

“Grieve Without Fear”
The Baptism of Our Lord - January 10, 2021 – Mark 1:(1-3) 4-11/B

We grieve, but we need not fear.

The events of the past week have cut us right down to our socks – shaken our foundations and caused us to watch in disbelief. This is America! But then, America has been under discussion for some time now, and the hearts and passions of her people have diverged into the myriad tributaries off of what many would like to imagine was the one great mainstream – when we felt like America was Great – when we all seemed to agree about most things of importance – when hard work and taking care of each other went without saying and “Midwest Nice” was just who we were, and not a label of disdain.

Last Wednesday, even as religious observers around the world marked the Day of Epiphany and pondered following stars and bringing gifts to honor God, we just might have seen an American revelation. We just might have observed a turning point. I’m not saying we were watching any kind of resolution – for that could be a long time coming, and will take an incredible amount of willingness to be open to one another as fellow humans and fellow Americans. But, the change of heart that we all got a tiny glimpse of – as some of our nation’s legislators experienced something bigger than themselves – and began to participate in our democracy with a different motivation. It was (for me) an illustration of Macrina Weiderkehr’s definition of Epiphany: *“a manifestation of the Divine Presence right in the midst of daily life.”* It was not the violence that changed minds, it was not the destruction of life and property that proved a point – it was something deeper that called Congress back into the chambers to finish the work they were called to do – however it would unfold. Something outside of themselves provided resolve. Courage. A change in perspective. A willingness to let go of some part of themselves for a larger purpose.

I’m wondering today, how to move forward. I’m wondering today how I might help you think about how you will move forward. I’m wondering today how God might be calling us to move forward. And I keep remembering something I heard, somewhere:

When people look up for help, they can easily become blinded by the glare.

When people look in, they can easily become disappointed when there is no answer.

But when people look around, they often find exactly what they need in the company of others.

In many of the Native American nations of the American southwest – a structure called a kiva has been used for centuries. A kiva is underground, a space dug deep and accessible only by a single ladder. Once into a kiva, one is completely in the dark, as the only source of light inside comes from above through a roof made of wooden beams. It is a sacred space, a sanctuary for worship and meditation. And yet there is huge difference from religious buildings, as it’s spiritual focal point is not above, but below. Especially once a fire is lighted, one is continually drawn, not up to the sky, but into the earth. It is a place of meditation and grounding in prayer – below, in the darkness – with the earth all around. It is a symbol of spiritual resilience that our Native American brothers and sisters have known for generations, a practice that we might learn as we make our way forward.

2021 has already been branded as a year of recovering, a year of healing. But most of us know that when a disease fills our body, often it must be cut out, or irradiated out, or

eradicated in a way that brings us pain. At the same time, we also recognize that it is only after the pruning that the new life can begin.

This is a time of pruning. And some of the cuts have pierced our foundations, our life-choices, our ways of being in the world. The patchwork quilt of our personal choices and our “rules to live by” are being shaken out and re-examined. Sometimes the patches have worn out. Sometimes they are torn and unable to be mended. Sometimes they just need to be replaced so that the integrity of the quilt is improved. But no quilt likes the ripping of seams. No plant enjoys the cut of the pruning knife. No human embraces change when the change comes to them – because change is loss. And loss feels like death. And even though the very bedrock of our faith is rooted in Life. Death. New Life., we resist the pains that come with the seasons of our life and our faith. Not because we don’t know they are necessary. But because as we grow and navigate and chose, we think we can control. Until something comes along that we cannot. A global pandemic. An insurrection. An economic upheaval. A terminal diagnosis. A career in ruin. A broken marriage. A wayward child.

In the television drama “This is Us,” Randall, one of the main characters, suddenly discovers that his birth mother, who he believed had died at his birth, had actually lived until recently. When contacted with this news, he was reluctant to believe it to be true, as these facts cast doubt on the story his father had told him, and thus, on their relationship. Devastated, Randall seeks advice from his counselor as to whether or not to pursue the information: He says, “You are already in the journey, Randall. Why not be IN, in it?” We are already in this journey, folks. **Why not be IN, in it?**

Earlier I described a kiva – an underground place in which to meet God. Even though we cannot go down that ladder physically, I think that even to imagine that experience would shift our spiritual focus in a whole new direction – for we are most certainly being called in these unprecedented times to see things differently – not seeking ways to escape from the world around us but in search of a way to *enter into it* as a point of new beginning. Just as God created “in the beginning...when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.” Just as we were born out of the darkness of our mother’s womb; just as the wise ones left their country and followed a new star in the darkness of the heavens, we have always been intimately connected to the soil, the earth, the humous beneath our feet.

In not too many weeks we will take ashes to our foreheads with the words, “remember that you are dust, and into dust you will return.” Yes, even when our days here are completed, our death ritual commends us to God, and commits our body to the elements with the words “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

The life of faith is often difficult. If that has not been the case in your life, you are either extremely fortunate, or simply observing. Today, we are being called out, just as Jesus called his first four disciples out of being fishermen into a whole new world of following. Today, those who are committed to the Christ must learn to speak the language of Grace into every human life and every circumstance. The winds of change are demanding that we respond to John the Baptist’s call for repentance with the foundational Christian commitment of lives lived for God and for others rather than for ourselves.

Jesus’ ministry began when he came together with his crazy cousin John – the priest’s kid who ran away to the desert to live the wilderness life – and whose commitment to the movement of the Holy Spirit began even before he was born. But for all of his wild-

eyed passion and his seductive invitation to ***Repent, for time is short***, John knew his purpose. He knew his place. He did what God had asked him to do, and then he stepped out of the spotlight, ceding to the power and purpose of God through his very own kin, Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Just as Jesus stepped into human flesh, stepped into the Jordan, stepped into his calling to restore and to heal, he also had to stop and just let the winds of change propel him toward the ultimate reason for his life. Can we do the same? Can we stand up to the wind? Can we step into our own human story instead of just observing it?

Can we go down into the deep waters even if they threaten to drown us? Yes we can.

Will we lose a piece of ourselves by doing so? Yes we will.

Do we make this journey alone? No we do not.

We grieve, but we need not fear.

We are strong and courageous because we are not alone. We weep with the disillusioned and discouraged and demeaned and diminished, and for ourselves. But we need not fear – for God made us a promise that is rooted in the depths of the earth, anchored in the waters of baptism, and sealed with an oil-cross of Christ on our forehead: ***“I am with you always – even until the close of the age.”***

We grieve, but we need not fear. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church
Olathe, KS

Resources: Macrina Weiderkehr in *Seasons of Your Heart*; Steven Charleston in *Ladder to the Light*;
NBC's *This is Us* episode, 1/5/2021;