got a whole city to follow Jesus.

How did that happen? What changed her?
Clearly it was the encounter with Jesus but the very fact that it happened at all tells us something about Jesus. Jesus seeks out those who are feeling lost. Let me give you an example from Mark’s Gospel. Now in preaching you are not supposed to draw examples from different gospels than the one you are preaching on, so don’t tell the bishop. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is constantly traveling. At least 17 different cities are mentioned by name. This one day he goes “to the other side of the sea” to the country of the Gerasenes. A man possessed by an unclean spirit, living among the tombs, comes running out. He shouts out at Jesus. In a highly dramatic scene Jesus throws the unclean spirit out of him and heals him. Jesus sends him out of the tombs and tells him “Go home to your friends.” He restores the outcast to his community. Then Jesus gets back into the boat and goes back across the sea.

Now I have been reading these stories about Jesus for a very long time. And I never noticed until this year that Jesus went all the way across the Sea of Galilee and back for one suffering person. He did not stay there and launch a preaching mission to the people of the Gerasenes. The suffering man didn’t just happen to be on Jesus’ travel route to somewhere else. Jesus intentionally made the trip for one person in pain.

Before he goes to the well in the city of Sychar, he is in Judea at a river where people are getting baptized. Jesus had to walk about 30 miles from that river where he had “abundant water” according to our text, to a desert town where water was scarce. The Bible is clear. When Jesus got to the well, “about noon,” he was “tired out by his journey.” But he did it for one person in need. You see Jesus takes his own story to heart about the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 to pursue the one who is lost. And on those days when we feel lost, Jesus will find us. Just as Psalm 23 says “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”…”goodness and mercy shall pursue me, shall chase after me, shall hunt me down.”

At the well, Jesus meets a woman defined by labels. “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” She is defined by her history of the five husbands and her present situation. Jesus breaks through all that. He essentially tells her his place of worship is not better than her place of worship. And he gives her the gift of acceptance. Jesus knows her story and accepts her for who she is. And this is what causes her to believe in him as the savior. Because he just became her savior. With no spectacular miracles. No water changed into wine. No feeding 5000 people with a few fish and loaves. Just acceptance of her as a person – that’s what salvation looks like. Maybe it could look like that for you and me.

My friend Rob Hirschfeld, for many years the rector of Grace, Amherst and now the bishop of New Hampshire, has a new book out called, Beyond Fear and Shame: From Adam to Christ. I highly recommend it. Reflecting on the book recently Rob said: “I find that the growing edge of our evangelism is to help people with their sense of shame, which I think is an almost universal experience. It can be debilitating and can really shackle us. I don’t think that is what God wants for us.” And “I define shame as that experience of not only having done something wrong, or that is perceived as wrong, but actually being something wrong. It is an existential emotion. It really gets to the core of our being.” And “I think Jesus is on a mission to get us beyond fear and shame.”

The Samaritan woman (or Photini, the enlightened one) leaves her water jar and goes back to the city, restored to the community. One commentator says in leaving the water jar behind, she is leaving her life of abandonment, rejection, marginalization and shame. She is set free by Jesus.

Now I promised you a few minutes ago, at the start of this sermon, there were a couple of reasons why “at about noon” was the key line in this gospel passage. Here is another. There is only one other place in John’s Gospel where something happens “at about noon.” John’s Gospel is 21 chapters long so you can read the whole gospel and find it. Or you can google it and you will find it in chapter 19 verse 14. At this point in the story Jesus has been arrested, interrogated by the High Priests and handed over to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate has Jesus flogged and mocked by the soldiers. “It was about noon” when Pilate condemns Jesus to death by crucifixion.

The Gospel writer John wants us to get the contrast. At about noon, condemnation of the Son of God by a human being. At the well, about noon, acceptance of a human being by God.

Not only is John, drawing the stark contrast, he is pointing us to the cross. As he does throughout his Gospel. So let’s reflect about what happens at the Cross. You might be thinking “if he does that, this sermon will end about noon.” No, I’m bringing it home. I promise.

You might have heard of the “Seven Last Words” that Jesus says from the Cross. They are scattered among the four gospels. John’s account has three of those “last words.” The very last one is “It is finished.” But before “it is finished” Jesus has two incredibly important things to tell us. He is pushing off death to get these messages to us.

He looks at his beloved disciple and at Mary, his mother. Jesus says to the disciple “Here is your mother.” And to his mother “woman, here is your son.” In doing that Jesus fulfills his promise that he will never leave us orphans. He has given us to each other to care for as family. We are brothers and sisters to each other. And to immigrants and to the 23 million refugees around the world. And to the poor who are already suffering from climate change. And to the factory workers who have lost their jobs to automation. And to women who are harassed and abused. And to Democrats and Republicans. Before Jesus says “it is finished”, he hands over his great mission of mercy, compassion and hope to us. He left us that mission as his last will and testament.
Before “it is finished” Jesus has one more “word.” It is “I thirst.” That seems ironic after the gospel passage we just heard “those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty again.” As all things in John’s gospel, this is intentional. Remember Jesus has already given away his mission to us. And maybe the mission is the water.

But there might be one more reason. Scripture has so many layers of meaning. There is only one other place in the whole Bible, where we hear “I thirst.” The whole Bible. The Bible contains 73 books, according to our tradition. We really need Google to find that other “I thirst.” It is in Psalm 69. It is cried out by a person who is suffering but who goes on to say “I will praise the name of God…you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the Lord hears the needy.” You see, Jesus fulfills Scripture. He dies alone so none of us will ever die alone. We will have God with us. In death and in life. God will be true to the Covenant. God will never desert us no matter what. Jesus needed to tell us that before “it is finished.”

Jesus is finished. But his God and our God is not. The mission of mercy and compassion and hope has been handed on to us. And just as God raised Jesus from the dead, God will keep raising us up. After death and before. Just as Photino was raised up in the midst of her life. We have a hymn with these words: “Let the servant church arise. A caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ’s sacrifice, and clothed in Christ’s humanity. “May we go with God. It is finished. It is beginning. Amen.

+Doug
A couple of weeks ago, I wrote a blog called “Desiring a Christ-Centered Life, Not a Trump-Centered Life.” Apparently it struck a nerve, as I received more responses (mostly positive) than any other blog I have written. I wrote “In a troubled time, the Church is made to call people to be our best selves, to live from God-filled souls, to imagine God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This blog will attempt to explore further what that means.

One of the best theology teachers I ever had is Michael Himes. He taught me at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington, NY, and now teaches at Boston College. Michael once said, “This is the most important line in the entire Bible.”

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness (Luke 3:1-2).

Why is this the most important verse in the Bible? Michael said it shows that our faith is based in reality. Our faith is not based on “Once upon a time…” This is not a fairy tale. It is not an abstraction. Luke goes out of his way to tell us in this time and in this place, “when Tiberius Caesar was in the 15th year of his reign, Pilate was governor, Herod was king… the word of God came to John in the wilderness.”

We, too, have an incarnational faith. We live our transcendent faith in this time and in this place. We listen for the Word of God that comes to us in the wilderness of confusion, in the midst of anxiety and fear.

I have said that our mission is the same as it was before Donald Trump was elected president. It is to follow Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. Or, in the words of our Presiding Bishop,

“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.”

That has not changed, but because this is not an abstract faith, context matters. What does it look like now to be the Jesus Movement when Donald Trump is President, Charlie Baker is governor and Warren and Markey are senators?

Here is what it has looked like so far. Interfaith gatherings abound. When the nation seems to be coming apart, people of faith are coming together.

- Faith Groups Across the Country Condemn Trump’s Ban on Immigrants and Refugees from Muslim Countries
- Hundreds Gather To Show Community Support for AJCC; Against Bias and Hatred
- Muslims Raise Thousands to Repair Jewish Cemetery

When the ERA failed to be ratified, the struggle against gender bias in the workplace and in government continued on the grass-roots level. Now, women are claiming their power and equality in our city streets.

- The Women’s March on Washington
- A Day Without A Woman
Even as we seem to have forgotten that we are a nation of immigrants, voices cry out for compassion, herald the blessing of diversity and name the Church as sacred space for those who live in fear.

- Chicago Cardinal Calls for Sanctuary
- A Day Without Immigrants

The Environmental Protection Agency is in the hands of one who doubts that human activities impact climate change. The institution established to protect “this fragile earth, our island home,” has been compromised. Yet…

- 16 Clergy Arrested Blocking Pipeline Construction: Here’s Why
- Scientists Plan March on Washington to Challenge President Trump
- Climate Change March to Descend on Washington in April
- 2017: Pipeline Resistance Gathers Steam From Dakota Access, Keystone Success

LGBTQ persons continue to experience discrimination in spite of momentous gains. Transgender youth and adults are facing the most invasive assault on their privacy and dignity. But…

- Curry, Jennings take lead in Supreme Court brief on transgender-bathroom policy

In March, 2016, meeting at a time of great political uncertainty, the House of Bishops said “the church is made for times like these.” We need to build on this activity, but do so from a place of deep prayer. The “political” activity of John the Baptist and Jesus is well-documented. Mark 6:17-20 tells the story of John’s arrest after protesting Herod’s marriage. In Luke 13:31-32, Jesus speaks out against Herod – “that fox” who will not stop him from healing and casting out demons. Like John and Jesus, we must walk in the wilderness with God. We are still listening for the Word of God to come to us in this time and in this place.

Long after the reigns of Emperor Tiberius, and Pontius Pilate and Herod and Annas and Caiaphas, Jesus mission of mercy and compassion and hope continued throughout history – beyond good times and bad – and we know it will until God’s Dream for the world is fulfilled.

+Doug
Today’s Gospel about the wilderness temptation of Jesus is a powerful story that readers are fascinated by but often find hard to identify with. We think of it as something that happened to Jesus but not as something that can happen to us. That could be because we have an image of the devil standing next to Jesus. Maybe our image of the devil is the traditional rendition of someone with horns and a pitchfork. But the Bible does not describe the devil. The only thing we know about the devil is that he has a voice. Maybe he is just a voice. All of us, no matter how sane we are, have voices in our heads—voices of parents, teachers, coaches, friends and enemies. Heck, in the time it takes me for one golf swing, there are ten voices going off in my head: “Keep your head down, turn your shoulders, follow through, and don’t swing hard…”

So maybe, once again, this is not just a story about Jesus. It is our story too. Let’s look at it.

The word “devil” in Greek is diabolos. Remember that the New Testament is written in Greek. Diabolos means “one who throws things around,” “one who stirs things up.” That is what the devil does. He changes the true order of things. Recall the devil’s appearance in the Garden of Eden. All is good. All is peaceful and wonderful. But the devil in the form of a serpent goes to Eve and stirs things up. He tells her “don’t just settle for being loved by God. Eat from the tree and you will be God. It is not enough to be God’s creature. Go ahead and be God.” She listens to that voice and reality becomes distorted.

Scott Peck, author and philosopher, describes the difference between a person with a “secular mentality” and one with a “sacred mentality.” The person with the secular mentality feels himself to be the center of the universe. But that will lead to despair because eventually he will know he is one person among six billion others—all feeling themselves to be at the center of things—scratching out an existence on the surface of a medium-sized planet circling a small star among countless stars in a galaxy lost among countless galaxies. The person with a sacred mentality considers the Center of existence to be beyond her. Yet she is unlikely to feel lost or insignificant precisely because she draws her significance and meaning from her relationship, her connection, with that Center, that Other.

The devil is going to “throw things around” once again by trying to distort the relationship Jesus has as God’s Son. And he will do it through a series of “if” statements.

- “If you are the Son of God command these stones to become loaves of bread.”
- “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off the top of this temple and angels will bear you up.”
“I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if you fall down and worship me.”

**Evil always speaks in conditional terms. Evil always manipulates.**

In contrast, God is a straight-talker and never puts conditions on love. Remember the voice from the cloud at the baptism of Jesus. It was God’s voice and God did not say “if you follow through on the mission, if you do everything I command, then you are my beloved Son.” No, God says right out “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And that is before Jesus ever performed a miracle or preached great sermons or healed the sick. “This is my beloved Son” and he puts no conditions on it.

Throughout the life of Jesus, people will speak more like the devil than like God:

- “If you are the son of God, show us…”
- “If you have the power to forgive sins.”
- “If you are the Son of God, climb down from that cross.”

**God loves unconditionally. No “ifs.”**

Jesus did not manipulate. He did not bargain. Jesus did not come to make a deal with us. Listen to the words on the last night of his life – the words you will hear when we go to the altar. Jesus did not say “This is my Body…and you may receive it if you are in a state of grace. This is my Blood; drink it if you are following all the rules.” Jesus speaks straight and unconditionally. “This is my Body – for you. My Blood – for you.”

This story goes right to the heart of what it means to be a human being. The devil tells Jesus, a hungry man at the end of a forty day fast, “If you are the son of God, turn this stone into bread.” What he is saying is if you are truly loved by God, then God won’t let you be hungry. Jesus, the human one, holds together being hungry and being loved by God. The devil is saying “you deserve better than this. If God loves you, you would never be hungry. Come with me and you can be full and fulfilled.” Jesus has to deal with this lack of fulfillment throughout his life.

Have you noticed how many times in the Gospels Jesus is frustrated – and knows he is loved.

- Jesus is opposed by the Temple leadership – and knows he is loved.
- Jesus is betrayed by Peter – and knows he is loved.
- Jesus is tortured to death by the Romans – and knows he is loved.

Jesus does not need everything to break his way to know God’s love, because the relationship to the Center of all that is, endures.

It works the same way for us.

- Can we have our hearts-broken and still know we belong to God?
- Can we have cancer and know God’s presence?
- Can we be unemployed and be loved by God?

The devil’s voice will always be in our heads, saying “no child of God would ever suffer like this. You deserve better. Come with me.” Oh, to respond like Jesus and say, “I would rather be hungry and on God’s team than a self-satisfied member of yours.”

How did Jesus know this? He knew it because he had an initial and everlasting experience of the unconditional love of God in his baptism. The baptism and the voice from above precede the temptations. This truth will sustain him. This truth can sustain us.

Different cultures express the originating love of God in a variety of ways.

- The Japanese hold new-born babies for the first year of life. The baby is never to be alone. This is because the baby has come from the divine world and is now in a foreign place and needs to be made to feel at home.
- Norwegians believe that when the soul enters the body of the baby, God kisses the baby. And throughout life the soul holds the memory of that kiss.
- The Jewish people believe an angel places the soul in the body and then seals it by placing a finger over the mouth of the child. That is why we have that little indentation over our lips and under our nose. It is where the angel’s finger was when she sealed in the spirit. That’s why when we try to remember something we instinctively place our index fingers into that little crevice. We are trying to remember and we are trying to remember more than where we left the car keys. We are trying to remember our divine origins.

We are made by God. We are made holy.
A long time ago, or maybe recently, someone poured water on your head and said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." And then oil was placed on your head with the words, "I claim you as Christ's own forever." Forever we belong to Jesus. No "ifs." Hungry we are his. Sick we are his. Sad we are his. In everything good and holy and joyful we are his. In life and in death we are his. We have unconditional belonging in the very life of God.

This seems like a good place to end the sermon but I need us to look at one more thing in this awesome story of eleven verses – the ending. "The devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him."

We are tempted to say, "Great timing, angels. You arrive after all the hard work has been done. You couldn't have come sooner, when Jesus needed you?"

But, wait. Remember what the angels do in the Bible. They arrive with news of a new era beginning.

- In Matthew's gospel they visit Joseph in dreams to tell him “don’t be afraid to take the pregnant Mary for your wife. She will bear a son and he will save the people from their sins.”
- In another dream angels appear to say Herod wants to kill the baby. Go to Egypt and live as refugees.

Of course then the angels appear after Jesus has resisted the devil. They come so Jesus can set off on his mission – a mission that will change the world, a mission of mercy, compassion and hope, a mission so important it did not end with his death, a mission that continues in his Resurrection and the ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit, a mission that continues in you and me.

We are Christ's own forever. And we are part of his Movement – the Jesus Movement – to change this world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it.

Amen.

+Doug
Forty Days of Curiosity and Courage

We have several seasons in the Christian calendar year – Advent, Christmas Season, Epiphany Season, Lent, and the “Season after Pentecost.” But only one comes with an instruction manual in the Book of Common Prayer – Lent. I’ll be reading that instruction manual when this sermon is over in eleven minutes and fifteen seconds. (Actually, I offered a video instruction for the Easter Season – you can find it on YouTube, but it is not in the Book of Common Prayer – yet.)

The instruction manual includes the reason Lent was created. Lent is not in the Bible. It was developed by the early church and we are not sure exactly when. “Lenten practices” started in various contexts from the earliest days but Lent as a season probably started somewhere near 300 A.D. Lent was for two categories of people.

“This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church.”

So if your sins rise to the level of notorious, Lent is definitely made for you. For the rest of us sinners who have fallen in numerous but more modest ways, Lent can still be a vital time if we enter into it like those people being prepared for baptism. Lent can be for us a time of re-commitment to our baptism, a “return to purpose” – our diocesan theme this year.

A few years ago I started a baptism renewal “call” at my visitations. After the confirmations and receptions at each church, I would say, “anyone else?” Anyone who wished could come forward, and I would place my hands on their shoulders and say this blessing “God has begun a good work in you. May Jesus continue to be your hope and inspiration.” The response has been amazing – about 80% of each congregation comes forward. Some come with tears in their eyes. That means the need to renew our commitment to baptism must be connecting to some desire deep in our souls.

This call is spontaneous. “Anyone else?” I’m suggesting we make Lent a time of intentional, planned out, re-commitment to baptism. There is a wonderful prayer we say immediately after the pouring of water in baptism.

“Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and love you, the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.”

“Inquiring and discerning” means to me “curiosity” – a curiosity about our faith and about God’s imagination. And courage means… courage. In the spirit of Lent and in the spirit of renewing our baptisms, I invite us to forty days of curiosity and courage. Let’s explore what that might look like.

Curiosity about God’s imagination

Consider 40 days of more bible study and more prayer – in groups and individually. When was the last time you read one Gospel all the way through? Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If you are pressed for time, read Mark. It is the shortest one. The life of Jesus is one remarkable life, and with a spirit of curiosity, see if there is something there that you never noticed before. We know some of those stories so well; we just presume we know them. But the Holy Spirit likes to break through in the details we never noticed before.
St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, has a powerful way of praying bible stories. He says we should imagine ourselves in the story from the perspective of each character. Let’s look at one. There is that great story of the paralyzed person with four faithful friends. Jesus is in town and he is preaching in a house. The house is so full of people, not another one can squeeze through the door. The four friends know that if they can just get the paralyzed person to see Jesus, something remarkable could happen. They carry him to the house, but can’t get in. But they don’t give up. They climb up on the roof, tear the roof apart and lower their friend in front of Jesus. Jesus stops his sermon in mid-story and heals the man.

Ignatius tells us to use our imagination and read the story as if you are one of the four friends.

- Who is it that you are bringing to see Jesus?
- What do you feel like as you carry your friend?
- What does it feel like when you can’t get into the house?
- What are you thinking as someone says “let’s lift him onto the roof and then take the roof apart?”
- What do you feel like when your friend is healed?

Now pray the story as if you are the paralyzed person.

- Who is carrying you?
- What does it feel like to be so vulnerable?
- What does it feel like to meet Jesus?

Then pray the story as if you were Jesus. Now that might seem to lack humility, but we are all called to “grow into the full stature of Christ.” We don’t just admire Jesus. His very Spirit lives within us.

You see, the Bible is the Living Word of God because we are living. We bring our hopes and dreams, our challenges and pain, to the Biblical narrative and find our story there. Theologian Richard Rohr says there is a primal desire in our souls to connect our little stories to the Big Story. To find our own lives in the cosmic Life which is bigger than us and includes us.
40 days of curiosity might include intentional times of silence. What would happen if we shut everything off for a few minutes and just breathed? Did nothing except breathe in and breathe out, knowing that God is in the breath. The transcendent God is that close. Are you curious as to what that experience might be?

**Courage**

Let's move from curiosity to courage. Later in this service, we will pray the **Litany of Penitence**. This is raw, honest, strong stuff.

"We have NOT loved you with our whole heart."

"We have been deaf to your call to serve."

"We confess all the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives."

"For our blindness to human need and suffering."

It goes on and on. It is truly a litany. We only pray this litany on Ash Wednesday because we can only take it once a year.

Isn't it interesting that we do this Litany after we have the imposition of ashes with those chilling words “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” You would think the imposition of ashes would be in response to the Litany of Penitence. Symbolic action following word. But no, we do the ashes first. Here's why. It has to do with baptism.

The ashes are placed on your forehead in the shape of a cross. I know, I know, a lot of times it just looks like a smudge. I have been ordained almost 37 years and I’m still trying to get the ashes to look like a cross. But that is what is intended – a cross. You are marked with the cross.

At your baptism you were marked with a cross. Using oil, the minister made a cross on your forehead and said your name followed by these words:

"You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever."

"Marked as Christ's own forever." That's you. That's me. Not “marked as Christ’s own when you are your most generous best self.” Not “marked as Christ’s own in the good times.”… “Marked as Christ's own forever.” In life and in death.

In this service we get marked as Christ’s own again, with that poorly formed cross of ashes. We belong to Christ. Even when we do not love him with our whole heart. Even when we are deaf to his call to serve. Even when we are proud and hypocritical. Christ is not letting go.

That means we can say all the facts of how we are messing up and how far this world is from the Dream God has for it. There is no need to spin this. We can look at a broken world, take responsibility for the ways we broke it, and respond with courage because Christ is still with us. Christ is not giving up.

I invite us to 40 days of courage in responding to that **Litany of Penitence**. And because I made a vow on December first, 2012 to “stir up the conscience of the people,” I invite you to respond with courage to two of those prayers in particular.

"Accept our repentance, Lord, for the wrongs we have done: for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty."

We cannot turn a blind eye to the largest displacement of people since World War II. We responded then with the Marshall Plan. We are responding now with injustice and cruelty. Beyond the refugee crisis, we have long time immigrants here who live in fear. In these forty days of courage, and beyond, we stand with the refugee and the immigrant.
I invite us to stir up our conscience and respond to our confession,

“for our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us.”

We live at a time when political decisions will greatly impact the world we leave to “those who come after us.” 40 days of courage means “concern for those who come after us.” Let’s stand with Pope Francis who says the degradation of the climate is a “sin against God.” And,

“The World’s poor, though least responsible for climate change, are most vulnerable and already suffering its impact.”

I would say this rises to the status of “notorious sin.” We stand with our military leaders who have concluded that climate change is a “threat multiplier” that is already creating instability around the world and will likely create significant security challenges in the years ahead. And we stand with the Native Americans of Standing Rock who protest the “waste and pollution” of their sacred lands.

Photo: Episcopal News Service

40 days of curiosity and courage
May we live into our baptisms knowing that we are marked as Christ's own forever. May we live with curiosity and courage so we can pray at the end of these forty days:

"Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your son Jesus Christ our Lord."

Amen.

+Doug
The frenetic and often controversial activity of the new administration dominates the news, and it is often the main topic of conversation in families, with friends, at our places of work. Certainly, the President is at the center of attention in our country right now, and for some that brings worry and fear.

In this time of anxiety, I invite the Church to stay Christ-centered. I said after the election that the mission of the Church remains the same as it was before the election – to follow Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. That is what we are called to do and to be no matter who the president is.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us “You are the light of the world.” You ARE the light of the world. Not “someday you will be the light of the world.” Not “you ought to be the light of the world.” You ARE the light of the world. What would the light of the world look like in this time and in this place? How can we stay Christ-centered now?

More and more, I’m learning from Buddhists who say theirs is not a religion but a practice. Christianity, too, is a practice; it is a way of living. In this blog, I hope to offer some practical ways to stay Christ-centered in this era.

- **Increase time spent in prayer and reduce time watching the news, whether it is MSNBC or Fox.** Stay in touch with what is going on in our world. But how much do we really gain watching four hours of news instead of one or two? Thomas Merton warned us that constant activity is a form of violence. Take time, now more than ever to live from the soul. Buddhist Jack Kornfield writes,

  > “Whatever your point of view, take time to quiet the mind and tend to the heart. Then go out and look at the sky. Remember vastness… Remember the Noble Truths, no matter the politics of the season: Greed, hatred and ignorance cause suffering. Let them go. Love, generosity, and wisdom bring the end of suffering. Foster them.”

- **Make friends with someone on “the other side” of the political aisle, or keep a friend who has differing political views.** People are more than the sum of their political opinions. I’ll always remember in 2003 in a sermon I strongly denounced the imminent invasion of Iraq. One of my parishioners, a former member of the Nixon administration, told me how wrong he thought I was. A few days later he became ill and was hospitalized. I went there and prayed with him. We talked and he said, “Doug, we will never let a war get between us, will we?” And we never did. In our time when our nation is so divided, show how friendship can go beyond opinion.

- **Whenever there is an interfaith service in your region, go out of your way in your time-poor life to go to it.** And not just once. And if there are no interfaith services near you, start one. As the world feels like it is coming apart, we need to come together.

- **I invite church leaders in our Episcopal diocese to consider saying “The Baptismal Covenant” at every Sunday liturgy in place of the Creed.** The Creed gets covered in the first three questions and then we are asked five questions about our commitment to a Christ-centered life. We need an affirmative answer to all five questions, and especially now, we need the last two:

  > “Will you seek and serve Christ in ALL persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”
"Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" With God’s help, we can do that.

I was asked a series of questions in the liturgy when I was ordained a bishop.

I keep all those questions before me daily, but the one that challenges me the most is,

“Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper?”

The answer to all the questions is “I will…” but always followed by a different clause. Sometimes, it is, “I will, for the love of God.” Or, “I will, by the grace given me.” For me, the answer to that question has become, “I will, for the sake of Christ Jesus.”

For the sake of Christ Jesus. A Christ-centered life means standing with the poor, the stranger (immigrants, refugees) and those who have no helper (those without health insurance, the environment). There are others that fit into my parentheses. Those who are discriminated against: women, people of color, indigenous people, LGBT people, Muslims. Those who have lost jobs due to automation, down-sizing and technological advancements. Those who cannot get jobs because they are experiencing homelessness or because they were once incarcerated. Those who are addicted who wind up in jail instead of rehab.

I was the one who answered the question, but as a faith leader I was answering for all of us. Calling elected officials, participating in the political process, engaging the American right to peacefully protest in order to stand with “those who have no helper”- we do this for the sake of Christ Jesus.

At the House of Bishops gathering last September, we reflected on the political turmoil in our beloved country and created a document in which we said, “The Church is made for times like these.” In a troubled time, the Church is made to call people to be our best selves, to live from our God-filled souls, to imagine God’s will which is to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

With all that is getting our attention right now, we are all invited to Christ-centered lives. Let’s practice Christianity in the midst of an uncertain world. Let’s follow Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. In the words of that great African-American spiritual, let’s keep our “eyes on the prize,” our hands “on the Gospel plow,” and “hold on.”

+Doug
We have two precedents: prayer and action.

January 17, 2017

If we could see one of those “word clouds” of the media coverage of the last couple of months in our new political world, the dominant word would be “unprecedented.”

- unprecedented use of Twitter by the President-Elect
- unprecedented responses to criticism
- unprecedented refusal to hand over tax returns
- unprecedented attempts at interference in our election by a foreign power
- unprecedented for Democrats to sit out the Inaugural

What should we do in unprecedented times? We can turn to the “precedented” in our own tradition. Our precedent is for prayer and action.

We will pray “for those in positions of public trust, especially President Trump, that they may serve justice, and promote the dignity and freedom of every person” according to the words of The Book of Common Prayer. That powerful but simple line has Biblical roots. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry recently reminded us, Psalm 72 urges prayer for the King of Israel that he might rule in the ways of God's justice, defending “the cause of the poor” and “bringing deliverance to the needy.”

In that same communication to the Church, Bishop Curry tells us that when we pray for Presidents of the United States, “we pray for their leadership in our society and world. We pray that they lead in the ways of justice and truth. We pray that their leadership will serve not partisan interest but the common good.”

In an unprecedented time, we have precedent for praying for our President. I will do that on Inauguration Day and in the days to come.

We also have another precedent. We have the biblical mandate to act justly. It can be seen in the 2000 calls in the Bible to help the poor, in the command to “welcome the stranger,” in Jesus’ prayer that God’s “will be done on EARTH as it is in heaven,” in Jesus’ respect for women clearly expressed so often in his ministry and in making Mary Magdalene “the apostle to the apostles.”
Our Christian tradition heralds the actions of those who tried to live this biblical imperative for social justice: Frances Perkins, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jonathan Myrick Daniels, Dorothy Day, Thomas Gallaudet, Vida Dutton Scudder.

Our precedent is for prayer and action.

Christianity is not an abstract idea. The biblical imperative to act justly calls us to see immigrants and refugees as the “stranger” in need of our welcome. It calls us to imagine God’s will for the earth and to make it so. (Here is the letter to the President-Elect from the Bishops of Massachusetts about his choice for the EPA.) We will be acting justly when we respect the dignity of all persons regardless of race, gender identification, sexual orientation, place of origin, religious beliefs, or economic status. We will be living justly when our streets and schools are safe from gun violence.

As the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement, we have a big mission. We have to witness to our faith in our families, in our neighborhoods, where we work and in our politics. God be with our President, and God be with those who march in protest this weekend. God will be with us in the struggle to find our way, to speak our piece and act justly for the good of all people.

Dr. Martin Luther King wrote, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

I pray for the courage to witness to our faith in the things that matter. I pray courage for us all.

+Doug