

Jesus was what we are.

December 25, 2015

The Bishop's Christmas Eve sermon given at 10 PM in Christ Church Cathedral.

Don't you love the Gospel for Christmas Eve? Written by Luke, it is an iconic story, a world-changing story, a story that touches the soul. I will happily preach about it in a moment but first, I want to look at a line from the Gospel we read tomorrow on Christmas Day from the Gospel of John. Since you decided to move the service up one hour – from 11 pm to 10 pm – that gives me plenty of time to preach on two gospels, right?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What came into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

The darkness did not overcome the light, but the light didn't overcome the darkness either. Preacher Scott Johnston puts it this way:

“I struggle with this verse because I want them to declare that when the light comes into the world it obliterates the darkness. It takes the bleak mid-winter with every sadness, every despair, every raw deal, every horrendous travesty, every evil plan, every god-awful life sucking disease, and tosses the whole mess into the cosmic trash bin. I want the light to arrive and I want it to win, and win big.”

The light came into the world and 2000 years later there is a lot of darkness. We know that so powerfully in 2015. But we have been given a promise – by God no less – that the light is here and darkness will not overcome it. Maybe, that is enough. Later in this liturgy we will turn out all the lights and sing “Silent Night” while holding candles. It will be more dark than light. But as we hold those candles and sing that hymn, I pray we know – we *really* know – that God is with us no matter what here in the real world and not in an abstract world.

That truth is what brings us into tonight's gospel. *“In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. That was the first registration and was taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.”* It reminds us of a line that comes up a couple of chapters later in Luke's Gospel when Jesus and his cousin John are adults. We are told who the emperor is, who the governor is, who the king is, who the high priests are *“when the word of God came to a man named John in the wilderness.”* These are crucial details. It is Luke's way of telling us this is not a fairy tale. This is not “once upon a time.” In history, in the real world, God was present. The light was coming not in heaven but on earth. God was not present in a vague way but in a human being. That presence was not to be restricted to Jesus but was to be a presence, a light in the darkness, for all of us.

The Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins puts this world-rattling insight into three lines of poetry:

“In a flash, at a trumpet's crash,
I am all at once what Christ is
Since he was what I am.”

Christ was what I am. If that is true, then we need to look to who Christ is to know who we are. And it just so happens that tonight's gospel gives us lots of insights into that. This birth story sets the themes that play out through the life of Jesus and beyond into our lives. Let's look at three of them.

The census required that everyone go back to the hometown of their father to be counted. For Joseph and the very pregnant Mary, that means going to Bethlehem – a seventy mile journey. When they get there, *“there is no place for them in the inn.”*

Now there are dozens of theories about what this means and to go into all of them would have required that this service start at 9 and not 10. But I am intrigued by one commentator who says that if all of Joseph's family had to return to the ancestral home of Bethlehem, then his brothers and sisters, cousins, uncles and aunts were all in town. But no one came to their aid. No uncle, seeing the almost-ready to give birth Mary, said “hey, take my bed. You need it a lot more than I do. I'll sleep outside by the manger where the animals eat tonight.” Again, we can speculate forever about why no one did this. Perhaps it was because Mary was pregnant and not married? Who knows? But what we do know is Jesus will later say in Matthew's Gospel (I know I'm intermingling gospels here – don't tell the bishop): *“I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.”* Could it be he understood that from his birth story? Jesus tells us what we are to do to be truly human, to be a light in a dark world: *“Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom*

prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food. I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

The shepherds give us another hint as to Jesus' mission – and what it means to be human. Shepherds were not highly regarded in the society of that time, but just the opposite. To use modern terminology – they were "lowlifes." And yet the angels bypassed the Emperor and the Governor and give the scoop about salvation and a whole new way of being to them. Doing that, the "outsiders" have been brought within the people of God. The baby Jesus would grow into an adult Jesus who would do the very same thing – including tax collectors and sinners, women, the poor and the marginalized. That was unimaginable in those days. One of my favorite theologians, Walter Brueggemann, puts it this way:

"The newness that God did at Christmas was to send into the world this Jesus who is beyond our imagination, who brought healing and grace everywhere he went, who forgave and transformed and called people out beyond themselves to a newness they could not have imagined."

In another soul-gripping story from the life of Jesus, his cousin John who is in prison sends friends to ask Jesus: are you the one, the Messiah? And Jesus says tell him what is happening here. "Blind people are dancing. Lame people are walking into freedom. Lepers are being invited back into the family. Dead people are being given new life. There are poor people having their debts cancelled. All around there are people starting over in freedom and courage because God is doing a new thing." God is healing and restoring and liberating and reconciling because the light has entered the world and the darkness could not overcome it.

And one more of many connections between the birth story, the mission of the adult Jesus, and our lives now. The angels who appear to the shepherds sing a hymn that is an echo of a hymn in the book of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:3). The prophet Isaiah who lived 600 years before Jesus will be incredibly important in his life and message. You all know – too well – that in many of my sermons I use a quote from a Bruce Springsteen song or a baseball story. They are my "go to resources." The "go-to" resource for Jesus is Isaiah. He quotes him more than anyone else from the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaiah. The one who tells us: "Look, you who serve your own interests...and oppress your workers...the fast I choose is to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free...to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house." That is one of dozens of passages about social justice and the rejection of violence. Isaiah is Jesus' spiritual hero. Isaiah is on Jesus' personal Mount Rushmore.

Isaiah also says "those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint." I always thought Isaiah got the order of that movement wrong. He goes from flying to running to walking. Shouldn't it be walking to running to flying? Isn't that what we are called to in the spiritual life? Maybe. But perhaps the spiritual life and real life are the same thing. Sure, sometimes we soar. We have "Paul on the road to Damascus moments" of incredible insight and connection to the living God. And we know about running – it's Christmas in America – anyone feel like they have been running the last few weeks? But walking, and not fainting – that's huge for living in a world where the light has not obliterated the darkness. Walking and not fainting because we believe every day that the darkness will not overcome the light. Walking and not fainting because we follow Jesus "who was what I am" and leads us on a mission of mercy, compassion and hope.



St. Augustine Church, Prophet Isaiah by Raphael

Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, invites us to be part of the Jesus Movement. And the Jesus Movement is determined to change this world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it. 2000 years ago the Jesus Movement, building on the Isaiah Movement was born. We are part of that. The Light is in the world. When Barack was president, and Charlie was governor, and Michael was the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the word of God came to you and me. The darkness will not overcome it. Amen.

+Doug

A House of Prayer – and Witness – for All

November 14, 2015

The following is the sermon offered at the rededication of St. Paul's Cathedral on Boston Common and the Seating of the Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates.



I am so blessed to be at St. Paul's tonight. Thank you Alan, thank you Jep for the invitation. I'm here with gratitude for all we in Western and central Massachusetts have received from what we call the Diocese of Eastern Massachusetts. From the early days of financial aid to a century of inspiration in Gospel living. Thank you. And personally I offer prayers of thanksgiving for my sister and brother bishops – Gayle, Alan and Bud. They are a tremendous source of support for me. You do know that we claim Alan as one of our own for his eight years of exemplary leadership at Trinity, Ware. Where? Ware.

As a representative of the Mass Council of Churches, Gayle comes to our Diocesan Council every year, offering words of encouragement. She caught on very quickly that although I love the people of WMA, I don't root for the same baseball team as most of them do. Now don't start booing – remember you are the house of prayer for ALL God's people. What Gayle does is lead the entire Convention in a full throttle rendition of *Sweet Caroline*.



When I was seated as bishop of Christ Church Cathedral three years ago, they displayed a banner behind me as I preached. I asked the cathedral chapter if I could borrow that banner for tonight. (Banner saying RED SOX ARE PRAYED FOR HERE is unfurled.) My Cathedral is loaning this to you... but I say why don't you just keep it? My gift to you on this most solemn occasion.

I'm always fascinated by church names. Those of you who have had the sacred gift of naming children, isn't it amazing how they become their name? My wife Betsy is here tonight and we named our first child Caragh. Spelled the Gaelic way, C-a-r-a-g-h. She is such a Caragh. The night before our son was born we still were undecided on his name. It was going to be Liam or Geoffrey. Now Liam is a wonderful name but we chose Geoff and that was exactly right. He is not a Liam. He is a Geoff. And our youngest is Grace and she is so full of grace.

In WMA we have a lot of churches named St. Andrew. That is interesting because St. Andrew is the patron saint of the sea and we are a landlocked diocese. He is also the patron saint of golfers but I have not found more than a few golfers in those churches. St. Andrew is the saint that introduced people to Jesus. Maybe that's it. Maybe that name gives those churches their mission, their reason for being.

St. Paul's. Not Trinity. Not St. John the Divine. Not Christ Church. Why St. Paul's? Could the name give a clue to your identity, your mission? For the next nine minutes and thirty-three seconds let's explore that.

In the Acts of the Apostles written by St. Luke, we hear a lot about Paul but not until late in the 7th Chapter when he is watching coats while Stephen is killed. When Paul starts preaching we hear this in Acts 9:27 – Paul in Damascus “spoke boldly in the name of Jesus.” One verse later he is in Jerusalem “speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.” Then he is with another preacher, Barnabas, and they “spoke out boldly.” You seeing a pattern here? I went through the Book of Acts line by line (we have time to do that in the slower pace of Western and Central Massachusetts) and found Paul's preaching described 15 times as “bold,” including the very last line of the book when Paul was in Rome: he was “proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness.”

On the one hand we want to say “St. Luke, get a thesaurus!” But on the other hand maybe there is a message here for all Christians and especially St. Paul's Cathedral on Boston Common.

Maybe you are supposed to proclaim the Gospel and live it out boldly in this place. And when you do you will be an ally of your bishop who was asked this question on September 13, 2014: “Will you boldly proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of your people?” And in a loud voice, Alan responded “I will in the power of the Spirit.”

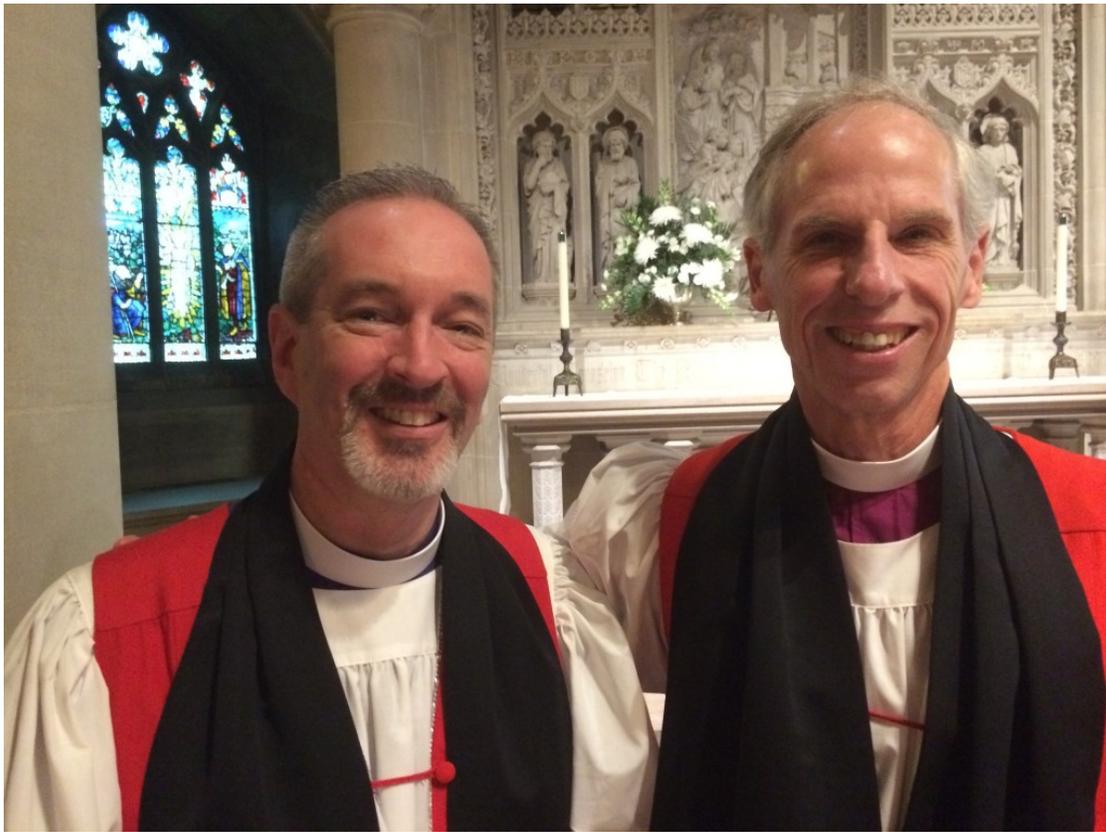
Living the Gospel boldly and stirring up our conscience will not be new to you in this new/old Cathedral. Consider these bold moves.

- You started an innovative faith community in [The Crossing](#).
- You reimagined what a food ministry would look like with [MANNA Ministry](#) – Many Angels Needed Now and Always.
- You developed a thriving Chinese congregation.
- You opened your doors to Muslims for Friday prayer.

One hundred years ago, when Bishop Lawrence gave you the mission to make this a house of prayer for all people, he knew it would take bold decisions. He made the decision to take the doors off the pews so church attendance would not be restricted to paying customers – a bold move for his day. He wanted this Cathedral to be open and inviting to those passing by on the street. He thought that would happen as people heard the music of your services. Still a good idea but you did him one better creating this new entrance way and chapel.

Alan has said he does not want the mission of this place to be considered the “boutique ministries” of the cathedral congregation only, “but integral parts of diocesan identity and ministries engaged in on behalf of all of us.” I guess that means St. Paul's is not only a House of Prayer for All Peoples, but is a House of Prayer and Witness for the Diocese of Eastern Massachusetts – I mean the Diocese of Massachusetts. Because your ministries here recall another question Alan was asked 14 months ago: “Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper?” Alan said “I will, for the sake of Christ.”

Boutique ministries? No, these ministries are what Alan and this diocese are all about.



And to that mission I will add one more. From your new entrance – if you look right over there – you will see the State House. I don't know this for sure, but you St. Paul's might be the only Cathedral geographically so close to a place of political power. Now the elected representatives in that House have done some outstanding work through the years and we should pray in gratitude for them. And perhaps there are times when we need to boldly express Gospel values to them. Not long ago Alan and I had a little disagreement with them about casinos. And although Massachusetts has the strictest gun laws in the country, our political leaders tossed out a proposal that would have limited gun purchases to one gun per person per year. Now if you think 12 guns a year per person is adequate, I invite you to knock on your neighbor's door and have a conversation about that. Go across the Common like Bud, the Green Bishop, and WMA's own Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, did the other day to take part in a rally raising consciousness about climate change. We need your witness, St. Paul's. Just as St. Paul was not afraid to speak to King Agrippa – Acts chapter 26 does not tell us he spoke boldly but he did speak "freely."

St. Paul – the inspiration for this Cathedral. The bold preaching and action of Paul was based on a radical trust in God's constant presence. God's "no matter what" love. God's "you can't ever get away from me" love. God's "I won't ever stop loving you" love. That is so clear in the passage we have tonight from the 8th chapter of the letter to the Romans. What will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord – absolutely nothing.

You have all heard this passage read many times at funerals. It is proclamation of resurrection and hope. But there is one line in the midst of the passage that does not seem to fit. "As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'" Ugh. Why say that to grieving people?

At my former parish church, Grace in Millbrook, New York, I took it upon myself to edit Paul. In the Bible we used for liturgy, I bracketed out the part about sheep being slaughtered and I would tell whatever friend or family member that was reading at the funeral to start with verse 31 "What then are we to say about these things?" and continue through verse 35. Skip the bracketed verse 36 about the killing and the slaughtering, and pick it up with "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors."

That seemed to work well. Dozens of funerals were conducted with my edited version of Paul. Until one day when the reader, the grieving daughter of the deceased, got to church just before the service was to start and in a harried state. I explained to her how to do the reading and to leave out the bracketed sentence. She said ok and went to her pew with her family. Now comes the time for her reading. She comes to the lectern and reads just the bracketed verse 36 "As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered. The Word of the Lord.'" And sat down.

Perhaps we who are getting clues to our mission in this Cathedral from Paul need to pay attention to that verse which I have ignored. It comes from Psalm 44 – that is "where it is written." That line is not out-of-place in Psalm 44. The whole psalm is one big complaint against God. Lots of being rejected and sold out and taunted.

Maybe the Psalmist and Paul are giving us another clue about what it means to be this Cathedral. There are many people outside these doors who feel rejected and sold out and taunted. They feel like they are being killed all day long. Where can they go? Bishop Lawrence thought they should come here. Alan and Jep and this dedicated staff and congregation think they should come here.

They can come here to *their* Cathedral as Bishop Lawrence proclaimed it. They can come into this renewed House of Prayer for all peoples, where the light now shines in. And together with you they can say the end of Psalm 44 after lots of complaining: "Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love."

Steadfast love – *hesed* – in Hebrew. God's faithfulness. God's "no matter what" kind of love. God's love that freed the Hebrew people from slavery, that freed Jesus, and all of us, from the power of death. This Cathedral stands as a witness to that love, to that God-given freedom. Or as your Paul would say it: "For freedom Christ has set us free."

A classmate of mine in the House of Bishops, Rob Wright, the bishop of Atlanta puts it this way: "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 beautiful Cathedral this is. May it be a House of Prayer where all people experience the steadfast love of God. May it be a House of Prayer where God causes freedom. You have a message and a mission, St. Paul's Cathedral. Proclaim it boldly for the sake of Christ and in the power of the Spirit. Amen.

+Doug

Bishop's Address to Convention 2015

November 7, 2015



Bishop Fisher's Convention Address

[Click here to download the PDF](#)

Just a few days ago I was at the National Cathedral in Washington DC for the installation of Michael Curry as our new Presiding Bishop. I can't possibly express adequately the enthusiasm that is running through our Church. Michael is the first African-American Presiding Bishop and the first ever to be elected on the first ballot. He is dedicated to social justice AND to growing our church. He says he is now the CEO of the Episcopal Church – the Chief Evangelism Officer. Michael is inviting all of us to join the Jesus Movement – a mission to change this world from the nightmare it is for so many into the Dream God has for it. I'm still on a spiritual high from that liturgy at the National Cathedral so if I start talking too fast, tell me to slow down.



And I have a great love and admiration for our outgoing PB, Katharine Jefferts-Schori whom many of you met three years ago around the corner at the Mass Mutual Center when I was ordained a bishop. I will always remember a sermon Katherine gave at General Convention this summer. She was preaching on the story in Mark's Gospel when Jesus is told a

twelve year old girl, the daughter of the synagogue leader, has died. Jesus immediately goes to the bedside of the girl, takes her by the hand and says “Talitha cum” which means “Little girl, get up!” Immediately the girl got up and began to walk.



As Katherine retold the story she reinterpreted “Talitha cum” to have Jesus shout: “Get up girl! You’re not dead yet!” Katherine then applied that to the Episcopal Church. “Get up, Church, you’re not dead yet!” We have had turmoil within and an increasingly secular society without, but we are not dead yet. Not only are we “not dead”, there are signs of abundant life, resurrected life.

Those signs of resurrection are here in WMA and our future is bright IF...Brothers and Sisters, it is a big IF. IF we allow God to be God. The God we believe in, the God we meet in the Old and New Testaments, the God we meet in the person of Jesus, the God we experience in the Holy Spirit, is a God who is constantly creating, constantly imagining and reimagining, constantly moving through death into new life.

It can’t get much clearer than the Book of Revelation. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...See, I am making all things new.” Here’s the good news. The newness is not just taking place in heaven. It’s taking place here...on earth. “See the home of God is among mortals.” This is not “fluffy spirituality.” It is not abstract. “See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them and they will be his peoples.” And God is on a mission to wipe out all the “deathliness” and suffering of the world. You see, God is agreeing with Michael Curry! The Jesus Movement is on a mission to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the Dream God has for it.

Let’s break away from Christianity for a moment and go east. I don’t know a lot about eastern spirituality directly. Maybe, someday. Most of what I know about it comes from the Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton and the Franciscan Richard Rohr. Rohr tells us Buddhist wisdom says “Thank God for impermanence. Thank God for constant change because it sets us free. It sets us free from constantly being bound by that which is passing away.” Buddhists acknowledge that “pain is inevitable, but suffering lies in clinging to that which has died.”

There are some dimensions of our church that are dying. And we suffer when we cling to them. At one time they were new and part of God’s plan. But now their mission is over and it is time to pass through death into the newness of resurrected life, into the life of God’s endless creativity and imagination.

One of our churches closed this summer. Several others are closing or considering closing. These decisions are made prayerfully and with a willingness to look at reality. I am grateful to our senior staff – Steve, Pam and Rich- and to the leaders of these parishes who are doing the hard work of transition. And I am grateful to the neighboring parishes that are actively welcoming members of these churches into their faith communities and appreciate the gifts they bring. The buildings close but the church continues. The Jesus Movement rolls in a new way.

Let's turn to some glimpses of God's newness among us. One of the highlights of my year was ordaining three new young priests and welcoming a fourth newly ordained from the great state of Idaho. They bring an energy, excitement and a fresh perspective. I remember doing that 35 years ago. And now I want to listen to them because there are certainly some things God is calling us to see that these old eyes are not seeing. To take advantage of their wisdom, and that of several young and dynamic lay people, I am forming the "Young Leaders Council to the Bishop." We will meet from time to time to see how we might be church for the 21st Century which is already 15 per cent over.



And I invite you to do the same. I'm blessed to look out at you- faithful and wise leaders of our churches. I encourage each one of you to seek out young people (under 50) in your parishes and start incorporating them into leadership, which may or may not look like a vestry. And, when they meet resistance, support them. Turn to those who say "we never did it this way before" and with love and kindness and respect convey that we need to let God be God. Let God express imagination and creativity.

There is another expression we need to avoid. And we clergy are often the guiltiest of using it. When someone wants to try something new, we say "oh, we did that before... In 1987... It failed." Maybe it was an idea ahead of its time. Maybe there is a new context. Maybe we aren't hearing the idea correctly.

You see, people like me who remember when President Kennedy was shot, are desperately needed in our churches – more than ever. But one of our big jobs is mentoring. Inviting in the next generations to bring their own special gifts.

Let's bring the gospel to new places. Like laundromats. Do you know about the Laundry Love program? You will learn about them later today. We have at least three of them in WMA.

Let's bring the gospel to new places like our streets. I didn't walk those 175 miles for exercise. I did it to bring the faith out of the church building and into the places where people live and work. And it wasn't me just bringing the faith, I received the faith. I was inspired by so many who are working for Jesus' Mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope. Later we are going to hear about our urban mission to Worcester. I know many of our parishes have done the 20 minute walk north, south, east and west from their buildings and have re-imagined their ministry based on what they found. I might be wrong, but there might be more community outreach going on through our parishes than ever before. You will hear about a few of those parishes in videos later today.



One of the awesome blessings of my walk through the diocese was meeting with community leaders, including police captains and sheriffs at jails. I learned so much. Including staggering facts about the heroin addiction that is crippling New England. Some of you are engaging community leaders in conversations about what churches can do. God bless you. This is Matthew 25 work for today's world. "I was addicted and you cared."

Let's bring the Gospel to new people. Theologian Brian McLaren asks "why do denominations assign leaders to buildings when they should be sending them to populations?" In WMA we are taking that question seriously. We are actively engaged in ministry with veterans, immigrants, Latino populations, to the addicted and the incarcerated. It does not look like traditional parish ministry but it does look like God's imagination at work.

How about bringing the Gospel to old places with new people? I'm thinking of our college campuses. There are 32 of them in WMA with 130,000 students. Now some outstanding campus ministry is already going on, but not nearly enough. Some of you were around three and a half years ago when I told this story in the "walkabouts" leading up to the election of a new bishop. Or the "Hunger Games" as my kids called them. When our youngest child Gracie was a freshman at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA her spring break was just two weeks before Holy Week. When I was taking her back to school at the end of the break, she said "dad when will you or mom pick me up for Easter?" I said, "Oh honey, you have classes right through Good Friday and you need to be back in class on Monday morning. You know your parents are both priests. There is no way we can drive 4 ½ hours to Carlisle and pick you up and drive you home on Good Friday and make that nine hour round trip on Easter Sunday after services." She was disappointed but understood. We kept driving and when we stopped at a traffic light in Carlisle, she said "There's the Episcopal Church...Where I will be sitting all by myself on Easter Sunday morning."...We figured out a way to get her home for Easter.

Is there a college campus near you? How are you reaching out to those young people? Remember, most of them – the vast majority of them, unless like Gracie a P.K. (preacher's kid), have been raised with no religious experience at all. They are not looking for a church to go to because they have probably never been in one. "Church? Hmm... I think when I was around ten my cousin got married and I was in this building with candles and windows with paintings in them." But that might be to our advantage. College is all about learning new things, new experiences. It is about rebelling against your parents. What could be more radical, more "out-there" than discovering life in Christ? And I bet that discovering could come through service to the community because young people love to volunteer for worthy causes. We have an opportunity here, beloved of God, if we can tap into God's imagination. Lawrence House is one such example and you will be hearing about that later on.

*"What could be more radical,
more 'out-there' than
discovering life in Christ?"*



It is great to be a believer, a Christian, an Episcopalian in 2015 because the imagination and creativity of God has given us social media. The word "gospel" means "good news." John's Gospel tells us "in the beginning was the Word." We are in the communications business and God has given us more tools than ever before. Let's use them! That stroll I took through WMA had 100 times more impact because Vicki Ix, the best communications director anywhere, got the word out on the website, Facebook, twitter, Instagram and traditional newspaper and TV outlets. I know, I know. I have the luxury of a full time professional communications director to do this work. I invite you to tap into God's imagination to see how you might take advantage of social media to proclaim good news. Someday we will all see Jesus face to face and we might say "Jesus, I know I promised in the Baptismal Covenant to proclaim the Good News in Christ and I'm sorry I did not reach as many people as I hoped. It was so frustrating." And Jesus will say "But I gave you Facebook!"

Here is one last area for God's creativity for this Convention address. I have not covered nearly all of them. That is the all-important area of social justice. I have been inspired by multitudes in this dimension of the Gospel, some famous and by some oh so grassroots. One of the famous ones is the theologian Walter Bruggemann who writes about our Revelation passage: "I saw a new Heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. The future is not a private, individualistic future. It is a new epoch in the history of the world." Here is a key line for us church folk. "The church knows that the old earth cannot be sustained." That's right. I'll add the old earth that burns fossil fuels without limit cannot be sustained. The old earth that does not allow refugees and immigrants to move away from war torn and gang-infested and impoverished areas of the world cannot be sustained. The old earth where a gun culture in the US is allowed to run wild cannot be sustained. The old earth where one per cent of the population takes in the vast majority of the wealth cannot be sustained. The Church of the New Creation God knows this. The Pope, the Bishop of Rome, knows this and when he said it he was called too political. The Episcopal Bishop of Western Massachusetts knows this and has been called too political. But friends, know this, the anti-casino bishop, trying to catch up with the imagination of the God of the prophets and Jesus, is going to double-down on social justice issues. Because I can't honestly say I believe in the God of the Old and New Testaments if I do anything else.

There is a prayer we all say at the Easter Vigil and we say it at ordinations which means I got to pray it four times in the last six months. It speaks to our situation in the church and in the world, and expresses our never-ending hope in the promises of the living God.

"O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on you whole church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever."

The Jesus Movement rolls on. Amen.

+Doug

My climate change sermon.

October 12, 2015



Church leaders throughout New England have declared [*A New Awakening: A Season of Prophetic Climate Witness*](#). In this season that runs from St. Francis Day to Epiphany, we are asking all preachers to [deliver at least one sermon on climate change](#) and how the Church is called to respond. What better place for me to deliver that sermon than here at the [Cathedral](#)? You are called to model God's mission for all our other churches. And, because I am here more often than any of our other churches, this is an easy place to have ongoing discussions with me about this crucial issue.

A back story to this sermon. At a family gathering a month ago I mentioned this *New Awakening Season* and a sermon for it. My daughter-in-law Brenna spoke up right away and said "I would like to help you with that sermon. It is a passion of mine." It is for my three children, too, but they have been part of so many sermons through the years, they did not volunteer on this one. (They evolved through the years from "Daddy, I hope you are going to tell a story about me in the sermon" to "Oh God, I hope Dad doesn't mention me in the sermon.")



Brenna, Grace, Geoff and Caragh Fisher

Of course they are passionate about it. They are all in their twenties. climate change is already affecting our world, but it is really going to be severe in the life spans of our young people...unless we do something about it. It is good and right that 25-year-old Brenna contributed insights for what I am about to say.

First, the briefest of sketches as to what causes climate change. It is the one NASA gives us. 97% of climate scientists agree that the main cause of the current global warming trend is human expansion of the "greenhouse effect" – warming that results when the atmosphere traps heat radiating from the earth toward space. "On Earth human activities are changing the natural greenhouse. Over the last century the burning of fossil fuels has increased the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide which contributes to the greenhouse effect."

Consequences of global warming include rising seas (as the ice caps melt), catastrophic floods, historic rains, and other extreme weather events especially drought. You all know about the record-setting drought in the American West. But did you know that the United States Navy says that climate change is our greatest security risk? That is because it will create political and economic instability throughout the world. Let me give you an example of how that has already happened.

Between 2006 and 2011, over half the country of Syria suffered under the worst drought on record. 85% of the livestock died. Nearly a million rural villagers lost their family farms. The government led by Bashar al-Assad did nothing. People flocked to the cities for work but there was none. The cities were also experiencing severe water shortages. Fifteen teenage boys wrote on walls demanding a new government. They were rounded up and tortured. This led to huge protests in the streets which led to government crackdowns which led to the chaos we have now. [It all started with climate change.](#)

Here's another example of what climate change could do closer to home. In a couple of weeks I will participate with other bishops on a panel about climate change. [Jim Antal](#) of the UCC will moderate the discussion and he sent us the questions he intends to ask so we would be prepared. You never want to surprise bishops! One of the questions haunts me. "Suppose you are the bishop of Massachusetts and one your churches in the Back Bay tells you they are starting on a twelve million dollar capital campaign for their vital, healthy parish that needs a big building upgrade to serve the needs of their community. But you know that the [Boston Globe has published an article](#) that says the entire Back Bay will be under water in 50 years due to climate change. What do you do?"

What would you do? Think about it and give me some advice at coffee hour because I am challenged by that question.

You see climate change affects nearly all aspects of life. [Our Episcopal Church joined with our Lutheran brothers and sisters](#) saying that scientific research shows climate change leads to food insecurity and humanity's inability to grow crops to feed a growing world population. Biodiversity is being destroyed and ecosystems undermined as species become extinct. Indigenous people will be forced to leave their traditional lives, and the poorest among us will bear the greatest burdens of the changing climate.

Pope Francis recently wrote and spoke passionately about climate change. He was criticized in some quarters for being "too political." And "he should leave this to the scientists." You have heard me say many times why we need to bring a religious and moral voice to the issues of our time. This time I will let my 25-year-old daughter-in-law speak to it. She writes:

"There is so much to learn and discover about the earth. We will always be making discoveries but we will still only be scratching the surface because the earth is made of something holy and mystical... So many of the Psalms, including the one we read today, are praising God for how complex and perfectly made the earth is and how the earth was designed to function with all living things symbiotically and harmoniously working together."

And now, the one I like the best:

"We cannot function in our faith passively and so we cannot live on the earth passively. If we are complacent in our faith we lose touch with God and with God's plan for us."

We have a crisis and we have a faith that requires we take action. Here are some suggestions:

- Learn more and stay informed. Do you know that more times than Jesus invited us to love, he invited us to "wake up", "see", "look", "be aware."
- Reduce your carbon emissions. The Environmental Protection Agency has [practical suggestions on their website](#). In your investments, consider divesting from fossil fuel companies and investing in green energy.
- [Contact your elected officials](#) and let them know how important this issue is to you. Call me naïve, but I believe our leaders will listen to voters when they out-shout the lobbyists.
- And pray. Pray to our God whom is described in the Book of Wisdom in this way: "For you Living God love all things that exist, and detest none of the things you have made... You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord who love the living. For your immortal spirit is in all things."

The task before us is daunting. But we are people of hope. As our Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts-Schori says :

“As Christians we do not live in the despair and melancholy of the tomb, but in the light of the Risen Christ. Our resurrection hope is grounded in the promise of renewal and restoration for all of God’s Creation, which gives us energy, strength, and perseverance in the face of overwhelming challenge. For us, this promise is more than an abstraction. It is a challenge to commit ourselves to walk a different course and serve as God’s hands in working to heal the brokenness of our hurting world.”

Or as our Missioner for Creation Care, the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, named her recent blog: [“The Tide Is Rising But So Are We.”](#) People are rising up to save the planet that God has blessed us with. Do it for the twenty-somethings. For my children and yours and for the generations that follow. “Glory to God, whose power, working in us, can do more than we can ask or imagine.” Amen.

+Doug

The time for silence is over.

October 2, 2015

On December 16, 2012 there was a powerful prayer service held at the Washington National Cathedral in the wake of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The Dean, Gary Hall, preached "Enough is enough. As followers of Jesus, we have the moral obligation to stand for and with the victims and to work to end it. We have tolerated school shootings, mall shootings, theater shootings, sniper shootings, workplace shootings, temple and church shootings, urban neighborhood shootings far too long... The gun lobby is strong but it is no match for the cross lobby."

On the day after the slaughter in Oregon, as our prayers go out to the victims and their families, it feels like the gun lobby is winning.

According to [VOX](#), yesterday was the latest in 986 mass shootings in the United States since Sandy Hook (a mass shooting is defined as one in which four or more people are shot.)

It feels like the gun lobby is winning.

But we have been here before. After the death of Jesus, it felt like all was lost. The great dream of the Kingdom of God seemed over. Even the Resurrection of Jesus did not restore hope at first. In Mark's Gospel, after the disciples are told at the empty tomb that Jesus is risen and they should go and tell this good news, they scatter. "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (Mark 16:8)." The Gospel ends there.

We know they overcame their fear at Pentecost and began a movement that went out to all the world. Although our churches throughout history have been (and continue to be) deeply flawed, the Jesus Movement is still the greatest expression of mercy, compassion and hope the world has ever seen.

It feels like the gun lobby is winning.

The Church offers sincere prayer-filled moments of silence for the victims, but the time for silence is over.

Let's get behind our President who says "there is a gun for roughly every man, woman and child in America. So how can you with a straight face make the argument that more guns make us safer?"

Have you [contacted your representatives in Congress](#)? Have you used your freedom and your faith to move the mountain of indifference? It's not too late to make your voice heard.

In Massachusetts we have some of the strictest gun laws in the nation, but we can do better. Ask your elected representatives why the proposal to limit the purchase of guns to "one gun per person per month" was voted down even though that would reduce gun trafficking.

Some studies show that the [vast majority of NRA members want universal back ground checks](#).

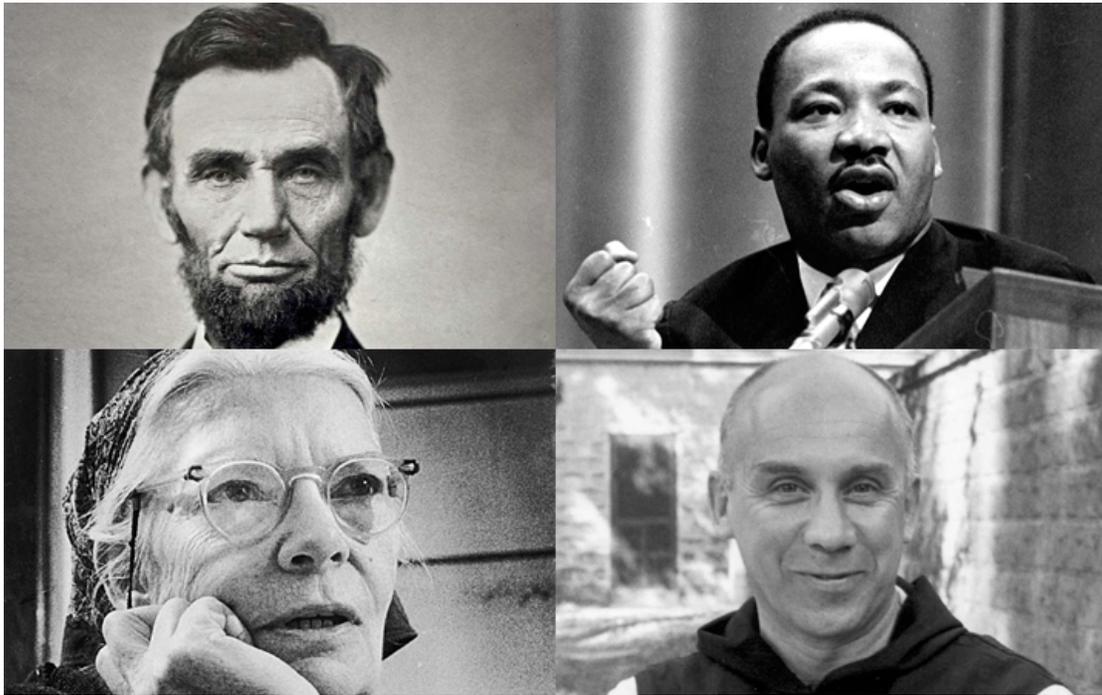
If you are an NRA member, why are you being silent on this? Why do you let the Wayne LaPierres of the world speak for you?

I want to believe the gun lobby is no match for the cross lobby, and that people of faith can make a difference. Another moment of silent prayer will not make it so. It's time to make noise. Proclaim God's dream of nonviolence. Proclaim it boldly and with endless hope.

+Doug

We are already deeply immersed in much of this work.

September 25, 2015



Like so many, I have been inspired by the visit of Pope Francis to the United States. My heart rejoiced to read this statement to Congress:

“A nation can be considered great when it defends liberty as Lincoln did, when it fosters a culture which enables people to ‘dream’ of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, as Martin Luther King sought to do; when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed, as Dorothy Day did by her tireless work, the fruit of a faith which becomes dialogue and sows peace in the contemplative style of Thomas Merton.”

What a great summary of what it means to be a “great” nation. And Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton are two of my personal spiritual heroes. Perhaps, we should follow up with a Quiet Day focusing on the insights of these two saints?

We should follow up on much of what Francis said knowing that we are already deeply immersed in much of that work. Here are two examples.

The Bishop of Rome has long been an advocate for the rights of immigrants. The Bishop of Western Massachusetts came here with experience in that area. Our Social Justice Commission issued a document called *Welcoming the Stranger: The Church and Immigration* on September 21. We chose that date because it is the feastday of St. Matthew – his gospel has the story of Joseph, Mary and Jesus as refugees in Egypt. I invite you to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” what is written [here](#). Immigration will continue to be a huge issue in the upcoming Presidential campaign.

Pope Francis took his name because he wants to follow in the way of St. Francis of Assisi who advocated for the poor and who is the patron saint of the environmental movement. With the leadership of our Missioner for Creation Care, The Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, we are addressing climate change in many ways on the diocesan and national level. Margaret spent this week in Washington D.C at numerous events including a meeting with Karen Florini, Deputy Special Envoy for Climate Change at the US State Department. You can learn more about that visit [here](#).



Welcoming the Stranger: The Church and Immigration





While the Pope was addressing Congress, I was speaking on the steps of City Hall at the Springfield Climate Justice Rally. I quoted the Pope and spoke about how many religious traditions are uniting in efforts to save our planet. [VIDEO](#)



Throughout New England, preachers are being urged to have at least one sermon about climate change in the season from October 4 (St. Francis Day) to Epiphany. "[New Awakening- Preaching on Climate Change](#)" is being held in Framingham, Massachusetts on October 20 to provide practical help in creating those sermons. [REGISTER](#)

Gospel Hope and the Climate Crisis: A Workshop for Preachers

Tuesday, October 20, 2015

St. Andrew's Church 3 Maple Street, Framingham, MA

9:30 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

Thank God for Pope Francis and his prophetic words. As Jesus gave us his public policy position in his first sermon in a synagogue in Nazareth: "I have come to bring good news to the poor (Luke 4:16-30)." Pope Francis has given us his public policy position which lines up pretty well with that of Jesus.

May this week be more than a time of inspiration. May it inspire commitment to being the New Creation that God has always envisioned.

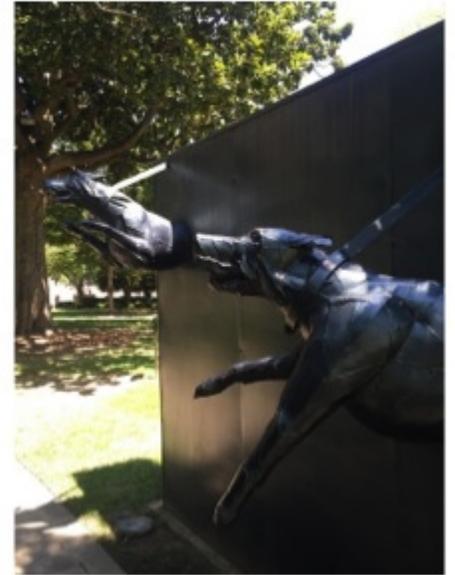
+Doug

After Alabama: a Path of Action for Justice

August 16, 2015



I have never visited the Holy Land. Friends who have, tell me they never read the Scriptures in the same way again. Even though they knew the stories, being physically present to the sacred places gave them a whole new appreciation. My participation this week in a pilgrimage through Alabama, visiting key places in the Civil Rights Movement, as part of a group sponsored by Episcopal Divinity School, brought me to a similar new depth of understanding. I was a child during those history making days of the 1960s but I studied that era extensively as an adult. I was especially taken by the story of Jonathan Daniels, the Episcopal seminarian who gave his life in that struggle. Although I never made the commitment he did, I shared his idealism, his hope that Jesus' dream of the Kingdom of God on earth as in heaven could be realized.



I entered the journey knowing the stories, but hearing the stories where they took place helped them enter my soul. Walking in prayer through Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, where Sheriff Bull Connor had his police attack protesters with vicious dogs and where he had water canons turned on the marchers, gave me a sense of witness to the horrific events, as did entering the 16th Street Baptist Church where a bomb killed four children getting ready for Sunday School. Walking over Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, knowing that “Bloody Sunday” occurred at the end of that walk, was prayer in motion. When I knelt on the ground in Haynesville, where Jonathan was gunned down by Thomas Coleman, taking a bullet intended for 16-year-old Ruby Sales, I felt the spirit of one who had followed Jesus all the way to the cross. Our multidimensional souls allow us to be horrified and inspired at the same time.



There is another Holy Land/Gospel similarity. The Gospels were written about fifty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Most scholars date Mark to around 70 A.D., Matthew and Luke to 80-85, John in the 90's. The Evangelists wrote to preserve the community's memory of Jesus and to keep the message and Spirit of Jesus alive and vibrant in a new time. The new time was living the faith without the Temple, which had been destroyed by the Romans in 70. Could it be that we are retelling the Civil Rights stories fifty years later, not just for history's sake, but so that we might embrace the message of that time – be inspired to work for justice in a new era? Our society does not look like it did in the '50s and '60s, just as the Judeo-Christian faith expression did not look like it did in the Temple era – a time in which they expected the imminent return of Christ. The Gospels invited believers to “be” the Body of Christ. The sacrifices of so many, fifty years ago, did achieve so much. But the work of the Civil Rights Movement is far from done, even though some may have thought it was. The attempt to roll back voting rights, the mass incarceration of black men ([The New Jim Crow](#)), income inequality are just a few examples. [Bishops Against Gun Violence](#) speak about the “Unholy Trinity” – poverty, racism and guns.

Telling the stories of Jesus and the Prophets has never been viewed as interesting stories from long ago. They are the Living Word because they comfort and challenge us now. They require a response. In the same way, the stories of the Civil Rights Movement ask something of us beyond historical study. They invite us first to an awareness of the reality of the present time, and then to action for a world where Jesus' mission of mercy, compassion and hope is not reserved for Heaven.

We should not assume the church is answering this challenge.

A few months ago I was on a panel with Ruby Sales – the woman Tom Coleman aimed the gun at. I was saying the fight against climate change was not making progress because churches were not getting behind it, as they did in the Civil Rights Movement. Ruby leaned in to me and said “the churches failed to lead in the Civil Rights movement.” I heard her but that was not my understanding of history. I grew up with priest mentors who were all about social justice. On this pilgrimage I learned Ruby had the facts and I did not. Far less than 10 per cent of the churches in our country overall and in the South as a region took part in the Civil Rights Movement. We have outstanding saints who acted on their faith – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jonathan Daniels, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Rosa Parks and thousands of others. As powerful as that witness is, the fact is that most churches sat out the Civil Rights Movement. May we not sit on the sidelines this time. I say that not knowing exactly what that participation looks like, but knowing it begins for me with awareness.



And maybe if you and I can grow in awareness, and hang on to the idealism of Jonathan Daniels who remains forever young, a path of action for justice will be revealed to us in the “beloved community” that Jonathan described in a Bible he gave to friends on Easter Sunday 1965: “We dream of a beloved community in which white men and black men, old men and young men, whole men and sick men, will join hands in the way of the Cross and find there the life broken, shared and renewed for them all, the unspeakable glory of God.”

+Doug

FREEDOM RIDE 2015: Lift Every Voice and Sing

July 17, 2015



I have the great blessing of spending a week in North Carolina with 70 young people from all around the United States, South Africa and Botswana. We studied the art of non-violence, the sin of racism, the Civil Rights Movement and what we are called to do as part of the Jesus Movement that seeks to transform the world into God's dream.



Here is the WMA cohort with the Presiding Bishop-elect, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry. The Rev. Hilary Bogert-Winkler, second from right, is our Youth Missioner. We're so grateful to Hilary for making this pilgrimage happen and for her boundless energy!

LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING is a powerful hymn written by James Weldon Johnson over one hundred years ago in an effort to give voice to God's grace bringing liberty to an enslaved people in America. I will never forget being in the House

of Bishops when Michael Curry's election was announced and we spontaneously sang this hymn. I'll use some of the lyrics as a focus for describing the power of [Freedom Ride 2015](#).

"Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us."



We went to places that told of a dark past of suffering for an enslaved people. One such place was [Stagville](#), a huge plantation of 900 slaves that has been preserved as a historical site. Owned by a prominent Episcopalian, Duncan Cameron, the primitive houses were actually better than most in the South as the owners did not want the slaves getting sick, thereby decreasing their value. After the Civil War the plantation continued as it was before Emancipation. The newly freed slaves worked the land as poor sharecroppers always in debt to the landowner. Another museum described how voting by blacks was suppressed (we were there as laws suppressing voting were being debated in the North Carolina legislature) and the pain of the Jim Crow era.



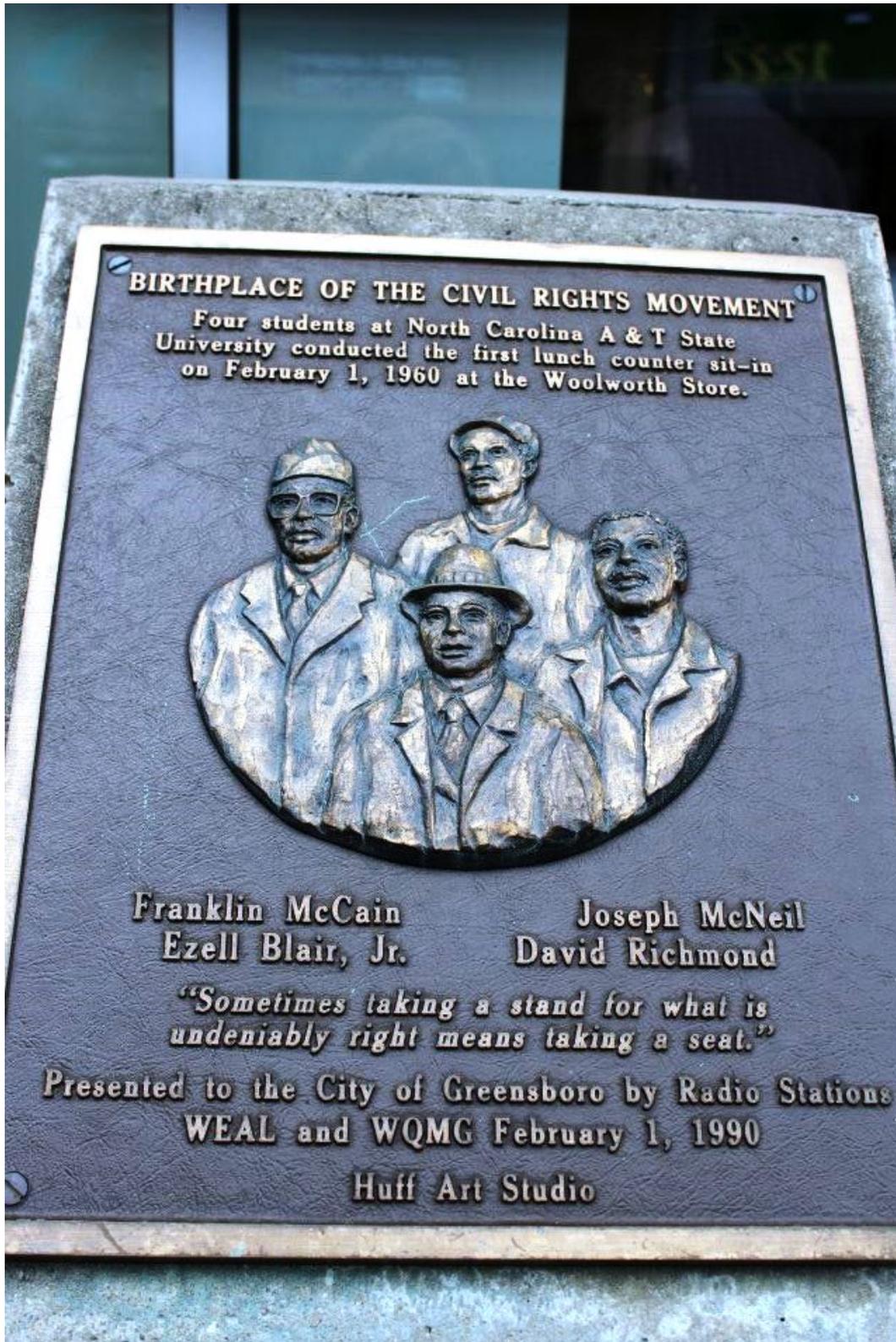
One of the team leaders, Michelle Lainer, gave us a great insight into what we might feel based on these experiences. This could make African-Americans feel bitter. It could make white Americans feel ashamed. But beyond bitterness and shame

is witness. We are all now a witness to our history, a witness to our culture of racism. Black and white share this history, we share this culture. Now what will we do together, as witnesses to the truth?

“Sing a song full of hope that the present has brought us.”

The young people who went on this Freedom Ride fill me with hope. They are energetic, compassionate, prayerful, joyful and highly sensitive to inequality of all kinds. These witnesses are going to do great things.

“We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.”



We all know about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. rightfully so. But how much do we know about the thousands of men and women, black and white, who sacrificed so much for a cause they recognized to be greater than themselves? This week acquainted and reacquainted our young people with many of those heroic stories. I know the “cloud of witnesses” that surrounds me when I pray that great All Saints preface on November 1 – and on many other occasions outside of All Saints Day (don’t tell the bishop) – has been dramatically expanded.

“Keep us forever in the path we pray, lest our feet stray from the places, our God where we met thee. Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee.”

We learned the “10 Commitments” of Dr. King – printed on a card that those who followed him on the non-violent path of resistance in Birmingham, Alabama had to sign in 1963. The first commitment is “Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.”

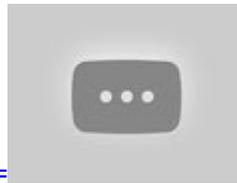
I HEREBY PLEDGE MYSELF--MY PERSON AND MY BODY--TO THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT. THEREFORE I WILL KEEP THE FOLLOWING TEN COMMANDMENTS:

1. MEDITATE daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. REMEMBER always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation-not victory.
3. WALK and TALK in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. PRAY daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. SACRIFICE personal wishes in order that all men might be free.
6. OBSERVE with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. SEEK to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. REFRAIN from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. STRIVE to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. FOLLOW the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration.

The work of social justice must be soaked in prayer and for Christians, grounded in Christ. Prayer – often in the form of praise music – was everywhere this week.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=>



“May we forever stand, True to our God, True to our native land.”

Our native land is the kingdom of God – where Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope comes to fulfillment. These are hard days in our world for race relations, immigrants, refugees and indeed for our Mother Earth. But we embrace those issues and more, filled with hope because we believe in a God greater than ourselves, in a God who makes all things new.

+Doug

Editor’s note: We are especially grateful to the Diocese of Northern California for the use of their photos.

A Statement on the Resolutions Regarding Marriage Adopted by the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church

July 2, 2015



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS
“CELEBRATING GOD’S ABUNDANCE”

July 2, 2015

The Church is all about Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope. Sometimes in our broken world, that vision of God’s love for all people can feel very far off. But this week in Salt Lake City, the elected leaders of the Episcopal Church have made some decisions and commitments that make that Reign of God feel a little closer.

One of those decisions concerns marriage equality. [We approved liturgies for trial use](#) that will treat all couples equally in marriage. This means true marriage equality. The marriage between two people of the same sex is equal to the marriage of a woman and man. I rejoice in this decision.

We made this decision in the context of forty years of debating and moving forward in our recognition of the full inclusion of LGBT people in our Church and in our society. I am grateful to all those who have been prophetic and all those who have been patient as we grew in our understanding of our LGBT brothers and sisters.

Because there is marriage equality in Massachusetts, I gave permission to our Episcopal clergy to celebrate marriages between same sex couples two years ago. So the decision of our General Convention meeting in Salt Lake does not radically change things here, but it does give us some new liturgies to use and expands our language in these services.

While marriage equality is now the law in all fifty states, there are still dioceses in the Episcopal Church where marriage equality has not previously been permitted by the bishop, as well as priests within our own diocese and others who cannot in good conscience officiate at same sex marriages. In those places we have decided that it is now up to the Bishop to make arrangements for same – sex marriages, perhaps by bringing in another priest to officiate or by having the couple go to a church that is willing to host them. In so doing, the intent is for the Episcopal Church to continue to be a “big tent” that allows for diversity of opinion.

We are blessed by all couples who commit themselves to faithful love. They make God’s Reign of Mercy, Compassion and Hope come alive.

+Doug

“Somebody’s talkin’ ’bout Jesus”: Reflection in the Midst of General Convention

June 30, 2015



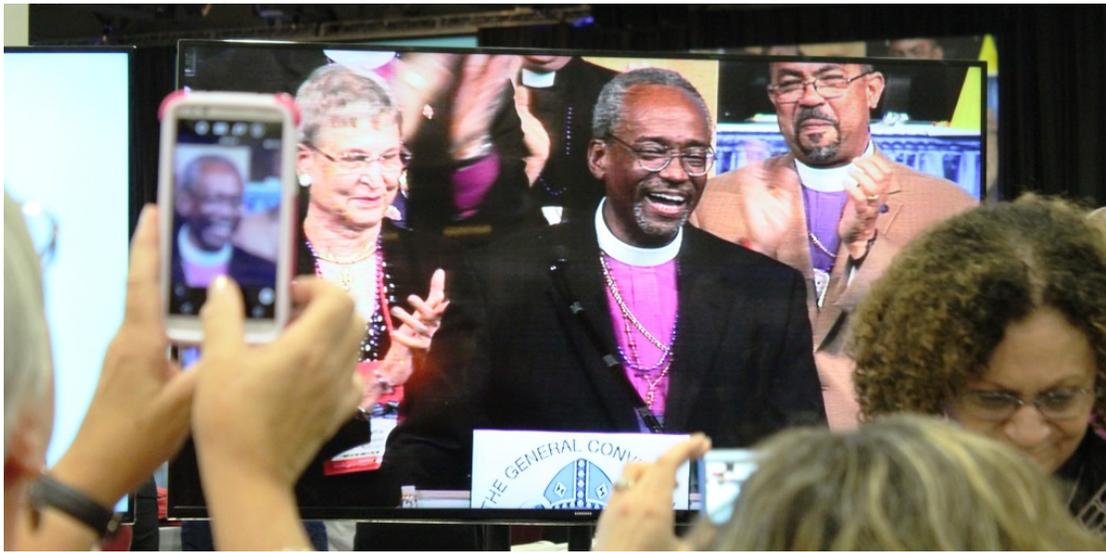
“Everywhere I go, Somebody’s Talkin’ Bout Jesus.” (Traditional Spiritual – this refrain is sung frequently at the House of Bishops)

Those who follow this blog regularly will not be surprised to hear that a highlight for me of this 78th General Convention meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah was the March through the streets of the city early Sunday morning [“Claiming Common Ground Against Gun Violence.”](#) 1500 people gathered to say “no” to the public health crisis that is gun violence and “yes” to background checks. We said “no” to the “Unholy Trinity” of poverty, racism and violence and “yes” to the Holy Trinity who offers a new creation. This was a public witness to our faith and it is exactly such public witness that is at the heart of Christianity. Christianity is not about the church (although we need Church to have Christianity because we are a communal faith). Christianity is about engaging the Spirit that changes the world. Faith without action is just opinion.

Faith without action is just opinion.

I feel most alive taking the faith to the street. At the risk of sounding like a five year old, I get impatient in meetings. And General Convention is mostly meetings – from 7 am to late at night. But those meetings, as hard as it is for me to sit still during them, are a public witness of our faith as well. In those meetings we make decisions about how we will live out our faith. What will we stand up for? Because money is a resource for mission, what we choose to spend our money on is a public witness to what we value. Even in those meetings, *“somebody’s talkin’ ’bout Jesus.”*

In those meetings, faithful people stay united even in the midst of disagreement as to what we value and what we should do in a complex world. An example close to home for me is the issue of divestment from fossil fuels. Yesterday, to my joy, the House of Bishops voted to call churches and church organizations to divest from fossil fuels – [something we have already done in Western Massachusetts](#) as our Trustees have led the way. To my disappointment, they voted to take the Church Pension Fund out of that list of organizations we are urging to divest. I am disappointed but I am blessed to be part of a church where we can have these discussions. And I think, if we stay faithful and keep making the case, the Church Pension Fund (led by good people) will come around to addressing what might be the most important issue of our time.



Someone who talks about Jesus often and from the heart is Bishop Michael Curry. [We just elected him to be our Presiding Bishop](#) for the next nine years. Every time Michael preaches, my spirit soars. He is an inspirational leader who proclaims a prophetic word embodied in the Gospel. The excitement about his election runs throughout the Convention. I know he will capture the public imagination. He will be to our Church what Pope Francis is to the Roman Catholic Church. Michael radiates joy flowing from God's love and the tough mindedness of the Prophets calling for a radical conversion of our society.

The liturgies at General Convention are incredible. The music touches the soul, the preaching inspires, the faith of those gathered is an opening to the Spirit. One day Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori preached on the Mark text where Jesus raises a twelve year old girl whom every one thought was dead. Katherine started [her sermon](#) with "Get up girl. You aren't dead yet!"

Our Episcopal Church is not dead. It might have been asleep for a while, but now it is waking up. This is a new, exciting day. And "*Everywhere I go, somebody's talkin' 'bout Jesus.*"

+Doug

A Litany for Emanuel AME Church

June 19, 2015

We Americans are so busy. We are time poor. Let us take a moment to let our souls catch up to our bodies, to reflect and to pray:

Nine people were killed in church by a man with a gun given to him by his uncle for his birthday. He had several magazines worth of bullets. (Silence.)

A five year old child was saved by playing dead. This happened in the United States of America in 2015. (silence)

Gun companies have made record profits since the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012. (Silence)

In the State of the Union Address in January 2013, the President, referring to the Sandy Hook massacre, shouted several times "they deserve a vote. " Congress has done nothing. (Silence)

Over 30,000 people a year die from gun violence in the USA every year. (Silence)

"With God, all things are possible." Matthew 19: 26. (silence)

+Doug

From Greenfield to Southwick: Things I learned on the Pioneer Valley Pilgrimage

May 21, 2015



May 20, 2015

I'm writing this blog just three days away from the last leg of my 170 mile Pilgrimage through our Diocese of Western Massachusetts. (For an exact countdown to the walk, [check our website](#).....). I'm really excited about this journey through the Berkshires and especially blessed to have my son, Geoff, and his fiancée, Brenna, with me the first two days. The itinerary can be found [here](#).

In my anticipation of this trip, I realized that I never wrote a blog about my last trip –through the Pioneer Valley in Easter Week. Such is the pace of resurrected life in the great 50 days of the Easter Season! Here, late, are a few of the many things I learned in that walk from Greenfield to Southwick.

- [St. James' Greenfield](#), [St. Paul's Holyoke](#) and [Southwick Community Episcopal Church](#) really know how to pray for a pilgrim bishop as he starts, stops and concludes a journey.



- Across the street from St. James there is a phenomenal place – [Community Action Family Center](#) – that helps young families, especially immigrants. The main need those families are experiencing right now is access to transportation. When will we do something about that in our rural communities?



- o The Veterans at the [VA Medical Center in Northampton](#) have compelling stories we need to hear.
- o Patrick Cahillane, the Deputy Superintendent of the [Hampshire County Correctional Facility](#) in Northampton has been on the job for 34 years. After all he has seen in those years, he still believes in the dignity of every human being and he has hope for renewal for everyone. He will inspire me for a long time.



- o [Richard Kos](#), the mayor of Chicopee, is truly a public servant.
- o As I walked with fellow pilgrims through the rain, icy rain and sleet, I experienced solidarity with all those who frequently work outside under those conditions.
- o The Episcopal Service Corps at [Lawrence House](#), under the direction of The Rev. Tanya Wallace, is a gift to WMA.



- o Listening to the stories of so many as we walked along, I was immersed in Spirit and renewed in my belief that "grace is wild and free."
- o One of my fellow pilgrims was the Imam of the [Islamic Society](#) in West Springfield, [Wisman Abdul-Baki](#). He is a scholar, and a holy man of peace.



- Students at [UMASS Amherst](https://www.umass.edu) will turn out at the end of a long day to meet a pilgrim bishop.



- Visiting several shops run by families who are members of our Latino congregation at the Cathedral, I realized that immigrants are the job creators.



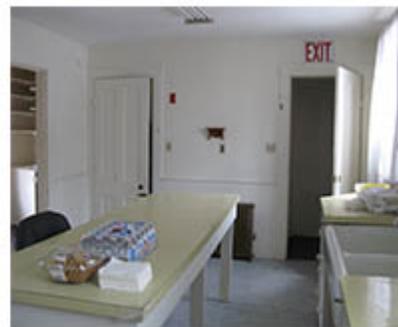
- There is great, God-inspired, work being done by the nurses at [Baystate Medical Center](https://www.baystate.edu).



- Episcopalians are not shy to pray on street corners and in parking lots. Who knew?
- Casinos displace whatever is in their path – even a [Correctional Alcohol Treatment facility](#) – a place dedicated to amends, healing and hope.



- In Westfield, I found out that as many as twenty teenagers are homeless in this upscale community, living in abandoned buildings. And several community agencies, including our [Church of the Atonement](#), are starting a home for them. I was blessed to bless ["Our House."](#)



These are just a few glimpses of the myriad ways in which I experienced the sacred world of the Pioneer Valley. The "aliveness of God" is everywhere we look. I look forward to experiencing that holy "aliveness" in the Berkshires. If you are

nearby, join me for a mile or two. And if you are far away, join me in prayer as the Resurrected Christ meets us on the road.

+Doug

A Missed Opportunity: A Statement on the Sentencing of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev

May 15, 2015

A few hours ago the jury that sentenced Boston Marathon Bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev to his death missed a great opportunity to show the world a better way. We could have shown the world that the response to killing is not more killing. They chose an “eye for an eye.”

Many faith traditions believe in a different way. Our Christian tradition is one of them. We follow Jesus, the innocent one executed by the Roman Empire, who returns with the greeting “peace” and an invitation to engage the endless creativity of God who offers life to a world that so often chooses death.

As I wrote a few days ago, the victims of the horrific violence of the Tsarnaev brothers have constantly chosen hope and resurrection. With the help of faithful doctors, nurses, family and friends, they have courageously “risen” and not given in to despair or been mired in vengeance. That is the story I choose to remember. I invite myself and all of us to choose hope over cynicism, peace over violence, love over hate.
+Doug

The Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher
IX Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts



Terror loses and love wins: The Sentencing of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev

May 11, 2015

Many of you have contacted me affirming the statement Bishops Alan Gates, Gayle Harris and I made advocating against the death penalty for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev – the Boston Marathon bomber. In it we describe his actions as “repugnant and morally inexcusable.” We wrote “Evidence offered in the trial has served only to deepen our awareness of the calculated mercilessness of this act.” Nevertheless, “moral reasoning requires us to transcend our emotional and visceral responses. The church’s teaching insists...that execution is an unjustified violation of the prohibition against the taking of human life.” The complete statement can be found [here](#).

The teaching of our Church is that the death penalty is always wrong. In prayer, and in my articulation of our position in interviews with reporters, I have discovered another dimension as to why the death penalty is wrong in this particular case. Here is what came to me this weekend: **I believe the over-arching narrative of the Boston Marathon Bombing is one of resurrection.**

For the past two years, we have been blessed with story after story of victims reclaiming their lives. Time and again, people leave hospitals in front of TV cameras telling us about the incredible work and love and care of their doctors and nurses. They tell us of the constant support of their family and friends through the hard, painful work of rehab. They tell us of their times of despair and the love that got them through it all. These are heroes supported by heroes.

When we look at videos of that horrific day in 2013, we see policemen and first-responders and ordinary citizens running *toward* the blast of the bombs. We see humanity at its best.

And we see the city of Boston refusing to be cowed by terrorism. We see “Boston Strong” and a city that refuses to live in fear.

This is a Resurrection story. Over and over again in the Scriptures we read the phrases “rise up”, or we’re told that someone “got up.” These are all expressions in everyday life of the “rising up” of Jesus. *The* story of the horrific tragedy of the 2013 Boston Marathon is Resurrection. Terror loses and love wins.

Why would we want to change that Resurrection story into a story of revenge and more killing? Why, in the words of my brother bishop, Rob Wright of Atlanta, would we want the next chapter in this story be one of “blood lust?”

The response to the Boston Marathon bombing is a story that invites us to hope, courage, compassion and belief in the incredible power of Spirit. Why would we want to redirect that life-giving, inspirational, transcendent, holy story into another story about killing? Why should we add to the death toll of that day?

Resurrection happened in Boston and among us. Let us continue with that story. Killing another human being will not save us. It is the ongoing Resurrection offered by our living God that will save us all.

+Doug

Emmaus, Confirmation and Living from the Heart

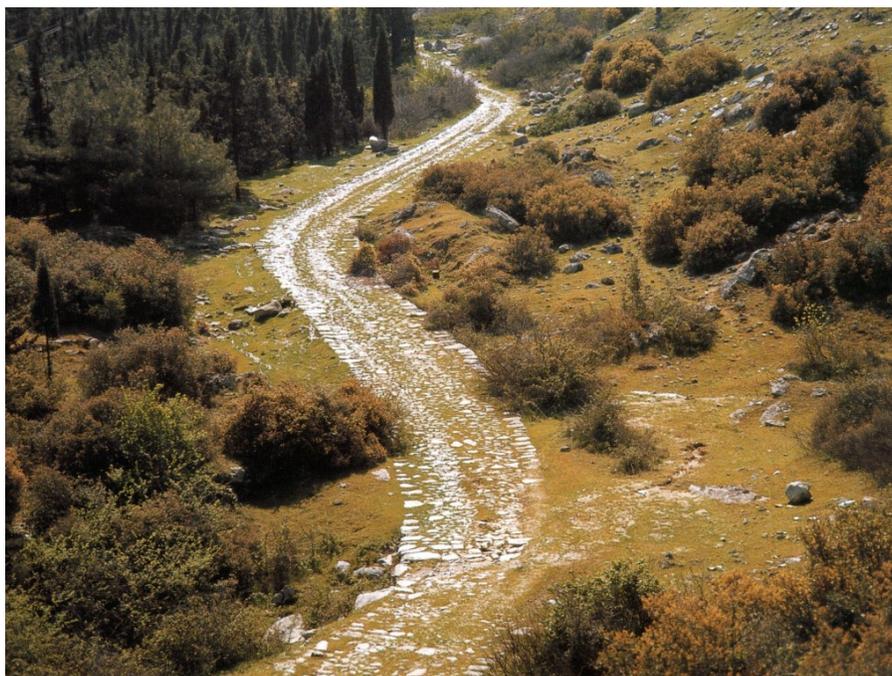
April 25, 2015

The following is the sermon given by the Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher at the Regional Confirmation held this morning at Christ Church Cathedral, Springfield, MA.

I have been blessed to confirm several hundred people in the last 2 ½ years. Just about every time I go to a church now, someone says to me “You confirmed me.” And I usually respond: “So how is that working out? Do you feel any different?”

I ask that question in a light-hearted way, but it is a real question. What you will do in a few minutes is a radical commitment to see the world in a whole new way. And not just see the world differently, but *live* in it differently. Empowered by the Spirit. Let’s look at that. And let’s look at it through the lens of the Emmaus story, because that is a journey to a whole New Life for two blessed disciples.

The story begins with two disciples walking. One is named Cleopas and the other is not named. Whenever that happens in the gospels – an unnamed person – you and I, the readers, are supposed to be that person. This is *our* story.



They are walking away from Jerusalem where Jesus has been executed. They are walking toward Emmaus. Why Emmaus? Emmaus is only mentioned one other time in the entire bible. That is in the Hebrew Scriptures. A battle took place there and the Maccabees, fighting for Israel, were crushed by the Romans about 150 B.C. Historians say the Romans then built a garrison there. It is not far from Jerusalem (only seven miles) and they could quickly get soldiers to Jerusalem if there were any problems among the people in that occupied city. So why are Cleopas and the other disciple going to Emmaus? They have been following Jesus. But now his cause – bringing mercy, compassion and hope to the world – has been defeated. Jesus is dead and their dreams of a new world are over. Now they are going back to the place that represents “might makes right.”

If we are that other disciple, what are we returning to when we give up on the mission of Jesus? Here is how one theologian put it: “A world where we believe nothing that cannot be proven, and respect nothing we cannot understand, and value nothing we cannot sell.”

It is interesting when Jesus walks with them. They do not know it is him. They tell him the things that have happened “the last few days” including the report that the tomb was found empty. Their knowledge did not end with the death of Jesus. They know there might be something more. But they don’t know what it is so they are going back to their old life.

Jesus – remember, they still do not know he is Jesus – gets really upset with them. He calls them “foolish” and “slow of heart.” Theologian John Shea writes: “Jesus is not happy. It is hard to read this and not conclude these are the words of a ticked-off resurrected Christ. He calls them foolish. ‘Fools say in their hearts there is no God’ (Psalm 4, Psalm 51). In other words, the foolish person tries to interpret and establish life without considering the spiritual dimension. These two have interpreted Jesus in strictly sociopolitical terms. They are foolish.”

And they are “slow of heart.” In biblical spirituality the heart is connected to the eyes. When the heart burns, the fire pushes up the chest and flows out the eyes. This allows the person to see. The eyes are like the headlights of a car. (I know this is an anachronistic example.) They are lit from within in order to peer into the darkness without. This might be poor physiology but it is good spirituality.

As the story goes on, so does Jesus. He explains the scriptures to them. And just as he is about to keep going forward, they plead with him to stay for dinner. At dinner Jesus did what he did many times before (not just at the Last Supper). He took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it away. And that is the pattern of a healthy, holy life. We are called to take our life, give thanks for it, and then discover how to give it away.

When Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it away, Cleopas and the other disciple recognize him as Jesus. He “vanishes” from their sight. Scholars of Greek say it really means “He became invisible from among them.” Jesus can go now because he has done his job. Cleopas and the other disciple (you and me) are now living from the heart.

We know this because the disciples say “were not our hearts burning within us as he explained the scriptures to us as we walked along the road?” Now they are spiritually alive. They see the world in a whole new way. They turn away from Emmaus. And we turn away from “A world where we believe nothing that cannot be proved, and respect nothing we cannot understand, and value nothing we cannot sell.” They return to the faith community. Now they share in the Resurrection – that is what “they got up” means.

In this confirmation, you are going to commit yourselves to spiritual “aliveness.” It is a whole different way of being in the world. As followers of Jesus:

- we turn away from cynicism and we turn toward hope.
- We turn away from “it is what it is” and we turn toward the endless creativity of God.
- We turn away from self-centeredness and we turn toward generosity.
- We turn away from exclusivity and we turn toward a society wherever everyone belongs.
- We turn away from siding with the powerful of this world and we turn toward the poor, the displaced, the outcasts.
- We turn away from using up creation and we turn toward caring for creation.

In three minutes this sermon is going to be over and you will have an opportunity to say to the world what you believe. Belief in the Living God who comes to us as Creator, as Savior and as Spirit that comforts us as we need to be comforted and challenges us as we need to be challenged. (That is what empowerment means.) And you will tell the world what you will do. Resist evil and when we sin, repent and return to the Lord. Proclaim the Good News of God in Christ, love our neighbors as ourselves, strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being.

That is all in the Baptismal Covenant. The way that Covenant is structured is with three “I believes” and then five “I wills.” All those “I wills” are vitally important. But the first one gives energy and wisdom and passion to all the rest. It is the one where we say, “I will *pray*.”



You might have heard of John and Charles Wesley. They were Anglican priests back in the 1700's. They were known as people who heard from God in prayer and they taught their “method” to their followers who later broke from the Anglican Church as the Methodists. When asked who taught them the most about God, both brothers agreed it was their mother, Susanna. But Susanna Wesley did not have just two boys. She had 16 other children! How could she have time to pray with 18 children in the house? Here's how. Every day at a particular time she sat on a chair in the kitchen and held her apron up over her head. For the next twenty minutes the children knew not to bother her as she was at prayer.

However we pray, whenever we pray, we need to make the time. Because it is only in an on-going relationship do we learn to hear and to see and to experience God in everything. It is only “with God's help” that we can do the mission of mercy, compassion and hope Jesus has given us.

Come Holy Spirit. Make us spiritually *alive*. Make us a New and Ever-New Creation.

Amen.

Resurrection starts with compassion.

April 5, 2015



CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED!

Bishop Fisher's Easter sermon given at Christ Church Cathedral- 10 am (English) and 12:15 (Spanish).

Alleluia, Christ is Risen! What a joy it is to be with you this morning, gathered together in the love of God, and share some thoughts, and maybe even some feelings, about Resurrection. Because the New Life offered by our God is not an idea. It is not just something to think about. It is something to experience in the depth of ourselves – in our souls – in the very heart of who we are as we try to live authentic lives that make a difference in this world.

I have long been fascinated by the Gospel stories of this day. Mark, Matthew, Luke and John all begin by telling us in different ways and by different witnesses that “Jesus is not here.” And then, with the exception of Mark, they tell us where he is or where he is going.

When my son Geoff was four years old, he loved to play hide and seek. Every night when I came home from work he would want to play that long-loved game, handed on from generation to generation. And he wanted to “win” at hide and seek. That meant saying, “Ok, daddy. I’m going to go hide. And you can look anywhere in the whole house...except in the closet in the basement.” Or “in the attic”. Or wherever he was going to hide.

In the cosmic game of “hide and seek” with God, the Resurrection of Jesus tells us where God is hiding. Unlike the way Geoff played the game, the Gospels tells us where we *won't* find Jesus. We won't find him in the tomb. And, like Geoff, the Gospels gives us a big hint as to where we *will* find him – in our lives and the life of this world. Hang in there with me for the next twelve minutes as I ramble on about the Resurrection as the Gospel of John tells it. You will know I'm near the end when I tell another version of the game of “hide and seek.”



“While it was still dark” Mary Magdalene got up from bed after what was probably a sleepless night spent reliving the horrific death of her friend, Jesus. How would she ever get those images of a tortured man out of her head? And “while it was still dark” she left her home and walked to the tomb to go and anoint the body of the one she thought could save Israel. Mary walked to that tomb in sadness, in grief, in disappointment, in loneliness.

As Mary walks in the darkness, we learn something about what it means to be human. None of us get out of this life without experiencing loss, grief, disappointment. For some there is the darkness of depression. But while it is still dark, in the world and in her soul, Mary gets up to anoint a dead friend.



700 hundred years ago there lived a great saint in Germany. His name was Meister Eckhart. He was a mystic – acclaimed for his brilliant mind and deep insights into life and into God. One time he was asked what someone should do in times of grief or depression. “Tell us, great wise man, the secret to life in such times.” His profound answer was this: do the next thing. Whatever you have to do next – go to work, make dinner, help the kids with their homework – do that. “Ok, great,” said his interviewers, “what happens after that?” To which the saint replied, “Then do the next thing. And the next thing after that. Don’t think far ahead. Don’t try and figure it all out. Just do the next thing. Do what is in front of you. And while you are doing that, God is acting. God is healing you. Even though you do not see it.”

1300 years before Eckhart gave this advice about being human, Mary Magdalene did the next thing. She went to anoint a friend’s dead body while it was still dark. As a faithful Jewish woman she knew her Hebrew Scriptures and perhaps she remembered the very first line of the Book of Genesis: “In the beginning...when darkness covered the earth” God created the world. God does some of God’s best work when all is dark.

New Life begins when darkness meets compassion. Did you notice what the two angels said to Mary as she stood at the empty tomb? They don’t say “Alleluia, Christ is Risen.” They don’t say “Hail, Thee Festival Day.” They don’t say “Now the green blade riseth.” They do say “Why are you weeping?”

Not only do the angels say it, but Jesus himself repeats the exact same line to Mary “why are you weeping?”

Now, let’s do a quick study in the bible and in marriage communications here. In the Bible, anytime something is repeated twice, it means “pay attention!” In other places in John’s gospel, Jesus says “Amen. Amen I say to you.” “Amen” said twice. And then he follows it with some profound insight that might make our lives a whole lot better. It is like that in marriage. This winter, my wife Betsy said to me “when are you going to get the snow off the roof?” I heard her, kind of. Later she said a second time “when are you going to get the snow off the roof?” and I knew this was important.

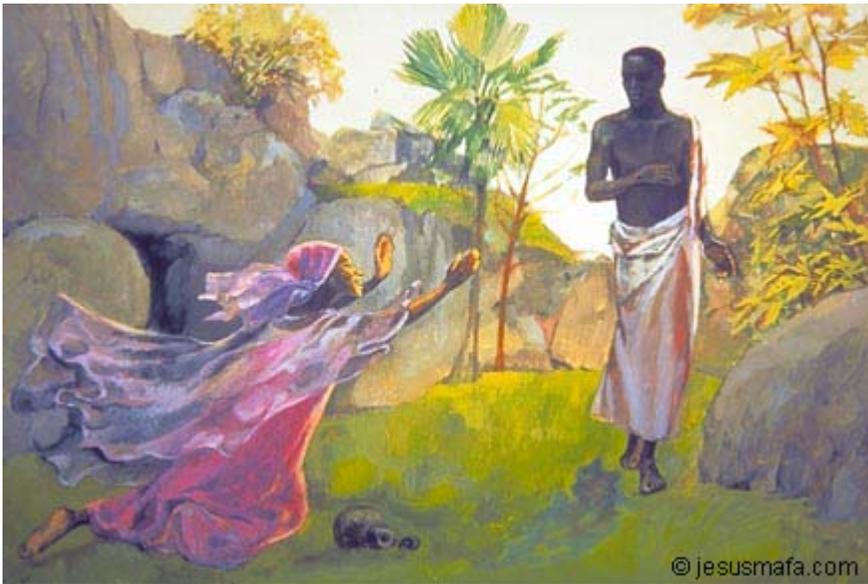
“Why are you weeping?” said twice. Friends, this must be an important. We better pay attention to this. How does the darkness end? How does the New Life of Resurrection begin? It begins with compassion. Why are you weeping? Why are you in pain? I want to help.

Resurrection started with compassion 2000 years ago and it is still true today. Last month I was at the House of Bishops meeting. There is a lot of wisdom shared in those meetings. Bishop Laura Ahrens of Connecticut offered a great insight into the Baptismal Covenant – you know those promises made for you when you were baptized and to which we re-commit ourselves at every baptism. “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons and in all creation, loving your neighbor as yourself?” “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” Bishop Laura has changed those questions. She can do that, she is a bishop. Laura says “WHERE will you seek and serve Christ in all persons and in all creation?” “WHERE will you strive for justice and peace?” “WHERE will you respect the dignity of a human being?” Resurrection is not abstract. It is our possibility here and now, on earth as is in heaven.

Resurrection becomes possible when we ask the hurting people of this world “why are you weeping?”

- When we ask immigrants “why are you weeping?”
- When we ask the families who have lost loved ones to gun violence “why are you weeping?”
- When we ask our earth dying of global warming “why are you weeping?”

Then we open ourselves to new possibilities, to new hope, to new ways of living. And, isn’t that Resurrection – a new way of living?



That New Way of living is dynamic and creative and never settles for living in the past. Resurrection life will never settle for “it is what it is.” We know this because of the bittersweet moment when Mary, having been called by name by the Risen Christ is hugging Jesus who is so concerned about her tears. What a great moment. It is no longer dark. Her friend who was dead is alive. Mary wants to embrace the “aliveness” that is Jesus. And what does Jesus do? He says “don’t cling to me.” That might seem cruel. But it is simply the truth. Christ is constantly on the move. Christ cannot be locked down. The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says it this way: “The only thing we cannot do is hold on to him. He has asked us to please not do that, because he knows that all in all we would rather keep him with us where we are than let him take us where he is going. Better we should *let him hold on to us*, perhaps. Better we should let him take us into the white-hot presence of God, who is not behind us but ahead of us every step of the way.”

The Risen Jesus is on the move. Are we moving with him?

- Are we moving from cynicism to hope?
- Are we moving from self-centeredness to generosity?
- Are we moving from using up creation to caring for creation?
- Are we moving from exclusivity – who is in and who is out – and moving toward exclusivity – where *all* are embraced as the beloved of God?

That is where the dynamic, creative Christ is going. Breathe deep Resurrection air, friends. He won’t let go of us as he goes there.

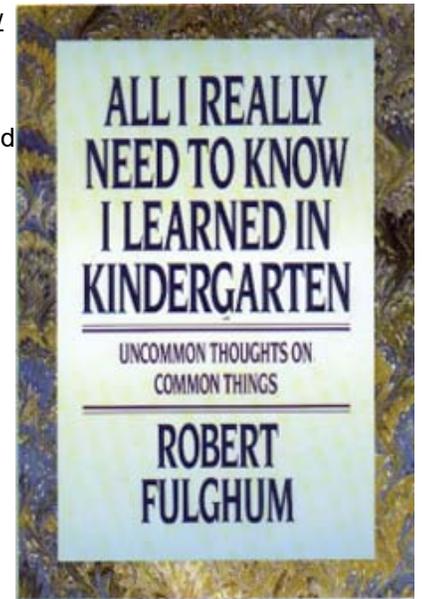
And how do we know he won’t let go of us? The gospel writer John tells us when Jesus left “Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’: and she told them that he had said these things to her.” Jesus won’t let go of us because we have the *community* of believers. Not individual believers on our own, but a community of believers – also called, the Church.

Here comes another “hide and seek” story. That means the sermon is ending and we are getting closer to those great hymns led by our awesome choir. Those hymns that help us experience Resurrection in our soul, in our very bones.

The story comes from Robert Fulghum, the author of Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. He tells the story of a time he was in his office and he heard children outside playing "Hide and Seek." He thought to himself what a frustrating game that is. If someone hides really well, all that happens is people get really annoyed. He prefers a game he calls "Sardines." In this game, one person hides, but when he is found that person hides with him. Then when the next person finds them, they hide with them as well. They are all huddled together – hence "sardines." The more kids who find them and join the huddle, the more fun it becomes. Until they can't keep from laughing, and their laughter gives away the location so everyone can find them.

Fulghum wonders if that is what church is meant to be. People who have found the Living God and we come together and laugh. The others want to join us so they might laugh, too. And we laugh because our destiny is not death, but glory. And, breaking into Fulghum's analogy, I would add that they join our laughter because we first enter into their sorrow: "why are you weeping?" And we offer new possibilities – new life given by the "aliveness" of our God. The God who we find in the Risen Christ who is truly among us, leading us out of death and into a world of mercy, compassion and hope. Amen.

+Doug



The “aliveness” of God is much with us: Report from the House of Bishops

March 16, 2015



March 15, 2015

Here are a few reflections from the House of Bishops' gathering at the [Kanuga Conference Center](#) in North Carolina.

This is my fifth House of Bishops' meeting. Although I always look forward to getting the work of the Church done, the best part of these gatherings are the friendships.

There are many deep conversations but most start with catching up on family news. Since Betsy leads a thriving parish, Caragh just got a great new job, Geoff is getting

married, and Grace is graduating college, I have a LOT to talk about. And many bishops talk to me about my pilgrimage, [the walk through the Diocese](#). This is a “good news” story and I enjoy talking about it. But more importantly I get to “walk the talk” again this spring. That is not possible for many of our bishops. Imagine walking Nevada!

Often times the topic turns to the weather. Not in a superficial way but in a “how are you getting through this winter?” way. Having Worcester in our diocese I get to claim the city with the most snow of any city in the USA. This gives me the opportunity to bring attention to climate change. And that leads to an invitation to read a remarkable article written called [“The Financial Advantages of Divestment,”](#) by Gregory H. Kats. See, we do get to the “work of the Church” eventually.

- **Speaking of Climate Change, Kanuga now gets all their energy through solar power.**

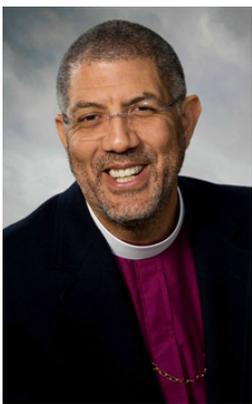


- **Another blessing of the HOB is coming together in smaller communities.** I meet with my classmates, our Province One bishops, [Bishops Against Gun Violence](#) and that remarkable group of bishops who all come from WMA.



WMA School for Leaders

- **The agenda for this House of Bishops has been the most intense of any in my time.** We are looking at the big issues of our time and what will be coming before [General Convention](#) this June. I'll offer a brief reflection on just one of those issues for now.
- **On Friday, my classmate Rob Wright, the Bishop of Atlanta, gave an extraordinary meditation on race.** Rob's talk will be available online in a few days. Watch for it on our social media feeds. Here are two points about the work of a bishop that will always stay with me.



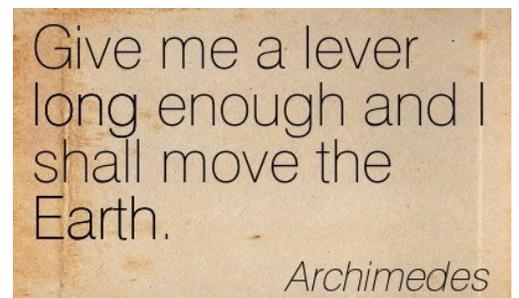
The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright, X Bishop of Atlanta

One, Rob told us the insight of Archimedes, the ancient Greek mathematician and physicist. Archimedes discovered the power of the "lever" and said that a lever could "move the earth" if a person were given "a place to stand." Rob said bishops have power. We have been given a lever. And we have been given a place to stand: the gospel. Do we have the courage – and "real courage is never abstract" in Rob's words – to move the world toward justice?

Two, again looking at the power that bishops have: "People take cues from us as bishops. They pay attention to things we pay attention to. And they notice what we refuse to be curious about."

Rob seems to be giving bishops a lot of influence in society. Maybe he is overstating the case. But if he is right, I feel the challenge. Even while engaging the issues of our time (because courage is never abstract), I always question myself if I am using my "lever" well and "standing in the right place" on casinos, climate change, gun violence and immigration. I am blessed to have a prayerful, wise and truth-telling staff, and our dedicated [Social Justice Commission](#), so that I might make those

decisions in community.



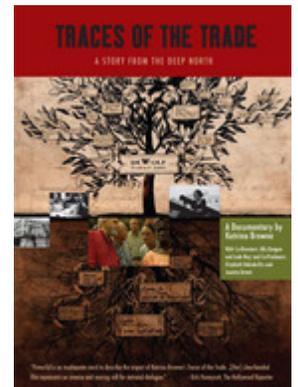
Not everyone has agreed with me on these issues. As it will always be, because these are complex issues. "We are not the Body of Christ because we agree with each other. We are the Body of Christ because we care about each other." But I hope, to Rob's second point, that we all have paid attention to these issues, that we have all been curious about them.



The Rev. Stephanie Spellars, Chaplain to the House of Bishops

I have not paid enough attention to race relations in our country, but I hope to now, inspired by Rob's meditation and by a sermon given here by **The Rev. Stephanie Spellars**. Stephanie preached about the complicity of the Episcopal Church in slavery. She told the story of a priest in 1844, just a few miles from where we are gathered in North Carolina, who preached sermon about the biblical argument *for* slavery. A week later his bishop sent him a letter praising him for his sermon and urging him to have it published as a "tract." That priest later became the first missionary bishop to the Diocese of Texas.

It was not just the Church in the South that benefited from slavery. We viewed a documentary [*Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*](#). It is the story of the DeWolf family, a prominent Episcopal family from Rhode Island, coming to terms with the discovery in recent years of the fact that the foundation of their wealth came from the slave trade. Their ancestors built and sailed the ships that went from Rhode Island to Africa and then on to Cuba and back home. They contributed significant financial resources to the church throughout New England.



One of the many things I appreciate about our Church is that we almost always point out the ways we have failed to live up to the Gospel in the issues we address. May that truth lead to awareness and to action about an issue that plagues America now as it has since our inception: race.

Racial injustice, or the "dignity violations" as Rob calls it, has my attention. May it have yours. And may we find out how to use the lever that moves the world toward mercy, compassion and hope.

- **My last reflection for this blog: The worship here has been outstanding.** We have a church jazz group that is leading us in praise of the Living God. That and the fervent prayers of my brother and sister bishops have moved my soul. The "aliveness" of God is much with us.

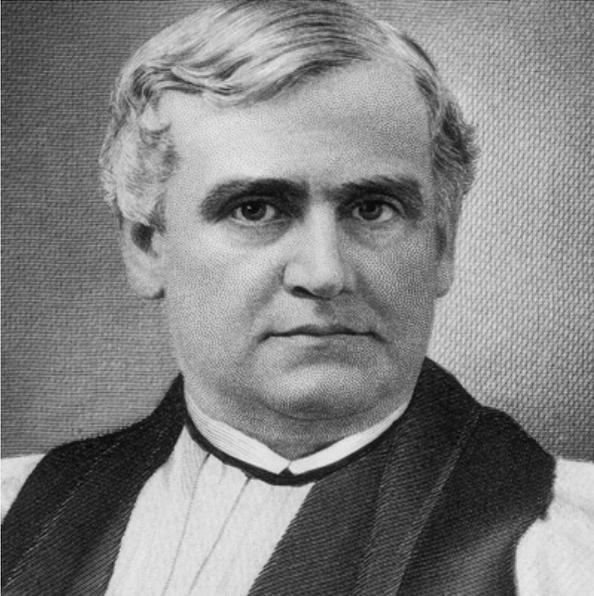
+Doug

It's time to run at our sins.

February 18, 2015

The following is the sermon given today, Ash Wednesday, at All Saints Episcopal Church, Worcester, MA.

I have been told that there is a tradition that every Ash Wednesday the bishop preaches here at All Saints. The tradition dates back to Phillips Brooks, one of the most acclaimed American preachers of all time, when he came here in 1891. Phillips Brooks preached thousands of inspirational sermons, but he is most well-known as the writer of the Christmas hymn, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.



The Rt. Rev. Phillips Brooks

Brooks was a huge man. Six foot seven and 300 pounds. A few of our churches have bishop's chairs that were built for him. When I sit in them I look like a little kid on a couch.

Brooks was a big man who took on big topics. Do you know what the title of his sermon was on Ash Wednesday, 1891? "A History of Sin."

I'm happy to continue the tradition of bishops at All Saints on Ash Wednesday. This is my third one with you. But my sermon will have a much more modest scope than the history of sin. Let's look at the ritual we are about to do and why the sequence of the prayers we use could be a key to understanding why Ash Wednesday is so important.

Some have called Ash Wednesday "the most honest day of the year." We say this truth: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." Today we face our mortality. Then after we hear that truth, we hear more truth in the Litany of Penitence. A laundry list of wrongs we have done and goodness left undone.

Note the sequence. Acknowledging a finite time here on earth, then owning up to sin. Why that order?

Let's leave the ritual for a moment and go to one of the most well-known stories of the Hebrew Scriptures – the story of David and Goliath. You all know it from Sunday school. The Philistine and Hebrew armies are facing off. In the tradition of those days, instead of entire armies fighting, a representative from each army would do battle to decide the winner. The Philistines send out Goliath – a huge man, the size of Phillips Brooks. A comic scene follows as the Hebrews ask for a volunteer and everyone says "not me." They finally decide on twelve-year-old David. More comedy as they attempt to dress him in over-sized armor that is far too big for him. For those of you who were at my consecration as bishop, you might remember that the miter did not fit me and slid down over my ears. It was like that.

David sheds the armor and goes down to the river to collect stones for his slingshot. After he collects the stones, we hear the key line of the whole story. "Then David *ran* at Goliath."

In those days, the representatives from each army would plod out to the middle of the field, moving slowly in all their gear, carrying a heavy sword and shield. When they met in the middle, the battle would commence. It was what Goliath was expecting.

David *ran* at Goliath. That action caught the giant soldier by surprise. When David launched the rock from his slingshot, Goliath was not ready. He did not get his shield up in time. The rock hit him in the forehead, killing him. David and the Hebrew army were victorious.

Let's go back to our ritual for this day. "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Our time on this earth is limited. We don't have forever. Knowing that deep truth, we confess the many ways we are not living the fullness of life God intends for us. We confess to our problems. Some are personal – our self-indulgent ways, our dishonesty in daily life and work, prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us. Some are societal – our blindness to human need and suffering, our exploitation of other people.

Since our time is limited, maybe we need to learn from the strategy of David. Maybe it is time to *run* at our sins. If not now, when?

Maybe it is because I'm leaving the "middle age" period of my life for what some optimistically call the "wisdom years." The biblical expressions of faith have an urgency about them that I appreciate now more than ever – the 56 times Mark uses

the word “immediately” in his 16 chapter book, the many “now” statements of Paul, the “do not cling to me” statement by an on-the-move Jesus in John’s gospel.



When we read that *Litany of Penitence* in a few minutes, I invite you to see which one strikes deepest in your soul. The one to which you respond, “Oh my God, I do that.” I invite you to hold on to that realization and pray about it – today and beyond. I guarantee our God of dynamic action and creativity will give us all a way to *run* at that sin, at that problem, at that “issue” that has plagued us for so long. God will give us a path of action to be set free from that burden and become more alive than ever before.

And I invite us to *run* at a societal issue. There are several mentioned in the litany but one that is especially urgent is this: “We confess to you, Lord, our waste and pollution of your creation, and a lack of concern for those that come after us.”

97% of scientists say climate change is real, it is upon us now, and much of it is man-made. Bill McKibbin, a climate change activist and founder of 350.Org pointed out that when it comes to addressing climate change it is like we are in the last half of the fourth quarter of a football game and we are down by two or three touchdowns. But as Patriots fans know, we can do some remarkable things when we are

down in the fourth quarter. The time to do them is now.

That means political, economic and personal action to reduce carbon emissions, to reduce the burning of fossil fuels, to turn towards other methods of getting the energy we need – from solar and wind. We have a Creation Care Missioner in our diocese – the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas. I invite you to [read her blogs](#) on our website for information, insight and action plans. And if you want to do something very “Lent” join the [“Annual Ecumenical Lenten Carbon Fast”](#) organized by Jim Antal and our friends in the Congregational Church. They will send you a tip a day during Lent to reduce your carbon footprint.



The second part of our prayerful admission of sin about creation is also powerful – “our lack of concern about those who come after us.” Global warming is upon us but the worst is yet to come. It will impact our children and our grandchildren far worse than it will us. Their future requires sacrifice on our part now. “Sacrifice” is not a word politicians can use and get re-elected. But we can. Jesus words, “there is no greater love,” and his actions tell us that sacrifice lies at the heart of God’s kingdom of mercy, compassion and hope.

Some theologians say we should change the “Remember you are dust and to the dust you shall return” to “Remember you are earth and to earth you shall return” because it says the same thing but stresses our commitment – our religious commitment – to the earth. Maybe we should do that. I’ll check with the bishop and get back to you.



My last point about the ritual before we actually do it. When you come forward for the imposition of ashes, I won’t just smudge your forehead with the ashes. I will impose them with the sign of the cross. Now I know it does not always look that way, sometimes it just looks like a blob of ashes, so forgive me. I really am trying to make it look like a cross.

The cross makes all the difference. Yes, we are dust and we shall return to the dust. But in giving *everything*, Jesus, the Son of God, offers us unconditional love. The cross tells us that *nothing* will separate us from the love of God. We are dust, but we are God’s dust, and God brings life from the dust. We know that from

Genesis and we know that from the New Creation that is the Crucified and Risen Lord.

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return” is true but it is only one half of the whole truth. In Western Massachusetts we have developed a liturgical action for this. In the Easter Season we have another imposition and another remembering. In that Season you are invited to come forward again and a priest will make the sign of the cross on your forehead again but this time with oil, the symbol of healing and New Life. These words will be said “Remember, love is stronger than death and to that love you are returned.”

That is the whole truth. Let's experience half of that truth now. And then run out of here to join Jesus in the sacrificial, life-giving, creative, dynamic, hope-filled mission that transforms us and the whole world. Amen.

Resurrection begins when we take someone's hand.

February 9, 2015

The following post began as a sermon given on February 8, 2015 at [St. David's Episcopal Church](#) in Agawam, MA.

Mark's gospel has no resurrection story. It ends with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome at the tomb of the crucified and dead Jesus. They are told by a young man in a white robe that Jesus has been raised and has gone ahead of them to Galilee. "Tell his disciples," says the young man. "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid (Mark 16:8)."

There is no resurrection of Jesus story at the end of the Gospel of Mark. But I believe there are at least three stories of resurrection *within* the Gospel of Mark and I think he opens the door to stories of resurrection in our lives today.



We just heard the story of the healing of Peter's fever-stricken mother-in-law. How did it happen? Jesus came and "took her by the hand and lifted her up." "Lifted up" is another way of saying, "raised."

Jump ahead to Mark chapter five. The daughter of the synagogue's leader is dead. Jesus goes to her, takes "her by the hand," and says, "Little girl, get up!" which can also be translated, "rise up."

Stay with me. We are going to chapter nine. There a boy is convulsing. Jesus commands an unclean spirit to come out of him. The boy convulses again and seems dead. Jesus "took him by the hand and lifted him up" – again, also translated as "raised him up."

You see, the resurrection *does* happen within the Gospel of Mark. Now, go with me back to the first chapter, the first verse of the Gospel. "The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark is giving us the beginning of a Gospel that does not have an ending. That means the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God is continuing. Resurrection is continuing. It happens whenever we take another by the hand and raise them up in faith.

When I was young I had a speech impediment. I could not say diphthongs – "th" words were really hard for me. I couldn't say "f" or "sh" sounds either. Which was really hard for a kid with the name "Fisher." It made me terribly shy everywhere outside my family. When I was in first grade my parents got me help. They hired a speech therapist. The speech therapist would come to my class every Tuesday.

Now this was 1962 and Catholic schools were bursting at the seams, they were so crowded. My class (not my grade) had 63 students in one room. When the speech therapist came in to take me to another room, I would have to walk to the front of the room in front of those 62 kids, and she would *take my hand* and lead me out. Every time I thought I would die of embarrassment. The first couple of weeks she could not get me to say anything beyond "yes" and "no." But she discovered if she asked me about my dog, I would open up. Building on that, with great kindness, and lots of homework done with my parents, she got me through my impediment to a new life, a resurrected life. She *took my hand* and *raised me up*.

Go forward more than half a century. You all know about "The Bishop's Pilgrimage" in which I am walking the sacred ground of this diocese. In October I walked the Worcester corridor and a planned stop was at St. Matthew's in the city of Worcester. St. Matthew's is blessed with a large number of Liberians. The country of Liberia is suffering greatly with the Ebola epidemic. Back in October there was a lot of hysteria about Ebola coming to the U.S. and Liberians were experiencing some prejudice. Could we catch Ebola from Liberians? When I arrived at St. Matthew's, Nancy Strong, my friend and the rector of the church, had a big sign on the street renaming my pilgrimage "The Bishop's Ebola Walk." People from the congregation, including Liberians, gathered to greet me. We listened to stories of families back in Liberia. We prayed. And we held hands out there on the street, with cars passing by and people walking on the sidewalks. Holding



hands was a deliberate public statement. And it was a statement of life that goes beyond the confines of fear and prejudice – new life, larger life, resurrected life.

On this Sunday as we are bracing for yet another snowstorm, I'm longing for the beginning of baseball's spring training. Pitchers and catchers report in ten days. How about a baseball story of hand-taking and resurrection?

Hank Greenberg was a phenomenal player, a Hall of Fame player, with the Detroit Tigers in the 1930's and '40's. In those days the Tigers were a great team – think of the 2013 Red Sox. When he was nearing the end of his career and his skills were fading, the mighty Tigers traded him to the Pittsburgh Pirates, a team at the bottom of the league – think of the 2014 Red Sox. Greenberg did not want to go, but he did.

It is 1947, the year Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball's color barrier and became the first African-American major leaguer, playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson



was 'booed' almost everywhere the Dodgers went. Sometimes his life was threatened. When they arrived in Pittsburgh for the first time, the hatred in the air was obvious to all. In his first 'at bat' Robinson hit a single into the outfield. In his usual all-out, hustling style, Robinson rounded first base, heading for second. When he realized he could not get there safely, he dove back into first base, ahead of the throw but in doing so he knocked over the first baseman, Hank Greenberg. Greenberg is lying on the ground and the crowd goes silent. Will Greenberg, the iconic player, get into a fight with Robinson? Both teams got up on the dugout steps, ready to run onto the field and join a fight. Fans were ready to jump the fence and get involved in a riot.



Greenberg quickly stood up and *took Jackie Robinson by the hand and lifted him up*. Everyone stopped. The great Greenberg, who had experienced prejudice as a Jewish player, had acknowledged Robinson as fellow athlete and human being. New Life, resurrected life, began.

Here is another story of hand-holding and resurrection. But it is not from Mark, it is from Matthew. One should not switch between gospels in preaching, so don't tell the bishop. The apostles are out at sea at night. They see a ghost walking on the water and think it might be Jesus. Peter says "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you

on the water." Peter knew that if the "ghost" said "*stay in the boat, stay safe, don't take a risk*" that could not possibly be Jesus. Jesus invites him: "Come." Peter gets out of the boat, starts to walk on the water but quickly sinks and cries out "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately *reached out his hand* and caught him. New Life, resurrected life, for Peter.

In your life, right now, who is sinking? Who is going under? Resurrection begins with reaching out our hands.

Do you know what Dr. Martin Luther King's favorite hymn was? *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*. He requested it at numerous civil rights' rallies. He asked for it to be played at his funeral, and it was by Mahalia Jackson. Dr. King knew that holding hands with Jesus, with one another, would lead to New Life.

But *Precious Lord, Take My Hand* does not make an explicit connection to resurrection. We had to wait for Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band to do that in *My City of Ruins*.

With these hands Lord, I pray for strength.

With these hands Lord, I pray for love.

With these hands Lord, I pray for faith.

Come on, Rise Up. Come on, Rise Up. Come on, Rise up.

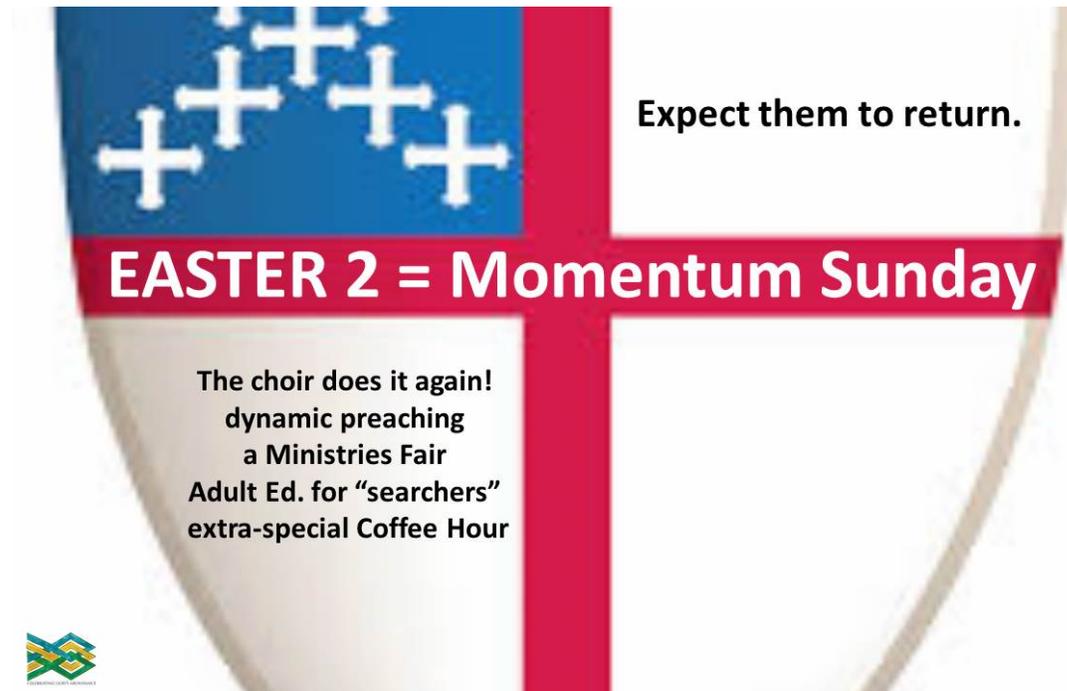
Mark's Gospel does have resurrection stories. They happen when Jesus takes the hand of someone in need. They don't stop with the earthly life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Resurrection stories continue with us. And they begin when we

take someone's hand. Amen.

+Doug

“Momentum Sunday” is Key to Easter Evangelization

January 30, 2015



Why in the world is the Sunday after Easter considered “low Sunday”? Clergy often call on supply priests so they can travel, rest from the rigors of Holy Week or just get a break from preaching. The choir is often “off” after the intense rehearsals for the Easter Triduum. Coffee Hour goes back to “normal.” We just assume that all those people who joined us for Easter Sunday will not be back. Easter 2, for the most part, is a missed opportunity for growing our churches. We lose the golden moment of Easter Sunday when so many people join our congregations to invite people back next week for something really special – Episcopal community at its best. Instead, we nurse a liturgical hangover and lose our momentum. We sing *Alleluia* with gusto and then close up shop. We forget that Easter is a great season, not just a great day. The early Church understood the power of the Easter mystery. For fifty days the Church was wholly engaged in *mystagogy* – the study of the holy things – until the feast of Pentecost. The “50 days” are an exceptional time for us to share the joy of Christ with the world – especially with those who have courageously crossed our threshold for Good Friday or the Vigil.

What if Easter 2 really was “Momentum Sunday”? What if we anticipated that our Easter Sunday visitors would dare to come back? What if we planned it *now* even as we are constructing the perfect Lent? What if we saved a great adult education series for the Easter season? Those classes could be geared toward “searchers.” For example:

“How to Pray” or “Prayer 101”

“The Five Bible Stories Everyone Should Know”

“Why the Church Makes a Difference in the World.”

What if we planned another ministries fair so that prospective members could see themselves somewhere in the life of the community? What if the choir was just as amazing as they were on Easter Sunday? What if the sermon was geared for these new friends at our table?

It seems to me that we give ample effort to the holy season of Lent and to the great feast of Christ’s passage from death to new life. We don’t tend to plan the Easter season with equal energy or passion. Easter 2 is for the survivors – the remnant who never miss a Eucharist no matter how “high” or “low” the celebration. What if we kept the momentum of the resurrection in our life together and made Easter 2 a joyful, engaging event? It’s good liturgy and it’s good for the mission of Christ’s Church.

+Doug

“Deep in my heart, I do believe...”

January 13, 2015



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Coretta Scott King, Selma, AL.

January 13, 2015

One of the many powerful scenes in the movie *Selma* occurs as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is leading marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. There were 2000 marchers, including many northern clergy who made the trip south on short notice. On the other side of the bridge the Alabama police are waiting. The police seem to step aside, clearing a path for the marchers (unlike days before when they viciously attacked a smaller group of marchers when King was not present). When he saw this, King stopped and knelt in prayer. When he rose to his feet he turned around and started walking back, away from the police.

King was harshly criticized for not seizing that moment but his decision for restraint gained support from President Johnson, leading to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

That scene fascinated me because as a church leader, I'm always praying not only about trying to make the right decisions but when to make them. Like the question of what to do, the question of when is also rooted in prayer but it is, in my experience, not an exact science. While my decisions don't have the drama or the profound implications of those made by King as he led a movement that changed our country, I do hope the comparatively small decisions I make are rooted in prayer, informed by the wisdom of holy people around me, and responding to the needs of the present moment in time.

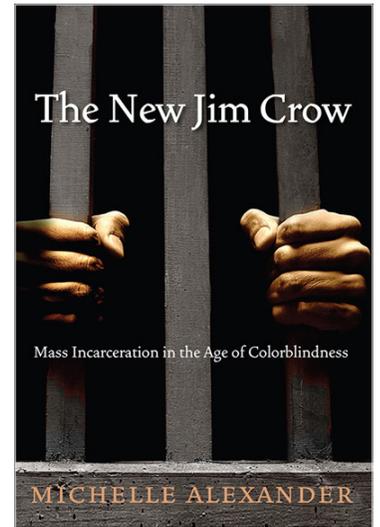
Several of you have asked why I did not make a public statement about the events in Ferguson, Cleveland and New York. Mostly, I did not think I could add much to the statements made by the Presiding Bishop (found [here](#)) or to the statements made by others, especially bishops, priests and lay leaders working in those places. But I also felt the need for continued prayer and exploration of the root causes underneath the presenting conflicts between law enforcement and people of color. My sense is that those issues are enmeshed with the even deeper and interrelated issues of racism, poverty, and inequality of opportunity. What I can add then, is not another public statement, but an invitation to prayer and reflection that may lead to personal transformation and social action.

How might I as a bishop – and how might we as a diocese – find ways to reflect upon, discuss, and act upon these challenges in our society. It seems to me that the time to begin exploring these larger issues is now. How can we go about doing that? Here are a few possibilities:

- Watch the movie *Selma* and discuss it with whomever is willing to have the discussion. Make sure to bring the discussion into the present day. The struggle for civil rights is not a war that has been won. Many believe the Voting Rights Act of 1965 is being dismantled in “legal” ways in our time.
- Read [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) by Michelle Alexander. This book opened my eyes to the incredible numbers of African-American men in prisons and how that has happened through the War

on Drugs. Once a young man is labeled a felon, even for a minor drug crime, the old forms of discrimination are suddenly legal again as basic civil and human rights are denied.

- We will be having discussions about race at our Diocesan Council and on our Social Justice Commission.
- It has been a long time since we offered [Anti-Racism Training](#) in WMA. For six years in the Diocese of New York, I was the co-chair of the Anti-Racism Committee and taught the *Martin Luther King Dialogues* where I learned far more than I taught. We are looking into a variety of programs we could engage in WMA.
- This summer I'm going to a week-long program (July 12-18) called:



Lift Every Voice

Youth/Young Adult Focus on Truth, Reconciliation, and Peace

It is open to young people between the ages of 15-22. It is a three-year program, the first part being a week-long gathering in North Carolina called the [Freedom Ride Pilgrimage](#). While on this pilgrimage (led by the great preacher, Bishop Michael Curry), we will be able to visit historical sites that embody the struggles for justice, talk about social injustice in our own communities, and discern how we can work for racial justice and inclusivity in our own communities. Youth who attend this pilgrimage will also have the opportunity to apply for a pilgrimage to South Africa in the summer of 2016, where we will continue the work begun in North Carolina this summer. To find out more about this program and how WMA youth can register, [contact The Rev. Hilary Bogart-Winkler](#).



Jonathan Daniels

- And there is another pilgrimage open to adults of all ages. This summer marks 50 years since Jonathan Daniels, a young seminarian from New England, gave up his life saving another in the Civil Rights Movement. There will be a trip to Haynesville, Alabama where he was killed on August 20, 1965. Details about this pilgrimage are still being put in place and will be available soon.

2015 marks 50 years since a pivotal year in the Civil Rights Movement. We have come a long way in racial justice in that time. And we have not gone nearly far enough. Let's make this a year of prayer, study, reflection and action for a more just society.

+Doug

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the American people], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and the hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP, 283.)

We have chosen to follow the star.

January 4, 2015



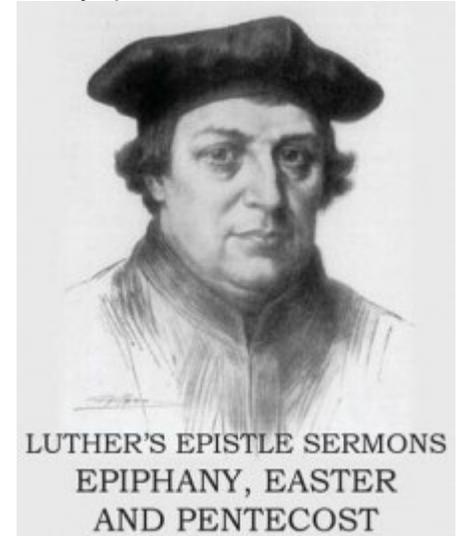
I'm so blessed to be at this combined service with The Episcopal Church of the Epiphany and Christ the King Lutheran. Pastor Nathaniel is doing wonderful work shepherding both of your congregations. Thank you to everyone who have come together in faith and made some sacrifices for this experiment to proceed. You have the support of the staffs of two bishops, mine and my friend, Jim Hazelwood. We are here for you as our always creative and dynamic God does a new thing.

Knowing I would be preaching for Episcopalians and Lutherans today, naturally I did some research on what Martin Luther had to say about Epiphany. I discovered a sermon from 1522. The sermon goes on for twenty-five pages of small print. Even if he channeled his inner New Yorker and spoke at my speed, that sermon would take at least an hour. Nathaniel, is that how long Lutherans preach?

Episcopalians have a hard time sitting still for long sermons, but we do love liturgical traditions. Epiphany gets celebrated with more pomp and circumstance around the world that it does in the U.S., with the liturgy in Australia's Anglican Church standing out. There they combine Epiphany with the baptism of the Jesus that occurs the following Sunday. The congregation gathers around a swimming pool and a cross is thrown into the pool by the "senior ecclesiastic present" who should be "wearing a cope." The children jump into the pool and attempt to "find Jesus." Someone emerges from the water with Jesus and the liturgy continues. If you want to try that next year, I have a cope to lend Nathaniel.

I'm not going to quote from Martin Luther's hour long sermon on the Epiphany, but I will read from this plaque that hangs in my living room. It is quote from Martin Luther and it will lead me into some reflections on Epiphany.

"This life is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness. Not health, but healing. Not being but becoming. Not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished but it is going on. This is not the end but it is the road." Keep Luther's theology in mind as we look at the magi, at King Herod, and then at the power the Christ child and vulnerability of children. I promise we will do this in less than an hour.



The magi. Although we have some great music calling them "kings", the scripture is clear they are not kings. They are magi and the word, "magi" comes from "magician." These were astrologers who searched the sky for God's plans. They were seen as quacks and charlatans by the Jewish leaders. There is a rabbi who lived around the time of the rabbi Jesus who wrote: "He who learns from a magi is worthy of death." The only other time the word "magi" appears in the bible is in the Acts of the Apostles when Peter says of Simon the Magi: "He is in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness." Yes, the readers of this story would be shocked that magi came to see and worship Jesus.

But this only continues a theme that runs throughout Matthew's gospel. Throughout the gospel, over and over again, the least likely people are saved by Jesus – the hated tax collectors, despised Roman soldiers, Gentiles. Matthew does this to make a powerful point: no one is out of reach of God's love. No one. Not you. Not me. It is the great reversal caused by grace. In Luther's words, "it is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness. Not health but healing."



Now to Herod. Have you noticed that we never include Herod in the Christmas Pageant? We hear about the Roman Emperor calling for "all the world to be registered", but we don't hear about the Emperor's puppet in Israel, King Herod. We don't want to spoil a magical and mystical Christmas Eve by bringing in this tyrant. But Matthew wants us to know he is there. You will see why in a moment.

Herod was not just any king. He was among the most blood-thirsty. He killed at least one wife and several sons because he saw them as a threat to the throne. He had forty of the most popular people in Jerusalem arrested with the orders that they were to stay in jail and be killed on the day he died. That way *someone* would be crying on the day of his death. Right after the Epiphany story ends, Herod orders the death of every child two years old and under, in and around Bethlehem – what we call the death of the Holy Innocents.

Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Amiens, France – Three Wise Men Visit King Herod

This stands in sharp contrast to a new king of a different kind of kingdom. Matthew draws that contrast

through the gifts the magi bring – gold, frankincense and myrrh. The 60th Chapter of Isaiah says frankincense and gold are to be brought at the time of salvation, but there is no mention of myrrh. The magi add it. Myrrh was an aloe used to anoint a dead body. Why bring that to a new-born? Matthew does this to contrast Jesus with Herod. Herod makes others sacrifice and die for *him*. Jesus, the non-violent bringer of peace, will die for *us*. This king – Christ the King as our Lutheran Church is named – will sacrifice for his people. All is reversed.

The Epiphany story has inspired hymns, poems, various traditions in cultures throughout the world, sermons long and short. But perhaps no one expressed the great reversal, the grace-filled choice we have before us now, better than the poet W.H. Auden who wrote “To discover how to be human now/is the reason we follow this star.”



Jesus Mafa, The Three Wise Men

We can have the way of Herod – a way based on self-aggrandizing power, greed, cynicism and death-dealing violence. Or, we can discover how to be human now and follow the way of Jesus – mercy, compassion and hope. The magi understand. They “go home by a different road.” Some say the closer translation in Matthew is they went home by a different “way.” Their choice was both geographical and metaphorical.

We have spent the past several weeks preaching and singing and praying about the Child – the Christ Child – preparing for him, hearing the “good news of great joy” at his birth, witnessing the “homage” of the magi and the incredible courage of the refugees Mary and Joseph as they take him out of Herod’s death trap to safety in Egypt. Next week we will hear about the grown-up Jesus. So maybe now we need to spend a moment with the Child and with the children, our children.



Since the tragic massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School two years ago, there have been 95 school shootings. The death of the Holy Innocents continues. Ninety per cent of Americans want universal background checks on gun sales and nothing has happened.

One in five children in the prosperous Commonwealth of Massachusetts live in food – insecure homes. The number of children who are hungry throughout the world is a number so large I can’t begin to get my head around it. What I can get my head around is that the babies home we support in Mampong, Ghana has had its government funding of food cut off and when their director, the saintly Maggie Addai, was here in Massachusetts this summer and my wife Betsy asked her what she needed for the babies home she said “food.”

Ninety-seven per cent of scientists say we are heading towards climate change disaster unless we act soon. The window for stopping or slowing climate change is closing fast. The worst effects of climate change probably won’t happen in the lifetimes of the people gathered in this church. But what will happen in the lifetimes of our children?

W.H. Auden was right. There is an old way of living. Herod knew that way well. But you and I have chosen to follow the star. We have chosen a path of discovery, a new way of being human now. It is Jesus’ way of imagination, creativity and the dynamic grace of the Living God – the way of mercy, compassion and hope.

I’m still short of Luther’s hour long sermon on Epiphany so I’m going to end with a portion of one of my favorite prayers. It is written by Daniel Berrigan and it is called “The Advent Credo” but I think he misnamed it. It should be the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany Credo.

“It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss. This is true: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

“It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger, and poverty, death and destruction. This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

"It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever. This is true: unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be Wonderful Councilor, Mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of Peace.

"This is not true that we are simply victims of the powers who seek to rule the world. This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo, I am with you, even until the end of the world.

"So let us go forth in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ- the life of the world."

Amen.

+Doug