

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I. Dark Times

A. This past week we witnessed a jaw-dropping act of violence against our country, its Constitution, and indeed the very people it represents, as an armed mob of rioters descended on the Capitol Building.

1. The headline in the L.A. Times screamed: “Trump-incited Mob Storms Capitol.



2. The story that followed began: “*Four years of incendiary, divisive and dishonest rhetoric from President Trump culminated with long-predicted violence ...as a mob of his supporters stormed the Capitol breaking windows and doors, vandalizing offices and disrupting a constitutional ceremony intended to validate the peaceful transfer of power...*”

3. And as I watched, all I could do was wonder, “What are we coming to? Are we on the brink of Civil War?”

4. Four people died – more were injured – some were arrested – and our country was stunned.

5. What are we coming to?

6. Where is the kindness – where is the gentleness – where is the caring for your neighbor and those who are in need?

B. Meanwhile, a pandemic rages on – killing almost 1,000 people a day in this country – and while it may be pushed off the front page for a day or two it is still among us.

1. Earlier last week, another mob – slightly less violent – got into a shopping mall in Southern California and refused to wear MASKS and ran amok in stores threatening those who were wearing masks.

2. What are we coming to?

3. When the wearing of a mask to protect your health and the health of those around you has become a political statement?

4. Where is the kindness – where is the gentleness – where is the caring for your neighbor and those who are in need?

5. What can we do?

C. What are we to do? How should we respond? And if we do, what happens?

1. Our Bishop and the Presiding Bishop call us to prayer: for our Country, for our leaders, for the President and President-Elect, for our peace, and for each and every one of us.

2. But there are those who feel that they cannot pray.

3. You want me to pray for THOSE people?

- Pray for Republicans?
- Pray for Democrats?
- Pray for Rioters?
- Pray for Senators and Congress people?
- Pray for Joe Biden?
- Pray for Donald Trump?

4. YES – pray – for that is what we do – that is who we are – people of prayer.

D. Recently on “Pray as You Go” we heard these familiar words from Isaiah: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”*

1. Today, it seems that there is darkness all around us.

2. And as we look around we ask, *“Where is God in the darkness?”*

3. But as St. John reminds us, *“The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

4. And that Light in the darkness is Jesus.

II. Jesus’ Baptism

A. It was another time of darkness – ruled by another despotic ruler focused on himself and not the good of his people.

1. And into this time of chaos and confusion a lonely voice cried out, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

2. He called the people to a new life – he called the people to be better than they were – and they flocked to him.

3. And as a symbol of this new life – as a reminder to be better people – he baptized them.

4. Jesus too came to this Baptizer – not for forgiveness of sins – but to identify with the people he had come to.

5. And as Jesus is baptized, we are told, *“as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’”*

B. As Jesus was baptized and came up out of the water, he was empowered with the Holy Spirit and acknowledged as God’s Beloved Son.

1. The Baptism of Jesus marks the origin of his identity.
2. Through this experience, Jesus knows who he is;
- and others will discover this truth through his life and ministry.
3. Through his Baptism, and with the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was now fully empowered for the Divine work that was the fulfillment of the prophets and the hope of generations.

C. And we too are empowered for ministry as God's servants by the Holy Spirit through Baptism.

1. For through OUR Baptism we are marked with the origin of OUR identity – as a child of God.
2. Through OUR Baptism we know who we are and whose we are.
3. Through OUR Baptism we too are empowered by the Holy Spirit for the Divine work given to us to do in this world.
4. And the **KEY** to that Divine work is found in our **Baptismal Covenant**.

III. Living Our Baptism

A. In the Baptismal Covenant we find our calling and direction in the living out of our Baptism.

1. In this Covenant we say we will follow in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, and participate in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers.
2. We promise to resist evil.
3. We say that we will **proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ**.
4. And we will live our lives by seeking to **serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves**.
5. And probably most difficult, we will strive for justice and peace among all people, and **respect the dignity of every human being**.

6. Respect the DIGNITY of EVERY human being;
- not just the ones WE think deserve it, but EVERY human being.

7. EVERY human being:
- the Trump supporter AND the Biden supporter
- the rioters at the Capital AND the Black Lives Matter supporters
- the people who wear masks AND those who won't
- the people we think worthy AND those we don't

8. We are to respect the DIGNITY of EVERY human being – as we work to SERVE Christ in all persons – as we proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

9. And when we do this – when we live into OUR Baptisms by the living out of OUR Baptismal Covenant – we will know the feeling that we are Beloved of God.

10. It's true – God looks at us and says, “You are my dear, dear child: I am delighted with you.”

B. But it's a hard thing to ask and a hard thing to do – we are so programmed to division right now.

1. We are constantly being divided into camps and pitted against each other by the media, by politicians, by those who think they know better than we do – and so we have to show they don't.

2. Abraham Lincoln once said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” – and you could say the same about a people divided against themselves.

3. Through our Baptismal Covenant we are called to be reconcilers, not dividers.

4. We are called to bring God's healing love to each and every situation we find ourselves in.

5. We are called to live into and live out our Baptismal Covenant – and as we do slowly but surely things will begin to change – in our relationships with one another and in the larger picture as well.

6. Pondering the events of last Wednesday, Scott Gunn, one of the creators of Lent Madness, wrote: *“On this feast of the Epiphany, we remember that the Herods of this world are always defeated by God’s grace and mercy.”*

7. And we are the Agents of that grace and mercy – we are the ones who put it into action by the very living of our lives.

8. Yes, at the moment it IS dark – a pandemic rages – our society seems in chaos – but the invitation is there, to see God at work in the world, even in the midst of darkness – and we are agents of that work.

Conclusion

In the late 1980’s Julie Gold, the granddaughter of Jewish Immigrants, left her home in Philadelphia to go to New York City to become a song writer.

She struggled with her craft – hoping to be published – working in this job and that to make ends meet – even working as a secretary at HBO.

Her parents sent her her childhood piano – that she loved and cherished – and as she sat down to her old friend – a song came pouring out.

This song, “From a Distance” became a number one hit for Bette Midler and won a Grammy in 1990.

The last verse goes like this:

From a distance
You look like my friend
Even though we are at war
From a distance
I just cannot comprehend
What all this fighting’s for
From a distance
There is harmony
And it echoes through the land
And it's the hope of hopes
It's the love of loves

It's the heart of every man
It's the hope of hopes
It's the love of loves
This is the song for every man

God is watching us
God is watching us
God is watching us
From a distance

I won't play the whole song and add another 4 minutes to the sermon, but I invite you this week to look it up on-line – just type “From a Distance” in your google or whatever and listen to this song and explore how God sees us.

Let us strive to see one another as God does – without all the inconsequential labels and barriers that we erect and stick on one another.

Let us work to see God at work in the darkness – and to be part of that work.

Let us work to respect the dignity of EVERY human being as we strive to proclaim by word and deed the Good News of God in Christ.

And let us work to bring God's love to this hurting world that is so desperate for it – this new year and all the days to come.

Let Us Pray

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon us your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised us to the new life of grace. Sustain us, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give us an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.

AMEN. (BCP p. 308)