

First Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

As I have said more times than I can count in the last 12 months, what a week! How do we even begin? We start by naming where we are. So, I invite you to hit your spacebar and, in one or two words, name what you're feeling. (pause)

Fear, deep sadness, disbelief, fear, anxiety, anger...

It is so much to wrap our minds around, so much for our hearts to hold, so many layers, so many reverberations, so much to reconcile. And yes, I will be stepping into the minefield known as mixing politics and religion. Why? Because Jesus is Lord of all of life, and we don't get to compartmentalize anything.

In my **Annual Address in 2016**, shortly after **President Trump was elected**, I reminded us that *we hold people accountable for word and deed, not for our fears of the what-if's*. I reminded us that *our baptismal vow to respect the dignity of every human being extends to the President, to the President's followers, and to those who oppose the President. "We are called to respect the dignity of every human being, while at the same time, calling out any and all words and actions that diminish the dignity of another human being,"* I said then, noting that *"living like Jesus is really hard."*

From time to time **throughout this administration**, when the **events of the day**, the **scriptures**, and **my prayers** have **called me to**, I have **called out** the **words and actions of this President** when they have **diminished the dignity of others, especially the most vulnerable among us**.

This past week, I **listened** to the **phone call of the President with the Georgia Secretary of State** when he asked **Secretary Raffensburger** to **"find and recalculate votes"** and the **Secretary refuted the false claims** the **President was making about widespread election fraud**. I **watched the President's rally on Monday night in Dalton, GA** where he **repeated these allegations--allegations dismissed or refuted in 61 court cases since the election**. I **watched his speech on Wednesday at the "Save America" rally just blocks from the Capitol**. *Both* of his **speeches this week**, and the *call-and-response with the crowd*, revealing a **toxic masculinity** that **traffics in shows of strength and belittles as weakness anything else**.

I **watched the crowd he incited turn into a mob and make its way to the Capitol**. I **watched in horror as they breached the Capitol with clubs and bats and pipes, some armed with guns and chemical sprays and shields and zip-tie handcuffs and molotov cocktails--pipe bombs found in a car near the Capitol, as well as at the Democratic and Republican headquarters**. I **watched this mob make their way through the hallowed spaces at the heart of our democracy vandalizing and desecrating as they went. Confederate flags flying inside the Capitol. A noose hung on the side. Shouts of "Hang Mike Pence."** **Chambers and offices ransacked. Journalists equipment trashed. Several people injured. Five now dead.** I also

watched in horror at the thought of thousands of people tightly packed with not a mask in sight in a week when 4,000 are dying a day of COVID.

By evening, I was crying. I stayed up and watched our institutions hold as the Senate and House of Representatives returned to their work. I had watched Mitch McConnell, Senator of my home state with whom I have disagreed for a lifetime, make the speech of *his* lifetime earlier in the day, and make a second speech when they returned that evening, that truly focused on the good of the Republic. I watched the process through to its bitter end at 3:41 AM. The elections of President-elect Biden and Vice-President Elect Harris were certified. Then, came this prayer from Chaplain Barry Black, Chaplain to the United States Senate and a Seventh-day Adventist minister:

“Lord of our lives and sovereign of our beloved nation, we deplore the desecration of the United States Capitol building, the shedding of innocent blood, the loss of life, and the quagmire of dysfunction that threaten our democracy.

These tragedies have reminded us that words matter and that the power of life and death is in the tongue. We have been warned that eternal vigilance continues to be freedom’s price.

*Lord, you have helped us remember that we need to see in each other a **common humanity** that reflects your image.*

You have strengthened our resolve to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies domestic as well as foreign.

Use us to bring healing and unity to our hurting and divided nation and world. Thank you for what you have blessed our lawmakers to accomplish in spite of threats to liberty.

Bless and keep us. Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to do your will and guide our feet on the path of peace. And God bless America. We pray in your sovereign name, Amen.”

Chaplain Black’s prayer has stayed with me in the days since as I **sift through the rubble of this week.** I commend it to you as well.

If you’re like me, there **may be many things that you don’t know what to do with just now,** and **so many questions stirring deep inside.** One question looms larger for me right now: **HAVE WE HIT BOTTOM YET? HAVE WE AS A COUNTRY HIT BOTTOM YET?**

Some may say, “no,” it could still get worse, like **more armed confrontations in our nation’s Capitol, or in state capitols, or civil war.** *Like with addiction,* the bottom can *always* be lower. **BUT also like addiction,** we can also decide that this is low as we wish to go and start on a path of recovery. And if 12-step programs could lend us some of their wisdom, they would tell us that rigorous honesty is the only way forward.

So, a few things that must be named today. This mob was *complex.* Amongst its numbers were Proud Boys and other white supremacists, paramilitary groups, QAnon followers and other conspiracy theorists, and *no doubt,* some supporters of the President that truly believe this election was filled with fraud who came to make known their concerns peaceably. But any

cruise through social media in recent weeks indicated that *those who stormed the Capitol* were not interested in peaceful demonstration. This mayhem, this insurrection, was calculated and planned, rhetorical seeds sown for the last two months by the President himself.

And if we don't acknowledge the role of RACE and RELIGION in what occurred Wednesday, we won't get to the root of what is ripping our country apart. So I am going to ask us to set aside the "*what-aboutism*," that line of argument so often deployed that says "*but what about this...*" that keeps us in an eternal loop of blame and keeps us forever stuck, unable to have hard conversations, unable to confront hard truths that our country desperately needs to wrestle with.

It was painful, and so blatantly revealing, to see how a group of predominantly white people, mostly men, storming the Capitol with weapons of all sorts was treated, *as compared with* the disproportionate use of force by law enforcement against people of color protesting for the right to simply live and breathe. What happened on Wednesday is chock-full of white notions of supremacy, entitlement, resentment, and grievance, as well as the benefit-of-the-doubt *always* accorded to white people that is NOT accorded to people of color. We have to keep wrestling with how deeply racism is woven into the fabric of our country, and our continued complicity with its structures, if we are *ever* to form "the more perfect union" envisioned in the Preamble of our Constitution.

The second piece that I found chilling as I watched the mob was the use of Jesus in their symbols. I kept seeing this huge flag that said "JESUS" and "TRUMP." I could tell more was written, but I couldn't make it out. I did some hunting and found a flag that can be purchased: "*Jesus is my Savior, Trump is my President.*" While there is truth in both of those statements, the proximity of those messages belies a deeper theological problem. Again, digging into social media feeds of those participating in the mob, you find a lot of apocalyptic, Trump-is-a-tool-of-God, this-is-bringing-on-the-end-times theology. QAnon uses overt spiritual language that *sounds* Christian, filled with scriptural images, and pulling in all kinds of believers who think they are saving children from a deep state Satan-worshipping cabal of pedophiles. These theologies are also profoundly anti-Semitic--one person on Wednesday wore a "Camp Auschwitz" t-shirt. In these streams of thought, President Trump comes awfully close to being a messiah. That "Jesus and Trump" flag also reveals a really individualistic approach--"*my Savior, my President.*" There is a loss of any sense of "we" and the *common humanity* that Chaplain Black calls us to in his prayer.

And, we can't have "*Jesus is my Savior*" without the corollary "*Jesus is my Lord*," and once we surrender to *following him and his way*, you simply can't take the actions that were taken on Wednesday because your commitment to *love and to your neighbor* trumps all.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we aren't just dealing with white supremacy, but we are dealing with white *Christian* supremacy. As followers of Jesus, we have to own our piece in these tragic events; we have to own our timidity in not proclaiming loudly enough and publicly enough that *what we have seen* is NOT the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is where **things get hard and messy**. Following Jesus as Lord *also means following his path of nonviolence*. As Gandhi and King and others in our time have taught, this nonviolence is rooted in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and it is **RADICAL**. I learned its application from John Dear and Pace-e-Bene, at the Wild Goose Festival and have taught it to our Social Justice Training Group *and* to our kids at St. Luke's. *We need this teaching NOW*.

Conflict has four stances:

- **Avoid** (Withdraw, Flight, or Freeze)
- **Fight**
- **Accommodate or Appease**
- **Nonviolence**--this elegant middle way where you hold clear boundaries and speak the truth, where you hold the other accountable, but you do these things with an openness to remaining in relationship

We no longer have the luxury of *fleeing from* or *avoiding* what we saw revealed on Wednesday. *fighting* will not achieve a lasting peace, and *appeasing* never works with people who have no regard for others. *A steely commitment to nonviolence in the work ahead, following in our Lord's footsteps, must be our way.*

So, we have **work to do to root out twisted, destructive words and deeds done in the name of faith, done in the name of Jesus**. We have **work to do to continue to root out the racism that has been woven into our country from the beginning**. We have **work to do in holding fast, and holding firm, and setting limits and boundaries, and calling out words and deeds that diminish the dignity of others, and holding accountable, but we also must maintain a willingness to keep reaching for relationship across all the divides in our country.**

As people of faith, we are **positioned to be repairers of the breach**. It will take those who drink from the deep waters who can stand in the tragic gap across our country and help to stitch *back together, or maybe together for the first time*, the frayed fabric of our *common humanity*. *Resurrection is never just a resuscitated life*; there is **no going back to the life before, no going back to some mythical golden age in our country--for many of our brothers and sisters of color, that golden age has never been**. **NO, resurrection is calling us to a new life that will demand the TRANSFORMATION of us all.**

I don't have a **four-point plan for how to get there**. The path must be *discerned by all of us day-by-day through our choices in word and deed as we live out our baptismal vows that we renew this day.*

But I do have a few thoughts to get us started on the way. Today, we celebrate Jesus' baptism. In Mark's gospel, we hear John the baptizer proclaim: **"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me."** *"One more powerful than I."* We have to get beyond the **"I"**; *we have to surrender the "I" and let a more powerful One knit us together as a "we" in one body, in one common humanity.*

Also in the account from Mark's gospel we hear this: **And just as [Jesus] 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.” What is true of Jesus is true of us. Today reminds us that *we are God’s beloveds*; this is our True Self. And *when you know you are a beloved*, you have no need of those things which the False Self craves in its relentless quest to prove it’s *good enough*. You have no need of power, prestige, position, and tribal belonging because *when you know you are BELOVED*, you know you BELONG at a depth that is unshakeable and infinitely secure; you know you are woven into a *common humanity* where EVERYONE belongs.

I keep thinking of that mob on Wednesday, and my thoughts go in three directions. *First, let’s have some humility about mobs*. We need only examine Holy Week to see how fast the mob can turn on the Lord of Love, and as *we* walk through that story each Palm Sunday, we hear ourselves cry, “Crucify him!” *We can ALL get swept up into the mob, and let us never forget that*.

Second, as I preached this summer when some of the peaceful protests turned violent, King said, “*A riot is the language of the unheard*.” We need to recommit to hearing *what is unheard* from ALL the places of pain in our country--black, brown, poor, marginalized, and voices in that mob--we have to hear ALL those who feel their voices are ignored. It takes a contemplative heart to listen to such pain, and *as people of faith*, we are uniquely equipped to listen in such a way.

Third, *how does a human make the journey from a curious, wide-eyed, wide-open child to someone with a heart filled with rage and a mind filled with conspiracy theories? Did they ever hear they were a beloved? Did they ever accept they were a beloved? Did they ever take that into their soul and open their eyes to see their connection to all the other beloveds of the world?* Call me naive, but when Jesus commands us to make disciples of all the nations, how might we start with proclaiming “*you are God’s beloved*” to those swept into the mob? And again, this doesn’t mean we don’t have boundaries, Jesus’ way of nonviolence *demand*s accountability, but it remains forever hopeful and open to reconciliation and relationship.

So, after a hard, hard week, I’m calling us to more hard work. Yep, this following Jesus stuff is relentless. However, along the way, you must seek out your lonely places--to rest, to pray, to renew, to allow your God-given wisdom to rise and inform your words and deeds; you must seek out your friends--to converse, to feast, to laugh; you must play and taste joy and drink in beauty; and you must, you must be gentle with your soul and drink deep from the well of life. The world has never needed us to be the people of faith that we are more than it does right now.

I want to close with a poem from Wendell Berry that came across my radar this week. It’s called *Our Real Work*.

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

God *NEVER* wastes a crisis. We have lived through Good Friday this week. And yes, we will continue to examine what led us all to this cross, but as we *die* with Jesus, so too we *rise* with him.

***We have come to our real work, we have come to our real journey; in our bafflement, let us hear the song crying out from our common humanity.* And then, **let us take our place in this call-and-response until we ALL learn to sing as the beloveds that we are.** Amen.**

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January 10, 2021