Christmas is about a world in which God’s imagination unfolds.

December 25, 2016

Sermon delivered Christmas Eve at Christ Church Cathedral, Springfield.

A couple of days before Christmas a few years ago, I was with some parishioners from Grace Church, in Millbrook, NY, where I was the rector. They were all saying how much they still had to do to get ready for Christmas. I said that was true in the Fisher family too and I still did not have a Christmas sermon ready and that was stressing me out. One person replied, "Don’t worry about it. People don’t come to church on Christmas for the sermon. They come for the music.” Ok. Well then let’s look at the lyrics for some of that music.

Do you know that the Christmas hymns we have been singing tonight would have gotten us arrested in Soweto, South Africa in 1985? Yes, in that place they made the singing of Christmas hymns an offense punishable by arrest. In that country, in the time of apartheid, they feared these hymns could spark a revolution. Christmas to them was not “cute” – it was a radical call for a new world.

Consider with me some of those lyrics:

From the seemingly so innocent “Little Town of Bethlehem,” “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight...where misery calls out to thee, Son of mother mild.” This hymn invites the hope of a better society.

From “While Shepherds Watched Their Flock at Night,” we get several “fear nots” to people kept in their place by fear and intimidation. This is empowerment.

And, to those governed by self-serving leaders, let’s find out who the real king is. “Angels We Have Heard on High" invites us to “Come, Adore on bended knee, Christ, the Lord, the newborn king.”

And the hymn that is the favorite of so many, “O Come All Ye Faithful,” “Sing all ye citizens of heaven above.”

That was 1985. As we know now, not even the suppression of those hymns could stop God’s grace from overturning apartheid and recreating South Africa.

We can sing these hymns without getting arrested, but I think there are ways that they could be revolutionary for us this night.

A story I told once, but is worth retelling, is from an author named Minka Sprague. One day Minka was walking in Manhattan and feeling overwhelmed by her life. She was a single mother raising two children; she was going to school and holding down a job. The more she thought about it, the more overwhelmed she felt. She could not imagine how to do this. She could not imagine how this might work out. In the depth of her anxiety, she started to pray:

“God I cannot imagine this but You can. My imagination is too small but Yours is not. Lord my God, please share with me Your imagination.”

And God did exactly that. Day by day God shared God’s imagination with Minka. Day by day people came into her life who helped. Day by day things fell into place.

On the first Christmas God began this incredible new chapter in human history of sharing God’s imagination with us. God did it with a revolutionary person. In Jesus God is sharing the plan of salvation. Day by day in the life of Jesus the imagination unfolds. Follow his story of mercy, compassion and hope. Follow his life which is so Spirit-filled that death could not put an end to it.

I bet some of you will get books for Christmas. I’m really hoping Santa or someone in my family gives me the Bruce Springsteen autobiography, Born to Run. Besides reading those books, I invite you to read one Gospel all the way through; but not in small doses like we do in church. Read the whole story. Take Mark or Matthew or Luke or John and learn about a new way of life revealed in Christ. If you are pressed for time, read Mark. It is the shortest one.

The story in Matthew and Luke begins with a baby. Somehow, in God’s imagination, it is important to come to us as a baby. Think of how vulnerable that is. A baby needs to be cared for and protected. This baby needs Mary and Joseph and all who helped them to survive during a violent and dangerous time. Remember on this holy night over 2000 years ago the king, Herod, wanted to find and kill Jesus. The threat was so imminent that Joseph, Mary and Jesus were forced to
become refugees in Egypt. Thank God there were people generous enough to take them in. In coming to us as a baby, God needs us. That is some big leap of imagination but it is true.

And it wasn’t only true when Jesus was a baby. Listen to this story. It comes from Etty Hillisum, a young Jewish woman, who died in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany. She kept a journal which is published under the title *An Interrupted Life*. One journal entry described a day in which she and a friend were talking in the midst of the indescribable horror of the camp. It was an awful, desperate situation. Her friend said, “why doesn’t God save us?” Etty responded, “Oh, it is too late for God to save us here. It is time for us to save God.”

Those words are haunting. It is time for us to save God. And it could be that many theologians would say they are the heart-felt words of a person in pain, but it is not good theology. So don’t tell the bishop, but I think there are many dimensions to theology and spirituality, and this is a tremendous insight into the soul. Etty was right. In that seemingly godless situation, it was up to her to keep God alive in her heart, in that camp. And she did by living compassionately and generously until the end of her earthly life, enlivened not by a shallow optimism, but by a deep hope.

Friends, no matter what side of the political aisle we are on, these are difficult and divisive times. We need to "save God." We need to save God’s dream of peace, of abundance for all, of *respect for the dignity of every human being*, and *reverence* for God’s creation. That revolutionary Christmas hymn, "Silent Night," gives us hope. Evangelical church leader Jim Wallis tells us “peace and mercy triumph over angry attacking in God's world according to the wisdom of Silent Night”:

“Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright!”

And when politics destroys the “calm” and “bright,” God brings both back:

“Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love’s pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace.
Jesus Lord at thy birth”

Friends, we need to save that dream – now and always.

Perhaps God comes to us as a baby to make a point about faith. Faith in all of us begins as a “baby faith.” Perhaps we have a “baby faith” tonight – a sense of wonder generated by those great hymns, a desire to belong to something greater than ourselves. Maybe a yearning for “the peace that passes all understanding.” Maybe you have heard 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, and you are intrigued about how that could happen. Perhaps we have a baby faith and we are called to nurture it – to help that faith grow.

Allow me to offer you an image. We are blessed with three great children but for this image I will stay with our son, Geoff. He was healthy and about seven pounds at birth. We fed him and nurtured him and cared for him, made sure he got enough sleep. He grew and grew and grew. When he was 13, he was taller than me, and I’m over six feet. He would delight in lifting me up in the air.
Faith can be like that. It can start out like a baby and then we nurture it – though prayer, through acts of compassion, through partnership with others in the faith community. Until someday it is bigger than we are. Until someday we no longer “have faith” but faith has us. We no longer carry faith around with us and bring it out when convenient. Faith picks us up. Faith carries us. We don’t hold faith but we walk in a world of faith. The world becomes transformed.

That is why Christmas is so revolutionary. It is about a whole new creation. It is about a world in which God’s imagination unfolds. It is about a relationship with God in which God needs our “yes,” needs our response. God made a commitment to us this night. God won’t let go. Don’t let go of God. And let the revolutionary song break out: “Joy to the world. The Lord is come, let earth receive her King, let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing.” Amen.

+Doug
MA Episcopal bishops oppose Trump E.P.A. appointment

December 12, 2016

December 12, 2016 [Springfield, Mass. ]— The bishops of the Episcopal Church in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts today issued a letter to President-elect Donald J. Trump expressing their dismay at his choice of Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency.

“The Episcopal Church stands strongly for the protection of the environment. We respect the facts of science. We support the laws and policies that address the reality of climate change,” the bishops say in their letter.

Weakening and dismantling the E.P.A.’s protections of the natural world threaten the common good and compromise national security, the bishops write.

“We wonder why a person who has consistently and adamantly opposed all laws and policies that provide even minimal ‘protection’ to the environment should be entrusted with leading such an agency,” the bishops say.

“As citizens of this beloved country, we intend to write our members of Congress, urging them to block the nomination of Scott Pruitt to lead the E.P.A. We will pray for a better choice,” the bishops conclude, with an assurance to the president-elect of their continued prayers as he assumes “this office of tremendous responsibility for the good of all.”

The full text of the bishops’ letter follows below.

December 12, 2016

Donald J. Trump
President-Elect of the United States of America
Trump Tower
735 5th Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Dear President-Elect Trump,

We, the Bishops of the Episcopal Church in Massachusetts, are glad to let you know that all of our 235 churches pray for you regularly in our liturgies with these or similar words: “For those in positions of public trust, especially Barack our President and Donald our President-Elect, that they may serve justice, and promote the dignity and freedom of every person.’

We also pray: “Give us reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory.”

The Episcopal Church stands strongly for the protection of the environment. We respect the facts of science. We support laws and policies that address the reality of climate change. We are in the process of divesting our financial interest in fossil fuels. Most recently our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry, joined
Native Americans at Standing Rock in their effort to protect their water and their sacred land. Numerous other Episcopal Church leaders have likewise traveled to Standing Rock.

Our respect for our government leaders and our reverence for the earth as God’s creation impel us to write you to express our dismay about your selection of Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency. We wonder why a person who has consistently and adamantly opposed all laws and policies that provide even minimal “protection” to the environment should be entrusted with leading such an agency.

President-elect Trump, you have promised economic development. Like you, we value a stable and prosperous economy. However, a thriving economy depends on a healthy environment. The more we weaken and dismantle the E.P.A.’s vital protections of our natural world, the more we threaten the common good.

You have also promised to strengthen our national defense. Like you, we value national security. However, our country’s top military intelligence 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. If someone who casts doubt on the reality of climate change becomes the head of the E.P.A., our national security will be compromised.

As citizens of this beloved country, we intend to write our members of Congress, urging them to block the nomination of Scott Pruitt to lead the E.P.A. We will pray for a better choice.

And we will continue to pray for you as you assume this office of tremendous responsibility for the good of all.

Respectfully,

The Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher, Bishop Diocesan of Western Massachusetts
The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates, Bishop Diocesan of Massachusetts
The Rt. Rev. Gayle E. Harris, Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts
The Rt. Rev. Barbara C. Harris, Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts (retired)
The Rt. Rev. Roy F. Cederholm, Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts (retired)
Ernest Hemingway was once asked about his writing process. He said if he could write just one true sentence, everything would flow from that.

Here is my one true sentence to start this sermon. It is from the prophet Micah:

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

That is what the Lord requires. It is our mission as 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. It was our mission before Tuesday's election and it is our mission now. The political context of our lives is dramatically different than it was last Sunday but the mission remains. In this sermon I hope to elaborate on that mission, coming off that one true sentence.

At our Convention this year, I invited us to double-down on prayer. Because as Thomas Merton wrote,

"if we descend into the depth of our own spirit, and arrive at our center, we confront the inescapable fact that at the root of our existence we are in immediate and constant contact with God."

God is as close as our next breath. I invite you to a brief prayer exercise. Get comfortable in those church pews. If you can! Settle in, if you want – close your eyes. Now just breathe. That is all you have to do. God is here…Amen…. Walk humbly with God indeed.

And just as we are doing right now, let's walk humbly with God together. And let's not just do it in this building. This past week I spent a lot of time praying with others in the street. The prayer witness this Cathedral gave out on Chestnut Street on election eve was filled with holiness as the cars drove by and people watched us from the apartment complex across the street. We have a mission to witness to the faith that is within us.
Another dimension of walking humbly with God is listening to God’s people. For some this election was an expression of deep rooted anger. For others of us, this election was a shock. Now the question is “what did we learn from it?” I invite us into dialogue with our neighbors of all political stripes. Let us listen deeply and humbly. And listen with respect. The person we are listening to, whether Democrat or Republican, is a child of God.

But we do not listen in a vacuum. We listen in the context of our faith. So someplace in that dialogue, after a lot of listening, let’s ask a question which comes from our Baptismal Covenant. “Knowing what we now know, how can we respect the dignity of every human being?” With emphasis on “every.” Because we are all children of God. And we should put another filter on the political decisions we make. It is given to us by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry who says,

“God is love. If a decision, or an action, is not about love, it is not about God.”

In a minute, I am going to give you a litany of those we need to stand with in order to “respect the dignity of every human being.” But while we are on the theme of listening and what we learned from this election, let’s consider those who are sometimes called the “working class” of America.

They shouted their pain and fear. A lot of people have been left behind in this economy. My favorite rock and roll prophet, Bruce Springsteen, has proclaimed their plight many times in song. One is “Jack of All Trades” about a man forced to do a variety of odd jobs because he has lost full time employment. It is a song of resilience but also a song of anger.

“I’ll mow your lawn; clean the leaves out of your drain. I’ll mend your roof and keep out the rain. I’ll take the work that God provides. I’m a jack of all trades, honey, we’ll be alright.”

Resilience. But then he adds,

“While a few get rich, the working man grows thin. It’s all happened before and it will happen again.”

We need to listen and learn from the pain of the working class.
Micah tells us to love justice. Respecting the dignity of every human being is loving justice. That means pre-election and post-election we stand with immigrants. The Bible is clear, over and over again, that we have a mandate to “welcome the stranger.” And to welcome refugees. According to Matthew’s Gospel, Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus spent two years as refugees in Egypt.

Four years ago, I stood in front of all of you at the MassMutual Center at my consecration as a bishop. Before I knelt down on trembling legs as bishops surrounded me and with a beautiful chant you invited the Holy Spirit to be among us and on me. Before that I was asked a series of questions provided and required by the Book of Common Prayer. They were all compelling and challenging. But one that seized my soul and still does is “will you defend those that have no helper?”

We stand with immigrants. With refugees. And we stand with our Muslim brothers and sisters and people of all religious faiths who might be worried right now. We stand with you under our one God.

And we have a mission to the poor. 2000 times we are told in the Bible to help the poor. This year on Sundays we have been reading the Gospel of Luke – a gospel filled with challenging parables. Do you know that in all those parables only one person is given a name by Jesus? Think about it. We all love the Good Samaritan story. What’s the name of the Good Samaritan? When I ask people what their favorite bible story is, so many say “The Prodigal Son.” What’s the name of the Prodigal Son? What is the name of the elder brother? What is the name of the Father? Jesus does not give any of them names. Oh, but then there is the parable about the rich man and the poor man. The poor man who “rests in the bosom of Abraham.” He has a name: Lazarus.

We know the names of celebrities and sports heroes. Do we know the names of the poor? Jesus wants us to know their names, know their stories and act to “change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it.”

Respecting the dignity of every human being means building a Beloved Community where diversity is welcomed and celebrated. The Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement says “black lives matter”…and “blue lives matter”…and “all lives matter.” Our Diocese offers Towards the Beloved Community: Holy Conversations about Race. I invite you to take part in those conversations.

And LGBT lives matter. We know that so well in the Episcopal Church. LGBT people have brought blessings to us abundantly. We stand with you in every Administration. In every era. In every time and place.
There is another dimension to “respecting the dignity of every human being” that has always been true but was highlighted in the campaign season. Sexual harassment denies the dignity of every human being. After the “groping video” became public, many women who have been raped and abused came forward with their stories to trauma centers and on social media. The statistics concerning sexual harassment and verbal abuse are staggering.

The Church has been guilty of this disrespect of women. And in recent years we have been intentional and forceful in eradicating it. We need to continue that effort and we need to add to that mission. We need to change the culture where men believe they have the right to demean women. And know that we do that for the sake of women AND men. Men become less than whole human beings when they engage in that behavior. We need to change a culture where women can be given numbers depending on how a man perceives them. We must do this work if we are to have any credibility at all when, in a few minutes, we respond to the baptismal question: “will you respect the dignity of every human being?”

We Are the Earth

Public Prayer for the Planet

I was shocked that climate change was never discussed in the presidential debates. God’s creation has been endangered for many years. No matter who was elected we needed to step up our awareness of this most crucial issue and act to preserve this world for future generations. Today I will be at a liturgy at Heifer Farm in Rutland. It is called We Are the Earth: A Public Prayer for the Planet. Along with several other church leaders, I will sign a pledge vowing to protect God’s creation. It is our mission.

We have so much to do as followers of Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. Democrats, Republicans, Independents, all of us. This sermon is getting long but the Patriots don’t play until 8:30 tonight so we have time. Just one more thing.
Micah tells us the Lord requires that we love kindness. We should always do that, but in this tense time in America, I invite us to practice kindness in big ways and in small. Hold doors open for others. Don't drive aggressively…even when you are in Boston. Think twice before you send that text. Check in on your neighbor.

Practice gratitude. Two years ago in this Cathedral we had the funeral of a beloved bishop, Andrew Wissemann. The Cathedral was full. The preacher, Bishop George Councell, asked “who here ever received a hand-written thank you note from Andrew?” Hundreds of people raised their hands. Let’s practice kindness.

What does the Lord require of us?

Do justice.

Love kindness.

Walk humbly with our God.

Amen.
For people of faith, the greater reality is God’s love. Our congregations have provided the space and silence for intense prayer leading up to this election. Today we are waking to a new reality as a nation with a new President-elect. Now, our congregations must be places where political opponents can worship together in peace. I acknowledge the weight of this pastoral ministry for the faithful priests who shepherd our congregations. I am praying with you and for you as your sanctuaries offer true sanctuary from the din and degradation of this election cycle.

As a person of faith, I look to Scripture today for wisdom. The prophet Isaiah encouraged the Israelites to avoid ugliness and return to purpose.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
   the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
   and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
   and your gloom be like the noonday
(Isaiah 58:9b-10).

We are part of a movement that transcends election results. We are followers of Jesus Christ and as such we are called to treat one another with the love that enfolds us at every moment in human history. We are about God’s mission of mercy, compassion and hope. We must uphold the dignity of every human person; recommitting ourselves to the work of justice and to an incarnational faith which recognizes suffering and the very real wounds of the crucified among us. We need to return to purpose as we double-down on our prayer. If we do this, the prophet tells us we will be instruments of the peace for which we long.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
   you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
   the restorer of streets to live in (Isaiah 58:12).

God is near. Jesus is real. The Spirit breathes in us. Double-down on prayer for this nation and for the grace to see the face of God in the other. Let us together, do the work God has given us to do.

+Doug

The Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher

IX Bishop of Western Massachusetts
Welcome to OUR Diocesan Convention. Let’s start with a verbal challenge. I am on a campaign to change the adjective that goes before diocese. Most often we say “the” diocese – as in “there are parishes” and then there is “the” diocese with the implication that “the diocese” is the staff at 37 Chestnut Street in Springfield. But the fact is that we are all in this together. “The diocese” is not just my staff. It is all of our churches, and all of our ministries, and all of the holy work God has given us to do in this time and this part of God’s world. We are in this together. From Stockbridge to Sutton, from Southwick to Fitchburg, from Williamstown to Whitinsville. From the Connecticut border to Vermont and New Hampshire. Yes, Yankee fans and Red Sox fans. So let’s change the adjective to “OUR diocese.” Because that is who we are. Today, if anyone says “the diocese”, I invite you to lovingly wave your hands. And this anti-casino bishop bets he will fail this challenge as well and will need to be reminded.

The line from last year’s convention speech that was quoted the most on Twitter and Facebook and in actual in person conversation was “we are going to double-down on social justice.” Remember that? Here is the line I hope you take away from this year: “in OUR Diocese we are invited to double-down on prayer.” Before I express the “why” and “how” of doubling down on prayer, let’s look at what the Holy Spirit did with the “double-down on social justice commitment” in the past year. Because the Holy Spirit ran with it. And this will not be a complete list.

In this year our Creation Care Missioner, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas has been engaged more than ever with our churches. And represents us, and now the United Church of Christ, at numerous politically strategic events, so much so that she received the 2016 “Steward of God’s Creation Award” from the National Religious Coalition of Creation Care. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry put me on the “Commission for Socially Responsible Investing” for the church nationally “because” he said “brother I want you to do there what Western Massachusetts is doing regarding climate change.”

We have begun Towards the Beloved Community: Holy Conversations About Race in our Diocese. This grew out of conversations on our Social Justice Committee after we all read the book The New Jim Crow. The first one was well attended and provided a safe space for people to talk about race. Our church is a place where Black Lives matter…and Blue Lives matter…and all lives matter. But we are still a long way from the Beloved Community that God intends.

Michael Curry has made racial reconciliation one of his priorities and now it is one of ours too. I encourage you to participate in future Holy Conversations. We have collaborated with an organization called Ashes to Ashes and prayed a funeral service in Springfield for the 4000 African Americans who were lynched between 1865-1965. Then many of you prayed those names out loud in your churches on “Speak My Name Day.”
Bishop Alan Gates, Bishop Gayle Harris and I have addressed the public health crisis of gun violence numerous times and actively support Attorney General Maura Healey in her attempt to close loopholes in the assault weapons ban. Many of our churches take part in the annual Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath to mark the anniversary of the shooting at Sandy Hook. On the first Sunday in June many of us wore orange – orange is the color that hunters wear so they won’t be accidentally shot by other hunters. We wore orange to say “we are human and do not wish to be shot” in response to the 33,000 people a year who die from gun violence and in the 300 mass shootings (4 or more people) that have happened this year. We are working with an organization called Don’t Stand Idly By to encourage gun manufacturers to use the technology already available for “safe guns” – guns that require the finger print of the owner to fire.

There are twenty-three million refugees right now. It is the largest displacement of people since World War II. The Bible is clear in giving us a mandate to “welcome the stranger.” Among many passages we hear this from Leviticus 19:34 – “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you. You shall love the alien as yourself. For you yourselves were aliens in the land of Egypt.”…Egypt where Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus lived as refugees for two years. We are working with Ascentria (the former Lutheran Social Services) to help refugees. I spent a day with New Americans working at their New Lands Farms. More about Ascentria later today. And St. John’s in Northampton is working with Catholic Charities on helping refugees adjust to new life here. This is holy work. This is Gospel work.

Ministry with Veterans is taking off throughout our Diocese. We have a lunch and arts program in Northampton, lunches for Vets in Springfield, West Springfield, Webster and Holyoke and another veterans lunch will be offered soon in Greenfield. We are seeing an average of 50 people at each location weekly. Some vets have told me that these lunches are the only experiences of community they have all week.

More and more of our churches are embracing forms of “outdoor” church and “laundry love” where we hear the stories and enter into relationship with people experiencing poverty. That is happening in Pittsfield, Springfield, Greenfield, Worcester, Milford to name just a few. I’ll never forget Meredyth Ward’s Celebration of a New Ministry in a laundromat and the blessing
of the “Walking Together” office in the Main South section of Worcester. In that room were Congressman Jim McGovern, other dignitaries, Episcopalians from our Worcester area churches, and people experiencing homelessness, all in one place. And most recently, a much-needed Sober House opened at The Church of the Reconciliation in Webster. These stories and more will be told throughout this day.

“Doubling down on social justice” is not a one year commitment. Michael Curry says “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 it.” As long as God’s dream is alive, a dream that is made so clear in the Bible and in the witness of the saints, we are called to work passionately with Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope.

This is my 5th Convention in our Diocese. My first one was as bishop-elect in 2012. Since Gordon Scruton handed off the crozier to me on December first of that year, I’ve traveled a lot of miles on the Pike…and a lot of back roads to little towns. 136,000 miles to be exact. I’ve seen this depth of prayer with my own eyes in big churches and small and all those in-between. I am grateful to serve a diocese where prayer already matters. And yet we can get distracted by many things if we are not careful. We can lose our focus on the heart of our faith: Jesus Christ. And so I invite you to join me in doubling down on prayer.
Let's look at what that commitment might look like. And I'll begin, as I often do, with Thomas Merton, the Roman Catholic monk, who wrote 60 compelling books on the spiritual journey. He wrote:

“If we descend into the depth of our own spirit, and arrive at our center, we confront the inescapable fact that at the root of our existence we are in immediate and constant contact with God.”

“At the root of our existence, we are in immediate and constant contact with God.” As we run from thing to thing, it does not always seem that way. Instead it seems like we have immediate and constant contact with anxiety. We live in anxious times in our nation, in our world AND in our church. And we can't think that anxiety away. We can’t make it stop by force of our will. We can only be set free to be authentically human by finding the source of our life and the meaning of our life in God. Our God who is as close as our next breath. It is by entering intentionally into that relationship that we are transformed. No one says that better than last night's speaker, my friend Rob Wright:

“God causes freedom in people. Freedom to be authentic. Freedom from fear. Freedom for improvisation. Freedom to befriend the world. God is a freedom God and God's people are in the freedom business.”

What a vision! I want to live that way. Do you?

But remember what Thomas Merton said. He had an “if” clause in there. “We confront the fact that we are in immediate and constant contact with God” – the freedom God – “if we descend to the depth of our own spirit and arrive at our center.”

My invitation to us is to go deeper. And that is a place where average Sunday attendance is not the only measure of our
faithfulness. It is a place below our anxiety about the stewardship campaign. It is a deep place of connection to the Living God that will not be destroyed by a church argument about taking out the pews and replacing them with chairs. What does the “how” of doubling down on prayer look like? How do we go deeper? There are multiple dimensions.

One is a renewed dedication to daily and if possible, more than daily prayer in our lives. I have “holy jealousy” of the Muslim tradition of set prayer times throughout the day. In our own tradition we have the Liturgy of the Hours which many of us continue to pray daily. There is a wonderful story of the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, who founded the Methodist movement. They were asked who taught them the most about God. They said their mother. Now John and Charles were not their mother’s only children. She had 16 others! But there would be a time in everyday when Susanna Wesley would sit down at the kitchen table and put her apron over her head. And the children knew not to bother mom for the next twenty minutes because she was praying.

My mother was a person with a deep commitment to prayer. A few years after she died in 1977, all too young at the age of 47, my sister found two prayers she hand wrote on the first page of a medical book she had as a nurse. The first prayer is called Nine Consecutive Hours, meaning that this prayer should be said every hour for nine hours in a row – such a Roman Catholic thing to do! The prayer begins “O Jesus, who has said, ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you, through the intercession of Mary, thy most holy mother, I knock, I seek, I ask that my prayer be granted.”

Then it says “make your prayer request.” And then there is another biblically centered prayer followed by “make your prayer request.” Followed by a third biblically themed prayer and then one last “make your prayer request.” Remember she did that every hour for nine hours. While having a hyperactive son who liked to jump down stairs instead of walking down them. This is being intentional about a relationship with the Living God.

And the second prayer she has written down is the Prayer of St. Francis. “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is sadness, joy. It is in giving that we receive. It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” She never heard Rob Wright preach, but I think she knew the freedom God.

Doubling down on prayer means a commitment to daily prayer. Even in the midst of our too busy lives or maybe because of our too busy lives. My prayer practice is to pray early in the morning and then I’m off and running. I’m going to make a commitment to practice what I preach and to schedule in 15 minutes of prayer in the middle of every day. Doubling down on prayer.

Maybe doubling down on prayer means a deeper commitment to Bible Study. In groups and in private. On Sundays, we get short bible passages. I invite you to take one gospel at a time and read it straight through. If you are really busy, know that Mark is the shortest one. There is transforming power in reading the Jesus story as a whole and remarkable life. And, if you want to connect it to social justice, I invite church leaders to offer a course looking at all the times that Jesus quotes the prophets – especially his favorite, Isaiah.
And I invite you to consider a parish program that is about going deeper in prayer and in bible study called Renewal Works. Pam Mott can tell you all about it. Pam also has another exciting possibility for our churches. It is called Prayer 5/30. It is a commitment to pray 5 minutes a day for 30 days or a season, checking in on Facebook with a community that is making the same commitment and joining you in prayer.

A renewed commitment to prayer might look like prayer with our brothers and sisters from other faith traditions. Rumi, a 13th century Sufi mystic wrote:

“Prayer clears the mist and brings peace back to the soul. Every morning, every evening let the heart sing ‘there is no reality but God’.”

God transcends any one expression, any one faith tradition. In the past couple of years I have been blessed to pray with rabbis and imams and Buddhists. We have been in our faith tradition silos for so long, that does not happen naturally. I invite our church leaders to be intentional in seeking out relationships with those from other traditions. Do it for the sake of the communities we live in and do it so our people might go deeper into the mystery that is God. Talk to members of the Cathedral about the enthusiasm generated by our new “rabbi in residence” Mark Shapiro.

And I invite us to consider opportunities to pray in languages besides English. Prayers in Spanish demonstrate a welcome to the largest growing demographic in the Commonwealth. And if you ever sang “Alabare”, you know God is smiling.
Doubling down on prayer might include a commitment to public prayer. Now I know all our churches are open to the public and all are welcome. But we are in a new era. People are not coming to us like they used to and we need to go out to them. We need to witness to the faith like St. Paul and the Apostles who prayed on street corners. We did that on my walk through OUR diocese. Many of you are doing that on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Last Good Friday I was in Worcester and as church people walked along we were joined by all manner of people who usually did not go to church but they were drawn by the cross lifted high and the compelling story of Jesus. A reporter from the Worcester Telegram joined us. Now my experience is that when reporters come to something like this, they get a picture and a quote from me and then they are off to the next thing. But this reporter stayed the whole time. And when she wrote her article, she did not include a quote from me but she did quote several of our pilgrims who were experiencing homelessness. The Holy Spirit was all over that prayer walk.

Public witness prayer and social justice can go together. The House of Bishops has done this several times. In Washington D.C. and in Salt Lake City we had processions to pray for peace in the midst of the public health crisis of gun violence. We will be doing that again in Chicago this spring to draw attention to the Unholy Trinity of Racism, Guns and Poverty. We are clear that these are not demonstrations but prayer. Not marches but processions. We are not another advocacy group; we are a people at prayer. Episcopalians are good at liturgy so why not take what we are good at and bring it to the street?

That is happening right here in our diocese in the next couple of weeks. On the Sunday night before Election Day, our deacons will be leading a prayer service on the streets of Worcester. We will be praying for wisdom in the choices we make and we will be praying for peace and reconciliation after a particularly bitter and divisive campaign season. The deacons will offer those prayers again, here in Springfield on election eve.
On November 13th we are gathering at the Heifer Farm in Rutland with our friends in the Lutheran and UCC churches for “We Are the Earth: Public Prayer for the Planet.” Margaret is leading us in a liturgy that renews our dedication to following Jesus, and that bears witness to our sacred calling to protect the Earth and create a more just and sustainable way of life.

Also in November, the Berkshire Clericus is organizing an Interfaith Prayer Pilgrimage in the Berkshires addressing our addiction crisis. As you know the opioid epidemic is having a devastating impact in New England. Thank you, Berkshires clericus, for your leadership.

And in June the Episcopal churches of New England are sponsoring a pilgrimage down the Connecticut River – the whole river. I will be with them for the journey that goes through Massachusetts and Connecticut. It is a way to celebrate God’s gift of this river, its history and highlight baptism imagery.

I am often asked what the future of the Church looks like. With you, there is much that the Holy Spirit has yet to reveal to us. Whatever that future is, I am sure public prayer witness will be a growing part of it.

Private prayer. Bible Study. Public Prayer. Our model for this is Jesus. He was committed to all of that. Jesus told us to “pray always and do not lose heart.” Prayer shaped the life of Jesus. And for the next few minutes I invite you to look with me at the prayer that I think might have been with him his whole life long. A prayer that might become our prayer too. It is a prayer that we know as one of the seven “last words” of Jesus, spoken while he suffered on the cross. It is Luke 23:46.

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” According to Luke, they were the final words of Jesus as “he breathed his last.”

Jesus might have summoned up those words from the depth of his soul for the first time because they fit the moment. But I think he practiced those words for a long time before his final breath. I think he made those words so much a part of his living that they came naturally and spontaneously to him at the end.

Could it be that when Jesus preached his first sermon at Nazareth – you know the one where “everyone was amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” and then five minutes later they wanted to throw him off a cliff- that one. Could it be that as they “drove him out of town and led him to the brow of the hill so they might hurl him off the cliff”, Jesus was praying “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” And he did not have time to put that prayer request in every hour for nine hours like my mom did. But somehow the prayer was answered and as the bible tells us “he passed through the midst of them and went on his way” – perhaps experiencing resurrection long before he died.

And maybe he practiced that prayer when he was in a house filled with people because they wanted to hear Jesus preach. The house was so full no one else could get in. Outside the door was a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. His four friends knew, if they could just get him in to see Jesus, something great would happen. They climbed up on the roof, carrying him with them. Then they tore the roof apart and lowered him down in front of Jesus. Think of the pressure on Jesus! The roof has been torn apart. If this was a house church, the junior warden is going to be furious about that roof. Before the healing, don’t you think Jesus was saying “Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit.”
And when Jesus was out there in a desolate place and 5000 people gathered. He was preaching and healing all day long. As evening drew near, the apostles told Jesus these people are hungry. Send them away. And Jesus said “you feed them.” But instead of looking what they had, they looked at what they did not have and said “we have five loaves and two fish. It is not enough.” Jesus took it, thanked God for it, broke it apart and gave it away. 5 loaves, 2 fish, 5000 people. Don’t you think Jesus might have been thinking “Father, I don’t want to look like a fool here. Let this food get beyond the first row and out to all 5000. Into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Now if this were a crowd of Episcopalians, it certainly would go beyond the first row because no one would be sitting in the first row. But they were not Episcopalians yet, so there were people in the first row and they joyfully received the food and broke it and passed it on and God multiplied the grace. More resurrection. More being set free for improvisation as our brother Rob would say. More freedom to take risks. To do things that were not done before. Do you think we need that freedom in our churches in our diocese, in central and western Massachusetts right now?

We could go on and on with these stories. The point is that Jesus, the one we follow today, tomorrow and through all time, had a prayer shaped life. And so did the early church. That is why they were not called Christians at first, but followers of The Way. Their faith was not an “add on”. One of many things they did. Their faith shaped everything they did. And then so many said, “we want that kind of life.” A life shaped by prayer and love of neighbor (also called social justice.)

We started this Convention Address with an experiment. We engaged the challenge of changing “the diocese” into “our diocese.” Let’s keep that experiment going. And let’s end with another experiment. An early church, Pentecost kind of experiment. Earlier, with Thomas Merton, I said God is as close as our next breath. I invite you to get comfortable in your seats and try to stay still. If you are comfortable closing your eyes, do that. In a moment I am going to invite you to breathe in. And as you do, say in your mind “come, Holy Spirit.” We will do that together. And then we will breathe out together.

Are you ready?
Ok. Get comfortable. Feel your feet firmly planted on God’s earth. On the count three we will breathe in and say in your soul “come Holy Spirit.”
The word “conspire” means to “breathe together.” That means you are now part of a conspiracy. God’s conspiracy. God’s plan for the Jesus Movement to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many, into the dream God has for it. Amen.

+Doug

The Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher
IX Bishop of Western Massachusetts
As our nation approaches its Election Day on Nov. 8, we have a deep yearning for the Holy Spirit to be present in our national life. Individually, we express this yearning in a variety of ways according to personal conscience. Collectively, we are called to express this yearning through prayer.

We must pray that God be at work in our electoral process. We must pray for a peaceful transition, no matter the outcome of our elections. We must pray that the demonization of one another’s opponents which has characterized this election not be further stoked by its outcome. We must pray that all those elected on that day be moved, strengthened and guided by the Spirit, to lead us through fractious and dangerous times. We must pray in gratitude for those who, with sacrifice of self and noble intent, step up to lead our common life.

We the Episcopal bishops in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts call for a vigil period of intense prayer from noon on All Saints Sunday, Nov. 6 through noon on Election Day, Tuesday, Nov. 8. The particulars of such prayer in our congregations will vary according to local parish traditions and planning. For some it may be as simple as concluding the Sunday prayers with an extended Litany for the Nation, or holding a special form of Morning Prayer on Nov. 8. Others may wish to hold extended vigils, with prayer in shifts offering continuous intercession.

*Almighty God, to whom we must account for all our powers and privileges: Guide the people of this land in the election of officials and representatives, that, by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.* [Book of Common Prayer, p. 822]

The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

The Rt. Rev. Gayle E. Harris, Bishop Suffragan, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

The Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
God is looking for us and God will not fail.

September 12, 2016

The following is the sermon offered to the people of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church on Sunday September 11, 2016

Jesus was such a great preacher. In these parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin, he engages his listeners by saying “which one of you…” Which one of you has ever lost anything? Since turning 60 I lose my glasses at least once a day. Losing something is a universal human experience. In asking this question Jesus not only engages his audience but he connects his audience to each other. According to the text, his listeners that day include “tax collectors and sinners” and “scribes and Pharisees.” The unrighteous and the righteous. Scribes and Pharisees would never include themselves among sinners. But Jesus brings them together in the experience of loss.

Now that Jesus has us engaged, he asks “which one of you, having 100 sheep and losing one, would leave the 99 in the wilderness and search for the lost one?” Not put them safely away in a pen with a guard. Leave them in the wilderness where there is great danger. Think coyotes. Which one of you would do that? The honest answer is “none of us, Lord, no one would do that.” But, spoiler alert, God would.

Jesus continues “which one of you, having ten coins and losing one, would sweep the house all day long until it was found, and then call your friends for a party?”

How would you answer that question? Let’s consider a 21st century version of this question. Think of a time you lost your car keys. You search and search. You look under furniture, in between the cushions, back out to see if you left them in the car. If you are of the spirituality that does this sort of thing, you might promise money to St. Anthony. Finally you find the keys. Which one of you would throw a big party? For four years now I have been living just 20 miles from here. I know people sitting in front of me this morning have lost and found keys. Not one of you have any of you invited me to a “lost and found key” party. No one.

2000 years ago when Jesus asked this question, his listeners are thinking “no one would do that Jesus.” But God would.

Jesus gets us interested by telling stories of a universal human experience – loss. But after he gets us there Jesus uses the opportunity to tell stories about God. Let’s explore these stories and learn about God and how the Living God makes a difference in our lives.

Let’s look at the numbers: 100 sheep, 10 coins. Those numbers represent fullness or completion. A full set. When one is missing the set is incomplete. God strives for completion. Why does God search out the lost? Because God’s world can’t be complete without them. You have heard the expression that parents are only as happy as their least happy child. God is like a parent. God can’t be happy until all people are brought into the fullness of life.

Here is another truth about God. In God’s eyes we are all sinners God wants to save. Consider this. In the lost sheep story the shepherd leaves the 99 in the wilderness and goes to search for the one. The text is very specific. When he finds the one, he goes home and gathers friends for a celebration. He does not go back to the wilderness for the other 99. That is because all of humanity is represented by the one lost sheep. The 99 don’t really exist. We can only understand this by looking at the words that conclude the parable: “There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who have no need of repentance.” Do you really think there are 99 people anywhere who have no need of repentance? The Pharisees might think they are in that crowd but Jesus is constantly pointing out their delusions. On many Sundays we have the “confession.” Do you ever exempt yourself from that? Do you think “nope, nothing happened this week that I am sorry for”? That never happens for me. And if it did, the “things left undone” would catch me every time. God knows who we are and yet still wants to save us.

Why? The lost coin parable reveals an answer. The story is about an inanimate object – a coin. The coin does not care if it is found or not. A coin can be a coin lying with the dust bunnies under the bed or when it is placed on a nice clean mantle or if it is being spent. The coin does not know it needs to be saved. And yet the woman (God) looks for it. It matters to God. God has an inbuilt desire to look for us. God is love and God will love whether we want to love back or not. As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, “if it is not about love then it is not about God.”

We know this from the 23rd Psalm which offers us more shepherd imagery for God. Recall the last lines of that psalm which is the favorite of so many: “surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” Here is a secret. Don’t tell the bishop. That is not an adequate translation. Really smart people who know Hebrew better than I do say that in the original Hebrew the word is not “follow”, which sounds so passive. It is closer to “your goodness and mercy shall pursue me, shall chase after me, shall hunt me down”.

The psalm and today’s parables reveal a God who is persistent, faithful. In those times in our lives when we feel lost, know that God is looking for us. Even if we don’t feel God’s presence or power or hope, something is going on. God is looking for
us and God will not fail.

Now I know the Red Sox game is on at 1:00 pm so you are hoping I will end this sermon soon, but here is just one more dimension to these rich parables. Each of the “lost” stories in Luke’s Gospel ends with a party. The shepherd throws a party. The woman throws a party. The very next story in this chapter is about the prodigal son – the lost son. And that ends in a party, too.

Remember the first lines in today’s gospel. The Pharisees “were grumbling.” The Pharisees were good people. They went to church. They prayed. They studied the Bible. They gave generously to the poor. But they were missing out on joy. They knew the laws of the church so very well but they were confining God to those laws. Jesus invited them to stop grumbling and celebrate a God of irrational, exuberant generosity. We are invited to join the same party.

Now I know we have a big job ahead of us. Michael Curry says 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 that God has for it. What a big mission! And in just two more minutes (I promise) we will re-commit ourselves to that mission. We will recommit ourselves to changing the world into the dream God has for it. We need to act because faith without action is just an opinion. In an anxious time in our world and in our country, let’s be a people of hope. Let’s remember in our tradition that we have been claimed in baptism as Christ’s own forever. Forever. God will find us. And there will be a party like no other. Because that is what God does. Amen.
Racism: We have breathed it in.

September 1, 2016

This post also appears in the summer issue of Abundant Times magazine in mailboxes September 1-2.

This fall our diocese will begin offering days of reflection called TOWARD THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: HOLY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE. I am grateful for the team formed from the Social Justice Committee that created the framework and gathered the resources for these days. I look forward to participating and having my vision expanded and my soul engaged.

When I reflect on my own journey of race relations, I can see how my understanding has evolved. When the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s was changing our country, I was too young to appreciate what was going on. It was later, in college and seminary, that I developed a passionate interest in the Movement, studied it in-depth, and spent several summers working with the southern poor.

My admiration for the great men and women that made history working for justice continued to grow through the years. With the cadets at West Point and the youth groups of Grace Millbrook, I placed great emphasis on the witness of Jonathan Daniels – the young Episcopal seminarian who gave his life in the struggle. Underlying this was a belief that if we could all just follow in their footsteps, racism would end.
While continuing my deep appreciation for all that has been done for racial equality by so many – the famous and those unnamed in the great cloud of witnesses- my understanding of racism has been expanded by a fable I heard a year ago. Here it is:

A long, long time ago there was a place where people were very poor. They were farmers and their tending of the land produced very little. Life was hard. But then someone discovered a fertilizer that made all the difference. The crops grew and grew. The society became prosperous and remained so for hundreds of years.

Then one day it was discovered that the fertilizer was, and always had been, toxic. The food people were eating, the air they were breathing, was poisonous. It was actually killing them slowly.

Here is the insight. For hundreds of years we took human beings from Africa and enslaved them. They worked on our farms and America became prosperous. Slavery and the racism that comes with it is a big part of our story. Slavery has ended but the racism that comes with it remains. It is not just past history. It is part of us. We have breathed it in.

The struggle with racism is not about “helping black people.” It is about understanding and addressing the toxic atmosphere that makes all of our lives less than what God intends.

Professor Ryan Williams Virden explores this further in writing about racial justice.

“The first step to creating this justice is to understand how it was sidelined in the first place. We must understand the way that whiteness — fitting into the Anglo-Saxon archetype —has been valued historically via formal avenues such as legislation and school curriculum as well as informal ones such as social customs, traditions and practices. Because much of this is passed down through generations, or happens away from public scrutiny, or is largely implicit it is necessary to learn and then unlearn this sordid history and way of being. Once we can come to grips with the ways whiteness keeps us from our own humanity and strangles our souls there is no other choice then to struggle for this justice. We won’t struggle because we are trying to help anyone else, or feel bad for them; we will struggle because our own freedom, our own humanity, is tied up with everyone else’s.”

I’m going to reflect more on this statement and I invite you attend TOWARDS THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: HOLY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE – because “our own humanity…is tied up with everyone else’s.”

+Doug

Click here for more information about “Toward the Beloved Community: Holy Conversations About Race.”
There is no “us” and “them”. There is only “us.”

July 10, 2016

Sermon offered today at Christ Church Cathedral, Springfield.

The story of the Good Samaritan – how many have heard this story ten times? 20 times? 30 times? We can be tempted to write this off and say “thanks, I got it.” But I believe in light of the recent violent events in our country – Louisiana, Minnesota, and Dallas – this parable offers us a way to New Life. After the murders in Dallas, reporters and commentators often referred to the United States as a country “on the edge.” The lesson taught by Jesus 2000 years ago might move us away from the edge and into abundant life.

I’m going to set the stage for my sermon by referring to another sermon on this same parable by the outstanding theologian, Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann says the lawyer began with a question about Eternal Life. He gets an answer that is about mercy.

“"The question and the answer do not fit together. Eternal life smacks of transcendentalism… future… untroubled…secure. Mercy is by contrast freighted with risk and hurt and involvement.""

By telling the story that he does, about a man beaten, robbed and left to die in a ditch, Jesus changes our question about Eternal Life by “plugging us into a world of violence.” Following Jesus will not mean escaping violence – it will mean engaging it. Sound like 2016 yet?

Now that Brueggemann has set the stage, let’s do 800 years of the history of Israel in two minutes and 500 years of American history in two more minutes and then look at Jesus’ plan for creating a different future. I promise not to talk too fast.

Before 800 B.C. Israel was one nation. But it was split among Solomon’s sons and became the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. The Southern Kingdom was often called Judah and the Northern Kingdom was sometimes called Samaria. Although they all practiced the religion of Israel and relied on the Torah, there was one big difference. The Temple in Jerusalem belonged to the territory of Judah. The Samaritans had to worship at a different Temple and each nation claimed to have the “true” Temple. Other economic and social tensions led to real hatred between the two groups.

To make matters worse, geography made it necessary for some people living in Judah to go through a section of Samaria to get to their Temple. Sometimes when people of Judah on pilgrimage to the Temple crossed through Samaritan territory, they were attacked, robbed and sometimes killed. This went on for hundreds of years. One time shortly before the time of Jesus, a large group from Judah were ambushed and massacred on this trip. In retaliation people from Jerusalem went out and killed Samaritans. Now at this time both sides were ruled by Rome, so Rome sent troops to slaughter people on both sides. Do you get a sense of the tension between the Jews of Judah and the Samaritans after 800 years of history?

Now let’s look at our history. Honestly. The first African slaves were brought to Virginia in 1619 – the beginning of a long wave of human bondage and oppression. New England was a big part of the slave trade. America became prosperous and we built our economy on slave labor. When we had a chance to do something about that after the American Revolution, we did not. Slavery continues until 1865. And that is followed by the Jim Crow laws that oppressed African Americans for another 100 years. Between 1868 and 1968, over four thousand African Americans were lynched. Now we have what many call the New Jim Crow laws leading to over one million black men in our jails – right now. And there are many other political and cultural realities that continue the oppression of our history. This did not get all resolved by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s. Racism is a huge part of our history and it obviously impacts us to this day. Let’s see how Jesus gave the Jews and the Samaritans a path to a new life and how that could be true for us now.

Jesus is telling this story to Jews and it could be a nice story about compassion. And it is about compassion but it is also about something more than compassion. If Jesus wanted to tell a story about compassion, he could have said a Samaritan was lying beaten in a ditch and a person from Judah came along and took care of him. That would work. His listeners would say “Yes, we have to stop hating the Samaritans so much. We should be compassionate.” But Jesus did not tell the story in this way. Jesus made the Samaritan the hero of the story. And that changes everything. Remember some people of Judah thought they had the only true religion. Salvation was meant for them. By making the Samaritan the hero of the story, Jesus is saying “You are not saved by belonging to a particular tribe or race or religion. You are saved by joining my
mission of mercy, compassion and hope. The Kingdom of God is not a religion. The Kingdom of God is a mission and the Samaritan is part of that mission.” This would have stunned the people of Jesus’ time. There is no “us” and “them”. There is only “us.” We are all needed, equally, to move towards the Beloved Community that Jesus intends.

Byron Rushing has served for many years in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. He is an Episcopalian and he is black. Recently he reflected on The Book of Common Prayer collect for July 4th. It reads in part “Lord God Almighty, in whose Name the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us.” Rushing writes,

“This phrase is only possible because slavery was forgotten – or the ‘us’ was not meant to include me.”

Jesus took the history of the Jews and the Samaritans seriously and he offered another way. Americans need to take our history seriously and find another way. I will leave you with one last “new idea” from Jesus that helped in finding that way 2000 years ago and can help us find it today.

The lawyer asks “who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story and then he reframes the question to the lawyer. In the original Greek wording Jesus says “Who became a neighbor to that man?”

To become a neighbor to another doesn’t just happen. It demands a new way of thinking. It demands imagination, creativity, effort. The rushing priest and the hurried Levite in the story will not let their lives be interrupted. The Samaritan does let his life be interrupted. He does not run from the brutality. He engages it and the outcome is a new identity. He is now really a neighbor.

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians we are told that in Jesus Christ “all things hold together.” In Jesus, there is no “us” and “them.” There is only us. Amen.
Baton Rouge, St. Paul and Dallas

July 9, 2016

*In Christ all things hold together.*

Colossians 1:17

During his lifetime, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. saw terrible violence and lost his life for speaking the truth to our nation. I find myself wondering what he would say to us today. His way of nonviolence – Jesus’ way – meant that we had to watch Selma and Birmingham on the evening news as police and guardsmen beat and bloodied young protesters. Fifty years later, people we look to for protection – motivated by fear – become judge, jury and executioner in viral video. The more this happens, the less their lives seem to matter. **We stand against racism.**

Violence will never end violence. Hate only feeds hate. The news from Baton Rouge and St. Paul – captured by cell phones – must force us to speak to one another about race in America. We must admit the ugly truth that Black lives are in danger. We must look long and hard at the way we hire and train our Law Enforcement Officers. Something is broken and we must have the courage to fix it.

Dallas – the city that still bears the weight of another killing more than fifty years ago – today, her streets are marked with the blood of heroes. When hatred fuels the heart of a man with an assault-style weapon, innocent people are gunned down in the streets – people who put their lives at risk for us every day. **We stand with those who keep the peace.** Those sworn to protect our lives and property are grieving. We must carry the families of the dead in our hearts. **We weep with those who weep.**

Make no mistake that hatred plus an automatic weapon equals death. Gun violence in America is now, God help us, part of the fabric of our lives. We cannot let fear take hold – though fear is the right feeling. Whether we “sit in” or stand up or speak truth until we have no words left, we must DO something to end the carnage. **We cry out for an end to the violence** – for Baton Rouge, for St. Paul, and for Dallas. *In Christ all things hold together.* In his name I pray.

+Doug
June 23, 2016

“The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

Gospel of John

“Your Kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.”

The Lord’s Prayer

“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 that God has for it.”

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry

Christianity is not an abstract faith. It is not a “world-escaping” faith, but just the opposite. We are a world-engaging faith. We believe in the Incarnation. God is here, among us. We believe God’s Reign is coming here. We believe Jesus has given us a Spirit to transform the world.

If we are to engage the world, then we need to be good citizens and be informed about the issues of our time. And we need to speak to those issues – even when those issues are complex and they always are.

In my engagement with politics, I often go back to criteria that then Senator Barack Obama put forth in a series of speeches during the presidential campaign of 2008. He invited churches to “enter the public square” and to “inject morality into public discourse.” He offered these guidelines:

1. Know what you are talking about. Study issues in depth. We can’t just proclaim “God says…”
2. Your stance on an issue needs to cut across denominational lines. Your position needs to make sense to people of other religious traditions and to people of no religious tradition.
3. For the sake of progress in political action, you must be willing to compromise. Too often, in Senator Obama’s opinion, churches take an “all or nothing” approach to legislation.

In this election year, I encourage our church leaders to urge people to vote, to be informed and to bring Gospel values into their discernment. But there are things we cannot do. We cannot endorse any candidate publicly. Nor should we speak against a candidate by name from the pulpit or in church publications. I invite you to read and study the very helpful TEC ELECTION TOOLKIT. In it you’ll find the “pledge to vote” button and “Policy for Action” – an easy-access guide to all the issues from the perspective of General Convention resolutions.

Another very helpful resource is this “Open Letter to Maine Clergy About Political Advocacy” by Stephen Lane, the Bishop of Maine. He has all the facts we need to know and he explores some gray areas. Read what he has to say about “church publications” and wonders if the personal Facebook pages of clergy could be considered a “church publication” if that is where people go to get news about their church.

And I recommend “A Word to the Church” issued in Holy Week by the House of Bishops. In it we call for civil political discourse and point to the danger of political rhetoric that turns neighbor against neighbor and threatens those on society’s margins. Although issued in Holy Week, this statement is a useful reminder throughout this election year.

As we vote, as we choose our leaders, as we engage the issues of our day, let’s do so as a people who follow Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope.

Doug
* Full text of Senator Obama's “Call to Renewal” Address on Faith and Politics, June 26, 2006
More death. More words. And no action.

June 13, 2016

A Statement on the Mass Shooting in Orlando

They lurk in ambush in public squares
and in secret places they murder the innocent;
they spy out the helpless.

Psalm 10:8

I write to you again in response to yet another mass shooting in America. Elementary schools, high schools, movie theaters, shopping malls, office buildings, churches and gay bars. No place is safe. No one is safe. Not as long as assault weapons are legally available to the one who hates, to the one who is ill, or to the one who wants to bring terror.

More death. More words. And no action.

The public health crisis that is gun violence just claimed 50 more lives. Add this to the 91 per day that die in the United States through gun violence. Just ten days ago Bishops United Against Gun Violence co-sponsored the #WearOrange campaign. Episcopalians all over the country wore orange and took over social media for the entire day. When will we wake up? When will our elected officials show some courage? In the wake of the slaughter and wounding of 100 LGBTQ people in Orlando, we must acknowledge that homophobia and racism are also at the heart of our dis-ease.

They say in their heart, ‘God has forgotten; he hides his face; he will never notice (Psalm 10:11).’ But God sees. God needs us to break the cycle of fear, hatred and scapegoating with a love that defies the darkness. Yes, our laws must change. Our elected leaders must bear responsibility for the state of gun safety legislation. But we must speak love to those who mourn, to those feeling a wave of justifiable anger. In time and with grace, we must speak love even to the one who brings death.

Our hearts are broken for Orlando and for LGBTQ people who are absorbing the reality of this violence. Our love surrounds all who bear the weight of this tragedy.

Rise up, O Lord;

Lift up your hand, O God;

Do not forget the afflicted.

Psalm 10:12

+ Doug

The Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher

IX Bishop of Western Massachusetts
Wear orange on June 2 because “we are human.”

May 23, 2016

Recently we celebrated Pentecost and many in our churches wore red. I was at The Church of the Nativity, Northborough that Sunday and they take this tradition seriously. I looked out at a sea of red. Red stands for the fire of the Holy Spirit and illustrates our prayer:

Come, O Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen

Now I invite you to wear another color that also proclaims God’s love and a desire to renew the face of the earth. The color is orange.

In 2013 Hadiya Pendleton – a majorette and high school student from the south side of Chicago – was shot and killed just a week after marching in President Obama’s second inaugural parade. Soon after this tragedy Hadiya’s childhood friends asked their classmates to commemorate Hadiya’s life – and the lives of hundreds claimed by Chicago gun violence each year – by wearing orange. Why orange? They said,

“Orange is used because hunters wear orange to warn other hunters not to shoot. By wearing orange, we are showing others that we are human and wish not to be gunned down.”

Numerous groups, including one I belong to – Bishops United Against Gun Violence – have declared June 2nd (Hadiya’s birthday) as Gun Violence Awareness Day. As a sign of solidarity “that we are human and wish not to be gunned down” are all invited to wear orange on that day. Clergy are invited to wear orange stoles on Sunday June 5th. Mine is being made now.

Gun violence is a public health crisis in our country. On average 91 Americans a day are killed due to gun violence. The stories and the statistics are staggering. Here are a few links to the facts.

Since Sandy Hook
Toddler Mortality from Gun Violence

Domestic violence
  - Everytown Violence Against Women
  - Gun Ownership Makes Women Safer Debunked

Polling
Comprehensive research website
Academic research in Preventive Medicine journal

Gun Violence Stats

And, because we are the people who wish to "renew the face of the earth," we need to act on what we know. Bishops United Against Gun Violence urges our cities, states and nation to adopt policies and pass legislation that will reduce the number of Americans killed and wounded by gunfire. These include common sense gun safety measures that already have the support of a majority of gun owners, such as:

- handgun purchaser licensing
- background checks on ALL gun purchasers
- restrictions on gun ownership by domestic abusers
- classification of gun trafficking as a federal crime
- encouragement for the development of "smart gun" technology
- federal funding of research into gun violence prevention strategies

And on June 2nd wear orange. Post your photo on Facebook or Twitter with the hashtags: #WearOrange and #Episcopal. Bear witness to the belief that our country can do better – much better – in addressing this public health crisis. Wear it because we are the Jesus Movement, because we are out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it.

+Doug
Daniel Berrigan: “I pray for his clarity.”

May 5, 2016

Dan Berrigan, who died last week, once said he was motivated by “outraged love.” His friend and fellow advocate of peacemaking and non-violence, Jim Forest reflects:

“Many people are driven by rage, which rarely does any good. But outraged love is mainly about love. Dan loved his church, his Jesuit community, and he loved America. But in all three zones there was something outrageous and Dan was never able to be silent or passive about our betrayals.”

I have long been inspired by Dan Berrigan. I was too young to understand what was going on when he was protesting the Vietnam War and was arrested for burning draft records (“Our apologies, good friend, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children…”). But when Dan and his brother Philip and Elizabeth McAllister expressed their “outraged love” at the nuclear arms race of the late 1970’s and 1980’s, I was feeling the same thing.

The strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) required a response. As a young priest I was arrested twice with the Berrigans while protesting at a “nuclear war think tank” in the heart of Manhattan. For me that meant being put in a paddy wagon, brought to the police station and released. Philip and Elizabeth, however, would go to jail many times as protesters of MAD.

I remember standing on a street corner before one of those protests. The Berrigan brothers and my seminary classmate Bill Schmidt were there. I was trying to look calm outwardly, but inwardly I was an anxious wreck. My anxiety was in sharp contrast to the peacefulness and the relaxed banter of the Berrigans.

Perhaps that demeanor came from Dan’s identification with the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet and perhaps Dan was as well — at first. But eventually Dan, like Jeremiah, realized he had no choice. God called. They had no expectation of success. Berrigan wrote often: You will speak and no one will hearken (Jeremiah 7:27). Faithfulness to our God of “the promise” demanded Dan’s commitment while bearing the “burden of awful events.”

Berrigan wrote that the God of Jeremiah begins with a “no.” See today I give you authority over nations and kingdoms, to uproot and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant (Jeremiah 1:10). For Dan that meant:

“no to our history of crime, war, bloodletting, greed, racism and injustice of every sort. A ‘no’ and then a ‘yes’ to God’s kingdom. A ‘yes’ to love and hope.”

I have been inspired by Dan’s willingness to engage the Church in the issues of our time. In protesting the war in Vietnam, he wrote “We confront the Catholic Church, other Christian bodies and the synagogues of America with their silence and cowardice in the face of our country’s crimes.” I might have been thinking of Dan when I urged the Diocese of Western Massachusetts to “double down on social justice” in my 2015 Convention Address.

I pray for Dan’s clarity. I’m not sure if he ever met our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry but I am sure he would resonate with his passion for “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.” Dan would be clear about what the “nightmares” are and the changes that need to be made. I think my friends Margaret Bullitt-Jonas and Jim Antal have that clarity about the nightmare of climate change. Other prophetic friends have it about other issues of justice. They inspire me.

As this great prophet and poet is laid to rest, I pray that he rise in glory. And, I pray that his spirit will never stop challenging me, and calling me to an “outraged love.”

+Doug

PS – A fuller description of the many dimensions of the fascinating life of Dan Berrigan can be found here.
Gathering of Leaders: An experience of the “aliveness of God”

April 27, 2016

One of my favorite theologians, Walter Brueggemann, often contrasts the anxiety, cynicism, greed and “deathliness” of society with the God of “aliveness”, hope, generosity and Resurrected Life that we know from the Scriptures. My experience at the Gathering of Leaders in Fairhope, Alabama from April 11-13 (my first one) was an experience of the “aliveness of God.” Started by Bishop Claude Payne of Texas, it is an “invitation only” gathering of young (under 40) clergy who have demonstrated leadership potential. Here is a little bit about the Gathering of Leaders from the organizational website:

Vision Statement

We envision the renewal of the dioceses and congregations of the Episcopal Church through transformational leaders dedicated to the missionary call of Christ and growing the Church in spiritual depth and in numbers as it effectively serves all sorts and conditions of people through the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

Mission Statement

The purpose of the Gathering of Leaders is to assist in the empowerment, support, and development of such leaders. To this end, the Gathering provides a place for leaders to come together without contentiousness and partisanship to share their love of Christ and of the Church, to empower each other through mutual encouragement, to deepen their skills as transformational leaders, to establish networks which will aid their ministries, and to clarify their understanding of God’s emerging vision for the renewed Episcopal Church.
The energy of the group was evident everywhere and in everything. The presentations were made with joy and enthusiasm right from the first sentence. Liturgy was deeply prayerful. Dinner conversation and “networking time” were filled with stories about grace. As a bishop, this gathering gave me hope for the future of our Church as I witnessed the Christ-centered focus of these “youngish” clergy.

The theme was *By Whose Authority? Faithfully Exercising Authority in the Missionary Church*. Our first presenter quickly and convincingly redefined “authority” as “followability.” The Gathering of Leaders crowd is so creative, we even invent our own words. For clergy leaders, authority comes from God, through the Church and through bishops, but that authority counts for little without the trust of the people and their willingness to follow a leader in a collaborative effort to embody the mission of Jesus – a mission of mercy, compassion and hope – in this world.

I am grateful for these clergy who “get it” in this era of the life of the Church. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, is so clear in telling us we are the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. We seek to change this world from the nightmare it is for so many into the Dream God has for it. From what I experienced at the Gathering of Leaders in Fairhope, Alabama, the Jesus Movement is rolling on.
When we follow Jesus, stuff is going to happen.

April 24, 2016

Sermon preached today at St. John’s Episcopal Church, Northampton, MA.

Throughout this holy Season of Easter one of the scripture lessons every Sunday is always from the Acts of the Apostles – the story of the earliest days of the Jesus Movement. In this sermon let’s look at the major themes of this book and see what it tells us about how to live as followers of Jesus now. That is a big job to do in one sermon. And if I had to get you out of here for a Red Sox game that starts at one pm, it would be impossible. But the Sox don’t play until 8 pm tonight, so we have some time.

It is interesting that this book is called The ACTS of the Apostles. Not the “ideas” of the Apostles. Not the “prayers” of the Apostles. No, it is the ACTS of the Apostles. When we follow Jesus, stuff is going to happen. My favorite theologian, Walter Bruggemann, writes:

“The whole book of Acts is about power from God that the world cannot shut down. In scene after scene, there is a hard meeting between the church and worldly authorities, because worldly authorities are regularly baffled by this new power and resentful of it.” At one point, in chapter 17, the followers of Jesus are accused of “turning the world upside down.”

Or as our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, says, this new world “is really right side up.” They proclaimed the Resurrection of Jesus and therefore the old powers of death were no longer capable of defining reality. They attested that new power had been turned loose in the world that evoked new patterns of social practice and new waves of truth.

Those new patterns of social practice were oh so evident in the earliest days. Right after Pentecost that day when Peter and his friends baptized “around 3000 people” (we are not sure it was really 3000. Preachers tend to round up attendance figures to the next thousand. That is why when I am at a meeting later this afternoon and someone asks me how many people were at church at St. John’s today, I’ll say “a good crowd. About a thousand.”) Here is the description of the church:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

Sounds good, right? They even renamed one of the new members “Barnabas” which means “son of encouragement.” Wouldn’t you love to have a son or daughter of encouragement in your life? Someone saying “you can do this, you can do this, I believe in you.”

That was chapters two, three and four. In chapter five there is trouble in paradise. Remember how everyone shared their money so no one would be in need? A couple named Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and they kept some of the money for themselves. Peter found out about it and called them out. They were so ashamed they dropped dead on the spot. (Now I will admit that when I was a rector and there was a year when pledging was slow, I felt tempted to tell this story from Acts 5, but I resisted the temptation.)

Evidence that the church was never perfect, right from the beginning. More evidence. One time Paul was preaching to a community gathered on the second floor of a house. A boy was sitting on a window sill, fell asleep during the sermon and fell out the window to what seemed like his death. Paul ran out and brought him back to life. You see, the sermons were not always great. This has always been a flawed church.

What kept this “less than perfect” Jesus Movement going? In the next seven minutes I will offer you five dimensions of a Movement that changes the world – and maybe even you and me.

1. **The Jesus Movement kept going because they built bridges instead of walls.** Today’s story from Acts is a perfect example. Peter overcomes all his inhibitions and reaches out to Cornelius – someone not of his tribe. As my brother bishop, Rob Wright of Atlanta, puts it so well:

   “God’s circle of love is enlarging. Too often we have painted our fear of others onto God. We’ve confused being closed to others with being faithful to God. But the Spirit gave Peter a vision of humanity without distinctions. A Spirit that defies death and opens tombs. A Spirit that whispers to us ‘who are you to hinder God’?”

2. **The Jesus Movement kept going because it was a “learning community.”** Here’s an example. In chapter 12, Peter was arrested by King Herod. He was bound in chains and several guards watched over him. When they fell asleep, an
angel came to Peter and set him free. Peter escaped the prison. The next day when Herod heard Peter got away, he ordered all the guards executed.

Go to chapter 16. This time Paul and Silas are arrested. I told you the early Christians were always in trouble with the government. This time the guards took extra precautions. Paul and Silas were placed in the “innermost cell” with their feet fastened in stocks. There was no angel this time, but an earthquake that broke open the chains and made the doors fly open. Paul and Silas could have easily escaped. But they didn’t. They stayed right there. When the guard came the next morning and saw the doors open, he took his sword out to kill himself, knowing that his boss would have him executed for letting the prisoners escape. Then he heard Paul’s voice “do not harm yourself. We are all here.” The jailer ran in, saw Paul and Silas, and realized they stayed to save his life. He was so moved by this act of compassion he said “sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And by that he meant really saved. What would it take to turn away from the world of cynicism and hate and toward a new world of hope and compassion? And then to show he wasn’t merely giving intellectual assent to this new way of living, the jailer “washed their wounds.” He joined their mission of mercy, compassion and hope.

You see, the Jesus Movement learned something from the arrest of Peter in chapter twelve to the arrest of Paul and Silas in chapter sixteen. God’s revelation is never finished.

3. The Jesus Movement is never a finished product.

4. The Jesus Movement continued because it was immersed in prayer. No, the Jesus Movement did not “simply” pray. They acted. They worked to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it, but those actions were always connected to their relationship with the Living God. True for them and true for us. My spiritual hero, Thomas Merton, wrote:

“If we dare to go to the deepest part of our souls, there we will be in immediate and direct contact with God.”

Let me give you a term you can toss around at a party sometime. “Supernatural existential.” It comes from the theologian Karl Rahner who says we are all created with an inbuilt capacity for God. Our existence (existential) that is open to the divine, the supernatural.

And lastly…

5. The Jesus Movement rolled on because the early church believed that what Jesus did can still be done now because the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ still lives among us. Jesus’ life was not a one-time event consigned to history books, but is repeated now and forever.

There are numerous examples in Acts but I will stay with just one because you might have something else to do before the game at 8 pm. In a story you heard in this church last week from Chapter Nine, a wonderful woman named Tabitha became ill and died. We know she was wonderful because we are told “she was devoted to good works and acts of charity.” Among her acts of charity was making clothes for poor widows – widows who in that time and culture might literally starve to death without the income only men could acquire. Peter is told of her death, and when he gets to her room, it is filled with widows crying. Peter prays and says, “Tabitha, get up!”- the same way he saw Jesus do that for a little girl a couple of years earlier. Tabitha comes back to life and it is witnessed by “saints and widows.”
My go-to-theologian Walter Brueggemann says:

"The wonder is witnessed only by saints and widows. What a pair! The saints are those who did not flee from the smell of death. The widows are those who live every day in their vulnerability. The non-saints, the ones who fear death, were gone and did not see the miracle. The anti-widows, the ones who work death on the weak, were not there. It takes a certain kind of witness to see the newness. They stayed in the chamber of death and were there for the surprising gift of new life."

I could go on well past 8 pm about what that says about issues of social justice, but instead let's make it personal. Let's spend the final three minutes of this sermon inviting the same Spirit that worked so powerfully in the life of Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago, the same Spirit that continued in the early years of the Jesus Movement, into our lives right here, right now. Let's use this powerful story of Tabitha for our own lives. I invite you to sit as comfortably as you can in those wooden pews. If you want, you can close your eyes.

In the story, Tabitha has died. Is there a part of your soul that has died? A dream gone, a hope dashed. Or is there a situation in your life that feels like death? Get in touch with that situation, that feeling. The Tabitha in you.

But Tabitha is not alone. Some stay with her even though the situation is hopeless. They do it out of love. Each and every person here has done that sometime in your life. You stayed at someone's bedside, you taught someone who seemed to resist learning, you supported friends who were going through a tough time. It was hard. But you did it. For a moment, get in touch with that dimension of yourself. The part of you that is faithful.

Now bring the faithful you, the saints and widows in the story, into contact with the Tabitha in you, the place, the situation, that feels dead.

And now Peter enters the room. Like Jesus, he is not afraid of death. He does not bring despair. He brings hope and life. He has power. For a moment, get in touch with the power of your soul. That supernatural existential. That place where you know God's love, where you know God's mercy, where you know God's hope. The power is truly in you. It was given to you in your baptism. Stay with that power for a moment.

Now bring that power through the faithful crowd that surrounds Tabitha. Bring that power to the place in you that feels dead. And in your soul, hear the words, "get up. Be alive. Remember love is stronger than death and to that love you are returned." Amen.

+Doug
There are numerous advantages to being the child of a priest (commonly called PKs – priests’ kids or preachers’ kids). When everyone is too tired to cook on Sunday nights, you can always go to the Parish Hall and find out what is left over from coffee hour. And when a PK is little there is the great thrill of hearing a story about you used in the sermon. When my children were young, whenever I would use a story about one of them, the other two would say, "Hey, Daddy, use a story about me next time." And then in God’s wisdom, as the children grow older their enthusiasm for being mentioned in the sermon matures into prayer. As in "Oh God, please not a story about me!"

Another advantage to being a PK, since Holy Week and Spring Break are often the same time, when your friends are on vacation you have the opportunity to go to church everyday. And if both your parents are priests and serving two different congregations, like Betsy and me, you get to go to two services on the really big days: Christmas Eve, Good Friday, Easter Sunday. One time at Easter, after they went to Grace Church, Millbrook with me, our children went to Betsy’s Church in the next town. When they came home they told me: "In her sermon mom asked why the Risen Jesus appeared to the disciples but did not come back and appear to Pontius Pilate. After all, he really needed to see Jesus. It was a good line, Dad. Everyone laughed. You should have used that line."

It’s a few years later, following up on the wisdom of my wife and kids, I will explore that question. Why didn’t Jesus appear to Pilate or Caiaphas or Herod? And why when he did appear to the disciples, did they not listen to him? And why was Thomas (my favorite apostle) the one to truly understand what Resurrection is all about? We are going to do this in ten minutes. Are you ready?

There is a saying in Zen: "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." I think that explains why Jesus did not appear to Pilate or Caiaphas or Herod. Think about Pilate. He was all about power. If the Risen Jesus had appeared to him, he probably would have called for the guards who did not secure the tomb as tightly as he ordered and had them executed. Jesus did not appear to Pilate because he would have no part in that. Or maybe it was because of that dream that Pilate’s wife had. Remember in Matthew’s Gospel, while Jesus is on trial, Pilate’s wife sends him a note saying "I had a dream about this man. Do not harm him. He is innocent." If Jesus appeared to Pilate, he would have to go back to his wife and hear the ultimate "I told you so!"

No, Pilate was not ready to see Jesus. Nor was Caiaphas, the High Priest that year. Caiaphas was so obsessed with his way of worshipping God (the traditional Temple sacrifices) that he could not be open to God acting outside that system. Again a Zen quote might help us understand. In Zen we are told that religions point us toward God, like fingers point us to the moon. But instead of looking at the moon, we look at the fingers and argue about which finger is the best one. We
argue about which religion is the best one. And we miss God. Caiaphas is so committed to his religious tradition as the only way, he can’t see God acting outside the system. Think of how often Christianity has been like Caiaphas.

And why didn’t the Risen Jesus appear to Herod? Remember at the trial “When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a very long time and was hoping to see him perform some miracle.” (Luke 23:8) Or as Herod sings with tremendous mockery in the play Jesus Christ Superstar “So if you are the Christ, You’re the great Jesus Christ, Prove to me that You’re no fool, Walk across my swimming pool.” No, if the Risen Jesus appeared to Herod, he would have thought it some magic trick.

No, they were not ready for the teacher to appear. And here’s the more shocking truth – neither were the disciples! When Jesus comes to them on that first Easter night, they are locked in the upper room for fear. Ok, we can understand that. They saw Jesus dead and buried on Friday, the female disciples had seen the empty tomb on Sunday morning, but the other disciples were not ready to believe yet. Easter Sunday night they are in the upper room and Thomas is not with them. Fear is all they know. But now in comes the Risen Jesus saying “peace.” Saying I forgive you for deserting me at the cross. Do not be afraid anymore. In John’s Gospel he empowers them with the Holy Spirit right then and tells them to go out and spread the good news. After these very explicit directions from Jesus, where are they a week later? Still in the upper room with locked doors. Still afraid. Theologian William Sloan Coffin says “Fear seeks safety, not truth.” They were still caught in their fear, so they sought safety.

Thomas, however, did not seek safety. Why wasn’t Thomas there that first night? Here is my opinion. It’s not written down in a book of theology anywhere and might not be orthodox – so don’t tell the bishop! In addition to the apostles, Jesus had many, many followers. And many of them were poor or sick or grieving. Remember Jesus and the early church had a special ministry to widows – people who were poor because only men could earn money. Could it be that Thomas was not there on Easter night because he was out taking care of the widows and the poor and the sick? Jesus was dead but the mission continues.

This idea fits with the Thomas we know from other gospel stories. Remember when Jesus wants the disciples to go to Jerusalem with him? Jerusalem is where Jesus will face death. It is Thomas who says “We may as well go and die with him.” Thomas has no fear. And he has no illusions as to how things should be. He just follows Jesus and does his job.

Perhaps we could understand Thomas in contrast to another disciple, Philip. When Jesus preaching one of his last sermons, Philip interrupts him and says “Jesus, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” In other words, “show us the Creator of it all. Show us the one who gives us all the answers. Why do we suffer? Why do we die? Why is there evil in the world? Get us those answers and we will be satisfied.”

Four hundred years later, St. Augustine will be one of the greatest theological minds of all time. He is in the Theologian Hall of Fame. He understood God as Trinity and he was obsessed with the idea. He wrote seven books about the Trinity. And not little paperbacks – big, thick books. One time, when he was writing still another book about the Trinity, he was
walking along the beach on the Mediterranean and saw a child running back and forth from the sea to a hole he had dug in the sand. He carried a bucket, filled the bucket with seawater, dumped it into the hole he had made and did this over and over again. Augustine asked him why he was doing that. The child replied, “I’m trying to put the sea into this hole.” Augustine responded, “You can’t do that. It won’t fit.” The child, who was an angel in disguise, said, “Neither can you put the Mystery of God into your mind. It won’t fit.”

Philip was like Augustine. Show us the Father and we will be satisfied. Thomas does not say that. Thomas says “show me the wounds and I will be satisfied.” Thomas knew Jesus was the one dedicated to those who hurt in this world. He knew Jesus brought to us the God of mercy, compassion and hope. Thomas refused to believe in an abstract God. He would only believe in a “real God” and so he exclaims “My Lord and My God.”

For Philip, God is the explainer. For Thomas God is the source of all compassion. For Philip, life is demanding answers. For Thomas life is humble service. Of course the Risen Jesus would appear to Thomas and he would respond from his soul. The student was ready.

In today’s gospel, after this powerful scene in the upper room, the gospel writer John jumps away from the story and says Jesus did a whole lot of other things that are “not written in this book.” But these stories, and this story about Thomas and the fearful disciples, are here so YOU might believe. It’s not about them. It is about you and me.

What do we believe? Like Philip, are we waiting for all the answers? Are we demanding a God we can fit into our heads? Or, like Thomas, are we willing to join the Jesus Movement that wants to turn the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it?

Amen.

+Doug
On the first anniversary of the Boston Marathon Bombings, Vice-President Joe Biden said, "We are Boston. We are America. We respond, we endure, we overcome and we own the finish line."

It was meant as a statement of encouragement to all those who were struggling with pain, physical and emotional, from that horrific day. Those explosions at the finish line were not the last word.

Let's take that sentence out of the patriotic context and put it in a theological context. After the horrific execution of Jesus on Friday, we celebrate that God owns the finish line. Sin does not own the finish line. Death does not own the finish line. God and God's abundant grace own the finish line. Jesus Christ is Risen today and that reality stands at the center of our faith and gives us hope beyond hope.

On that first Easter Sunday, at early dawn, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other unnamed women went to the tomb. But the body of Jesus was not there and they are told by two men in dazzling clothes - angels maybe or perhaps those two men from the Transfiguration on the Mountain - that Jesus is risen. They go back to tell the apostles the good news-you see women are preaching the first sermon in the era of the Resurrected Christ-and the response is the worst one a preacher could hear: “this is just an idle tale.” You say Jesus is risen and that means nothing to us. Blah,blah,blah.

How did the apostles move from dismissing the Resurrection of Jesus as an idle tale to a reality that changed their lives – a reality for which they would give their very lives? How can we move from the Resurrection of Jesus being a nice story to life-giving, life-saving grace? How can we know, really know, that God and not evil and destruction, owns the finish line? I think the answer may lie in wisdom given to the women at the tomb by those two men in dazzling clothes.

While the women are “perplexed” and “terrified”, they are told to remember. Remember what Jesus said and did. Allow me to illustrate this by way of a story that happened in a first grade class. The teacher collected some well-known proverbs and sayings. She gave her first graders the first half of each famous saying and asked them to come up with the rest. Here is what the children came up with:

- Better to be safe than….pick a fight with a fifth grader.
- Strike while…the bug is close.
- Don’t bite the hand that…looks dirty.
- Where there’s smoke….there’s pollution.
- A penny saved…is not much.

Ok, now I have one for you. Love one another. What’s the next part? Love one another…as I have loved you.

The “I” in the statement is Jesus. If we are going to understand what it means to love, we are going to have to understand Jesus. And if we are going to understand resurrection as something real and not just idle chatter, we have to understand Jesus. We need a personal relationship with Jesus.

Now you may be thinking “I thought the sign outside says this is an Episcopal Church. This preacher sounds like some evangelical.” Maybe so, but resurrection makes no sense without this relationship and the church makes no sense without it. Think of it this way. Did you ever go to a grammar school concert or a play or a soccer game when your child or grandchild or niece or nephew is NOT in it? It is painful. It goes on forever. But if your child is in it, you watch enthusiastically. You have your phone recording it; you are nudging the person next to you saying “watch this.” The personal relationship makes all the difference.

In a little while, I’ll be at the altar praying with you. If you are just watching me, I guarantee it is going to be really boring. But if you are saying “hey, this is my God we are praying to, my Savior offering me the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation”, then the whole situation changes.
We will go beyond idle chatter to real faith, if we remember. If we remember what Jesus said and did. If we remember his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. If we remember his power to forgive, his ability to heal, the way he could bring life forth from people thought to be dead. What would happen if we remembered Jesus constant invitation to put away our fear – that paralyzing fear that keeps us from generosity – and remembered Jesus' preaching and actions that proclaim abundance? Grace so abundant that one lifetime cannot use it all up? What happens when we remember Jesus saying that to gain life, we must give it away? What happens when we remember that Jesus was always transforming things – water into wine, bread and wine into Body and Blood, sin to forgiveness, illness into health, oppression into freedom, outsiders into membership in the beloved community. Jesus never left things the way that they were. So of course, when Jesus dies, death is not going to stay death. When we remember all that, resurrection is no longer idle chatter. Instead of being bewildered by the empty tomb, we say of course the tomb is empty. Of course God raises Jesus to New Life – it is completely consistent with everything Jesus said and did and believed. And as in all things, Jesus did not rise from the dead to show off. He did it so he might take us with him.

The two men in dazzling robes give us another way to move from idle chatter to real faith.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Later on, at the Ascension of Jesus, these same two men are going to ask “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” The import of these two statements from these very consistent men in bright clothes is the same. Look for Jesus among the living. Remember the prayer he taught you. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Heaven is not an escape clause in the covenant we have with God. God wants to bring heaven to earth. God wants to own the finish line here. Jesus will always be wherever there is transformation from the ways of death to the ways of life.

And that, my brothers and sisters, is when things get messy. Because life is complicated, people are complex, and we struggle to know how to be Christ in this world.

Let me give you an example of that. It is 1964. It is the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Thousands of Episcopalians, including hundreds of the clergy, pressed Congress to adopt the Civil Rights Bill. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was invited to speak at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Dr. King praised Episcopalians for “making the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ relevant and meaningful in this period of social transition.” That is finding Jesus among the living, in social transformation. He also warned Episcopalians about ignoring the great revolution that was stirring the nation. At that same Convention the bishops approved a resolution supporting one of the central principles for which King stood – the right of citizens to disobey unjust laws of segregation. The House of Bishops voted for that resolution but the House of Deputies voted against it, so it did not pass.

These were all good people – struggling and disagreeing as to what Christ was calling them to do. But the willingness to engage in that struggle is exactly what we have to do, in 1964 and in 2016, if we are to look for Christ among the living. The willingness to engage in the issues of our time – be it climate change or the public health crisis of gun violence or income inequality or ongoing racism or intolerance toward immigrants – is to move from idle chatter about the Resurrection to real faith.

Dr. Martin Luther Kin, Jr. at the ESCRU dinner, General Convention, 1964.
Let me share some wisdom from one of our deacons, Terry Hurlbut. He serves in All Saints, South Hadley. One day in 2015 I was discussing the 50th anniversary of the many important events in the Civil Rights Movement and the sacrifices people made. Terry said:

“Sometimes I wonder what I would have done in that time. Would I have stood up for equal rights for all? What would I have done then? And suddenly I realize those times are now. Those times are my times. What will I stand for now?”

To me, that does not sound like idle chatter. That sounds like looking for Christ among the living.

We have glorious hymns to sing with this outstanding choir and we have communion – the very life of the Risen Christ among us – to receive. I need to end this sermon. Let’s do it with some personal reflection.

I invite you to sit as comfortably as you can on those hard pews. If it is helpful, close your eyes and breathe – just breathe. Breathing is a gift from God.

As you breathe, remember this. Two thousand years ago God raised Jesus from the dead. God rolled away the stone from the tomb and set Jesus free for the fullness of New Life. Right now, what is keeping you from being fully alive? What is the stone keeping you in the tomb? Is it anxiety? Is it some long-held anger or resentment? Is it jealousy? Is it a constant feeling of not being good enough? Is it an addiction? What is it that keeps you and me from embracing the fullness of the one and only life we have? Whatever it is, it is not the finish line. Because God owns the finish line. God rolled back the stone that kept Jesus in the tomb and God wants to do that for us. Jesus is here among the living, transforming everything into grace. Will we let the God we know in Jesus be God in our lives?

I invite you to slowly open your eyes and come back to this place. Consider continuing that meditation at home. Each and every person here is part of the Jesus Movement that wants to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the Dream God has for it. And that Dream is for you and me and for all creation. Resurrection is not an idle tale. Death, and what feels like death, does not own the finish line. God does and what we know from Jesus is that God offers endless, abundant life. Right here. Right now. Amen.

Doug

*I first heard Vice President Biden’s “finish line” remarks in a sermon given by The Rev. Buddy Rodgers at St. Bart’s Church in New York City on Easter, 2014.*
Tom taught me to engage media.

February 19, 2016

Monsignor Tom Hartman died this week and was received into our God who gives abundant life. Some of you might have known him as half of “The God Squad” with Rabbi Marc Gellman. Together they had a TV show, and appeared frequently on “Good Morning America” and on radio with “Imus in the Morning.” Tom was often a commentator on all things Roman Catholic in the media.

As a young priest, I knew Tom as a mentor, friend and inspiration.

From 1972 to 1979, Tom was the associate at St. James Roman Catholic Church in Seaford, New York. He left there to start Telecare, a religious cable TV station. Fresh from seminary, and oh so young, I was assigned to take his place. Not that anyone could. Tom was beloved, and rightfully so. He touched hundreds of lives with grace, kindness, humor and the imagination of the Living God.

Tom encouraged me to engage media.

These were the early days of cable TV and he got me to host a show called “Teenagers Speak Out” in which I interviewed teenagers about key topics of the day. It was awful. Tom had a weekly radio show called “Religion and Rock” in which he would play rock music and talk about the meaning of the songs. I was his back-up and hosted twenty or so shows a year. I’m not sure how good it was but I had a lot of fun doing it.

I want you to know about Tom for three reasons. One is that even though he was a “big deal” in the world of Long Island, NY, Tom always gave complete attention to whomever he was with. If the person was elderly, or suffering from cancer, or a troubled teenager, Tom was right there. I don’t know what Tom’s prayer practice was, but in relationships he was all in, “mindful” as Zen masters would say.

Tom used every means available to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Cable TV, network TV, radio. For newspapers he was the “go to guy” when they needed a quote about something involving the world of religion. Tom was the opposite of bombastic TV evangelists. He was soft spoken and emphasized compassion over controversy. Sometimes to a fault. His friend and media partner Rabbi Marc Gellman would sometimes kid Tom, telling him he sounded like a Hallmark® card. But Tom really was that upbeat and positive and joyful.

As I engaged social justice issues, I was sometimes frustrated because Tom did not – in my opinion – use his pulpit to speak out. But Tom also raised millions of dollars for AIDS research (his brother died of AIDS) and teamed with the actor Michael J. Fox to raise even more for Parkinson’s (Tom was diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 1999). My point here is that Tom engaged the media for the sake of the life-giving message of Jesus. Today with social media we have more possibilities for that than ever before. As the Rev. Laura Everett, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches says, “we can create our own news.” Inspired by Tom (and St. Paul and Martin Luther) let’s use it.

Lastly, I commend Tom to us because he showed us how to be human and vulnerable and how to trust in the Living God.

In 2003 he wrote a public letter to say that he had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s four years earlier. It was taking a toll on his life and he was going to have to slow down after a lifetime of high energy. He admitted that he needed to learn how
to face death and that he was scared. You can see his statement [here](#). It is a humble, faithful and oh so real statement of not knowing and yet trusting in the God he gave his life serving.

May you rest in peace, Tom. And may you rise in glory.

+Doug
“Ashes To Go” Out…Awake, Alive and Grateful

February 10, 2016

Ash Wednesday – the first day of the holy season of Lent. I’m going to ask you to consider Lent in a new way this year – as a second chance at living Advent. Maybe we could call it Advent 2.0. This is an unusual approach, so don’t tell the bishop.

Remember in Advent we heard the same invitation that we’re hearing in Lent to “repent and believe the Good News.” We had two weeks of the wild and wonderful prophet, John the Baptist, telling us to do that. We were urged to “stay awake” because salvation is coming. It is just around the corner. “Look” around you so you won’t miss it. And we heard messages from angels telling us to not be afraid because God is coming to us in a baby. We contemplated Mary who “treasured” events in her heart and Joseph who was willing to trust in God and welcome a child not his own into his care.

But let’s be honest, on this Ash Wednesday – called by some the “most honest day of the year” – did many of us, or at least many in our society, miss Advent? Advent is always overrun with preparations for Christmas – gifts to buy, parties to plan and attend, travel arrangements to be made. One priest told me: “I gave up on Advent. The culture won. It is all about the consumer dimension of Christmas all the time.” Were we ever really in the moment?

Sometimes we miss Advent because of grief. It is my experience as a parish priest and in the life of my family that the approach of Christmas brings up a lot of feelings for those we love who have died. That is why “Blue Christmas” services are so well attended. There is nothing right or wrong about feelings. They just are. We need to honor those feelings. But Advent can get lost in that grief.

Traditionally, Lent is about giving up material things we like. It is about looking at all the ways we mess up and asking for forgiveness. It is about pondering our mortality. And, it is an attempt to re-discover our spirituality.

Lent is also a time for lots of church – small groups, Soup Suppers, extra services – all good things leading to Easter. There is a cartoon where the first frame has the caption “Christ is Risen!” with the priest all decked out in Easter vestments surrounded by lilies. In the next frame we see the priest collapsed in a heap with the caption “Christ is Risen and the clergy are dead.”
Maybe we need to take an Advent approach to Lent. Maybe it is a time to:

- "wake up" as the Baptist urged us
- treasure life as Mary did
- protect vulnerable life as Joseph did
- witness to the New Creation that is Christ, as the angels did

Let's spend the next eight minutes and twenty seconds exploring those ideas.

Theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin famously said:

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

Franciscan Richard Rohr unpacks that statement.

“We are not human beings trying to become spiritual. That task has already been done for us by our initial creation as ‘images of God.’ (Gen 1:26) We are already spiritual beings. That is God's gift. Our desperate and needed task, the one we have never succeeded at after all these centuries, is how to become human. Jesus literally turns religion on its head.”

One time the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh was asked what holy people do. He said,

"when they sit, they sit. When they walk, they walk. When they eat, they eat."

That is the Advent/Lent invitation to stay awake. Maybe instead of giving up certain foods for Lent, it would be better to slow down and be aware of the goodness of the food we are eating. This is being said by someone who often eats meals in his car going from one place to another. Maybe Lent is not about attempting some extraordinary heroic spiritual feat but paying attention to what is around us. My spiritual hero, Thomas Merton, wrote,

“If we could let go of our obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear God’s call and follow God in the mysterious cosmic dance. We don’t have to go far to do that. When we are alone on a starlit night, when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of trees to rest and eat, when we see children in a moment when they are really children, when we love in our own hearts- at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the newness, the emptiness, and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.”

That sounds like Mary treasuring the events of her life in her heart.

Advent/Lent can be waking up to the life around us and treasuring it. It also means waking up to the world around us, seeing the pain of it, and taking responsibility for it. That’s what Joseph did when he took in the child not his own.

That is what we commit ourselves to doing in the Litany of Penitence which we will pray in a few minutes. That Litany is one long wake-up call. It gets our attention, breaks into our consciousness and invites generous action in a society that is so consumed with anxiety that we have forgotten how to be generous.
“Accept our prayers and repentance, Lord, for the wrongs we have done; for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty.”

Joseph and Mary nurtured Jesus into the man who would be on a mission to bring mercy, compassion and hope into this world. And it makes me think of St. Paul who wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians: “There needs to be a fair balance between your present abundance and their need…As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’”

“For all false judgments, for uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and for our prejudice and contempt to those who differ from us.”

We can’t pray that without waking up and taking responsibility for America’s original sin of slavery and the racism that still grips us. We can’t pray that and look the other way when there is the greatest displacement of peoples as refugees since World War II.

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

As spiritual beings having a human experience, we need to figure out how to live as humans in God’s creation and not independent of what happens here. For the sake of that creation and for the sake of our grandchildren, we have to figure that out fast.

This Lent, let’s engage an Advent type of life. Let’s heed the Baptist’s call be awake. Let’s treasure the goodness that is around us and within us as Mary did. Let’s wake up to the challenges that surround us and take active responsibility for them as Joseph did. And if we do that, maybe we can proclaim a New Creation coming in Jesus as the angels did. That could be an exciting, transforming Lent. That could be what theologian Marcus Borg describes as,

“dying to an old way of seeing and being and living and identity, and being born, raised, into a new way of seeing and being and living and identity.”

And then perhaps the Easter cartoon I mentioned earlier in this sermon, the one about the clergy dying in the midst of the Easter lilies, could have a different ending. Maybe then all of us – clergy and laity alike – could arrive at Easter Sunday and say “Actually, I’m not dead. In fact, I think I have been resurrected.”

Now it is time to have ashes imposed on our foreheads, to begin our Advent/Lent journey. We spiritual beings will hear that we are dust and to dust we will return. We don’t have forever in this human part of our spiritual journey. May these be “ashes to go”. May we be marked with the Sign of the Cross to go out into the world, awake, alive, grateful and determined to join the Jesus Movement that is out to turn this world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it. Amen.

+Doug

Reference: The Easter cartoon story comes from Karoline Lewis, writing in Dear Working Preacher from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.
Jesus is visible among us when we embrace his mission.

February 1, 2016

Remember reading *A Tale of Two Cities*? Perhaps you did that in high school? Even if you don’t remember the whole story, you might remember the opening line: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,….” My sermon today is a tale of three faith communities: the one we just heard about in Nazareth two thousand years ago, the one which formed on the Road to Emmaus three years later, and *Trinity Church in Ware* today. The difference between those first two faith communities could tell us a lot about what it means to follow Jesus in our own time and why this time has the possibility of being the best of times for Trinity Ware.

Let’s go to that faith community in Nazareth. Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah, chapter 61, which contained the holy promises of good news for the poor, sight for the blind, release for prisoners, freedom for the oppressed. Then he gives a very short homily: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* And everyone spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words. That is verse 22 in the 4th chapter of Luke’s gospel. By verse 28 those same people are enraged and by verse 29 they are going to throw Jesus off a cliff. What happened?

The answer may be found in the way that congregation listened to the passage from Isaiah. Modern studies on listening show that although people speak at about 150 words per minute (people raised in New York might be at 180 or so), our minds work at about 500 words per minute. That is why while I am speaking you might be thinking about what could have happened if that Tom Brady pass on the two point conversion last week had been caught to tie the game. Your minds are working faster than my mouth.

Go back to that synagogue in Nazareth. As Jesus is reading from Isaiah, the minds of the people are filling in their opinions. As Jesus says *the Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor,* the people are thinking “the poor- that’s me. I am going to get good news.” When Jesus says *recovery of sight to the blind,* people are thinking of all their blind friends and how they will be healed. When Jesus says *let the oppressed go free,* these people of Israel who live in an occupied land with Roman soldiers on every street corner are thinking “that’s me – I’m going to be set free. He is going to get those Romans!”

Jesus sits down and says this passage is not just about you. He mentions two times when God acted outside of Judaism and healed people, one of whom was Syrian.

Theologian John Shea says this:

“When Jesus says things that displease the Nazarenes, he is attacked. What triggers the displeasure is Jesus’ words that suggest these blessings that they thought were theirs alone would also be given to the Gentiles. Worse, they would be the ones who bring those blessings to the Gentiles. The depth at which this message was heard is hard to imagine. It touched on the emotional energy of racial hatred and survival. The Nazarenes exploded in rage and attempted murder.”

There are many lessons here for us in our time about refugees and walls and who is excluded. For the moment I will restrict myself to one. We learn something about how free the Spirit of God is. The Spirit is not confined to any one religion. But notice that although Jesus proclaims that, he is deeply faithful to his Jewish religion. Many today who acknowledge the Spirit working beyond the boundaries of any one religion choose to belong to none.

There is a *New Yorker* cartoon in which a man at a party says, “I don’t belong to an organized religion. My religious beliefs are way too disorganized.” Jesus immerses himself in Judaism. He constantly quotes the Hebrew Scriptures. But he knows God acts within and beyond religion’s boundaries. We need to immerse ourselves in our faith tradition, while acknowledging and celebrating God freedom of movement and the dignity of every human being. No exceptions.

There is another dimension of this story. Reverend James Forbes, formerly the pastor of Riverside Church, says this story illustrates the pattern of Jesus’ life: *from praise to persecution.* From everyone speaking well of him to wanting to throw him
off a cliff. There are numerous examples in the gospels. The most dramatic one is the praise heaped on him as he entered Jerusalem, with people waving palms and shouting “hosanna.” Five days later he is nailed to a cross.

Forbes tells us about the time his five-year old grandson heard him preach on this passage from Luke 4. The little boy wondered how Jesus got away when he was surrounded by all those angry people at the cliff. Forbes told him he did not know and asked him how he thought Jesus did it. The little boy thought and said, “Jesus just upped and out. He just upped and out.” And he will do that again later – in the tomb. Jesus will up and out. You see, hatred cannot hold Jesus down. Death cannot hold him down.

That leads us to our tale of a second faith community – the one three years later on a road between Jerusalem and Emmaus. This community is really small. Just Cleopas and an unnamed person. They are discouraged. No, they are more than discouraged. They are in despair because the praise of Jesus had turned into persecution and he has been executed on the cross. With that death their dreams of a better world – a world where there would be good news for the poor and freedom for the oppressed – had died too. But as they walk along, the risen Jesus walks with them. But they don’t recognize him. He asks them what they are talking about and they tell him about himself – about what Jesus had done – the healing, the inspired preaching, the generosity, the deep wisdom, the connection to the Living God, the way he touched their souls. And then they say the saddest line in all the Bible: *we had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel.* “Hoped” – the past tense describes a hope that is gone.

Then Jesus starts to talk. They still don’t know he is Jesus. *Beginning with all the prophets,* he interprets the things about himself in all the Scriptures.

Now I know I am the anti-casino bishop, but I am going to bet that one of those prophets he talked about was Isaiah and I bet he talked about chapter 61 – the passage that almost got him killed three years earlier. He talked about good news for the poor, and healing, and freedom for the oppressed. He talked about changing the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it. And as he spoke their hearts burned within them. They wanted that world so much. Not just for themselves but for all creation. Not for one tribe, or one religion, or one country. For them these were not abstract ideas and they were not just for heaven but “on earth as it is in heaven.”

This little faith community of three people stop and have dinner. Jesus (they still don’t know it is Jesus), takes bread, breaks it and gives it to them as he did so many times before – as you and I will do in a few minutes. In that moment, their eyes were opened, they knew it was Jesus and then…he vanished from their sight. He just “upped and out” like he did at Nazareth three years earlier when he escaped the crowd who wanted to throw him off the cliff.

But here’s the difference. The words in Greek (the language in which the New Testament was written) are very similar. Now I am relying on scholars who are a lot smarter than I am here. They say the words for he passed through the midst of them and went on his way from the cliff incident is close to he vanished from their sight in the Road to Emmaus story. In the Emmaus story it really says: “he became invisible among them.”

The Risen Jesus stayed among that couple somewhere between Jerusalem and Emmaus because they were going to take on his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. They were going to bring the message out into the world and not keep it for themselves. They knew they were blessed and the only holy response possible was to give that blessing away to others. The message of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah really was being fulfilled in their hearing. Hope was not for the past but for the present.

At that same hour they went back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples. That meant it was nighttime and that meant walking through the dark but they were not afraid anymore. There they found other disciples who also experienced an encounter with the Risen Christ – the one who could not be held down by hatred and death. The Jesus Movement begins.

And that brings us to 2016 and a third faith community – Trinity in Ware, Massachusetts. Some say we live in “the worst of times.” We live in an anxious time – in a time when we don’t think we – however we define that “we” – will have enough of what we need. It is a time when anxiety drives our decisions. We live in a society that is so consumed by anxiety that generosity seems impossible. We sound like that faith community in Nazareth.

But at Trinity, Ware you are deciding to be the faith community that formed between Jerusalem and Emmaus. You are deciding – and acting – as a generous community that has heard the message of Isaiah and have embraced the mission of Jesus.

And you are not alone. Others believe the message of Isaiah and Jesus is possible now. No one put this better than the Rev. Stephanie Spellers who said this:

“There is no better time to be in the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. So many of us are ready to partner, risk, heal and celebrate the Good News in our neighborhoods. So many of us are hungry to fall more
deeply in love with Jesus and to create spaces where different people can grow in that love too. So many of us are yearning to follow Jesus beyond fear, beyond comfort and beyond the walls keeping us from each other and from our neighbors.”

You are embracing that mission, Trinity. Jesus is still in your midst, invisible among you and yet visible in your embrace of his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. God bless you. Amen.

This text was delivered by Bishop Fisher to the people of Trinity Episcopal Church, Ware on January 31.
The Episcopal Church is not backing down on our support for same-sex marriage.

January 15, 2016

“Anglican Communion Suspends the Episcopal Church After Years of Gay Rights Debates” headline in the Washington Post

“Anglican Communion Suspends the Episcopal Church in the United States” news crawl on CNN

“Episcopal Church Suspended from Anglican Communion” headline from Religious News Service

“...the disciplinary action is the most serious setback for the Episcopal Church...since the conflict erupted in earnest over how to interpret what the Scriptures say about gay people and same-sex marriage.” Quote within a news report from the New York Times

These are all reliable news sources that I respect. None of the statements are true.

What happened at the Primates’ meeting in Canterbury needs to be unpacked in light of who Primates are (an awful name – we need to come up with something better), what Primates do and what the Anglican Communion is. I can’t explain that any better than Andrew McGowan, Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, does in this blog.

If you don’t have time to read that blog, know that a gathering of Anglican Communion leaders throughout the world declared that The Episcopal Church could have “voice but not vote” in several internal bodies of the Anglican Communion for the next three years. They made this decision in reaction to our (The Episcopal Church) decision at General Convention last summer to allow same-sex marriage. We are not “suspended” from the Anglican Communion. We are still United “in bonds of affection” with this religious tradition of 90 million people. And we are still a companion diocese with Kumasi, Ghana and Mampong, Ghana. We will support the Mampong Babies’ Home as generously as ever. We will listen respectfully to Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury and support his leadership of the Anglican Communion and his prophetic witness for the poor and for the earth.
I hope the above shows why the headline and “crawl line” from the *Washington Post* and *Religious News Service* and *CNN* are wrong. As to the *NY Times* statement, I offer the following rebuttal that this decision by this one gathering of church leaders is “the most serious set-back for the Episcopal Church…since the conflict erupted in earnest over how to interrupt what the Scriptures say about gay people and same sex marriage.”

Our “Primate” – also called our Presiding Bishop, also called my friend and inspiration- Michael Curry, responded to the Primates’ decision against The Episcopal Church’s decision to support same-sex marriage with this:

> “Many of us have committed ourselves and our church to being a ‘house of prayer for all people’ as the Bible says, when all are truly welcome. Our commitment to be an inclusive church is not based on social theory or capitulation to the ways of culture, but on our belief that the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross are a sign of the very love of God reaching out to us all. While I understand that many disagree with us, our decision regarding marriage is based on the belief that the words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians are true for the church today: All who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ.”

Or, as my brother bishop in Rhode Island, Nick Knisely, said in the midst of the debate over same-sex marriage in his state, said “I’m not for same-sex marriage *despite* my faith. I am for it *because* of my faith.”

The Episcopal Church is not backing down on our support for same-sex marriage and for the dignity and equality of LBGT persons. But I also, as a Bishop in the Episcopal Church which is part of the Anglican Communion, apologize to LBGT persons. This decision by the Primates is hurtful for you- you who are God’s creation and beloved by God as you are. I wish they had never said what they did and I support you.

I support you despite the Primates’ Meeting and I look forward to this as an opportunity to once again make this support public. We are not “set back.” Just the opposite. This is an opportunity to again to say to LBGT people- “you can come home to the Episcopal Church.” We will not back away from that support. Not in these three years of “sanctions” and never in the years after that. Not only are you welcomed, but you are a great gift from the Living God.

At the same time, I value this opportunity to walk with our Anglican Communion even though we disagree. We are not walking out on the Anglican Communion. We need to show the world how to live in disagreement. We are not the Body of Christ because we agree with each other. We are the Body of Christ because we care about each other.

As I write this on Martin Luther King weekend, remember his words “the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.” I wish the Primates did not say what they said. But we are still moving toward justice for LBGT people. The Jesus Movement rolls on.

+Doug

PS Another source of reflection is the blog of the Rev. Jesse Zink, a WMA priest.