

Third Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:6-14
I Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

All across the land this week, such a **mixture of feelings within us, among us, and between us**. Some watched the **Inauguration**, and all the events around it, and **felt relief, joy, hope, and like they could breathe again**. Some watched those same events and felt **disappointment, sadness, anxiety, uneasiness** about what this change in leadership and policy may hold for the future. And **yet others**, who had gone all in with movements like QAnon, are **feeling deep disillusionment** as they come to terms with the fact that the apocalyptic moment they'd been expecting just wasn't going to be. **And all of these feelings, and all of these people, all of this is America.**

No matter where you may fall in this spectrum, no matter if your candidate was sworn in or your candidate left office, there are things to mark from Wednesday that could serve as common ground and are consistent with our faith. The **call to decency and respect for the dignity of others**; the **call to end this “un-civil war;”** the **clear articulation of all the problems facing us as a country**; the **call to unity** and the awareness that **it will take all of us to move forward and heal our land.**

I am always struck by our **human need for rituals**. *We know this in the church, especially in the Episcopal Church—we live and breathe rituals to mark every aspect of our life.* Tuesday evening, **the memorial to the 400,000 who have died of COVID touched a grief in my heart** that I didn't even know I was carrying. The **need to mark communally this death and loss and toll on our country** tapped something deep. Those **lights and the Reflecting Pool and silence and song and prayer gave our hearts a way to grieve all of our losses.**

There was the **ritual of leaders from both parties starting Wednesday in worship and prayer and remembrance that there is something bigger than us**. And the dance between **Amy Klobuchar, a Democrat, and Roy Blount, a Republican, emceeding the swearing in ceremony**. Later in the day, **three of our former Presidents, from both parties—Bill Clinton, George Bush, and Barack Obama—offered their thoughts, together, as elder statesmen.**

There was the **sheer beauty of the flags on the Mall, the powerful singing of the National Anthem** in the same place where the mob had raged two weeks before, and the **gift of Amanda Gorman, that 22-year old poet, and the power of her words and the unbelievable presence she held for all of us as she, too, clearly named the wounds and the hard places as well as the hope she holds**. She was **stunningly beautiful in every conceivable way**. And the **virtual parade that took us all across our country revealing the beauty of place and the distinctness of culture and the majesty of who we are from sea to shining sea, including the High Country Cloggers from Boone, North Carolina (and our own Ragan Huntsman!) who clogged on the Blowing Rock Observation Deck.**

Thursday morning, the **National Prayer Service** took place at the **Washington National Cathedral**, as well as all those who participated virtually, presenting **the awesome diversity of faith across our country and the beauty of praying in so many different ways, all expressing a greater love, a larger duty, a movement toward one another**. And, there was **Rev. Dr. William Barber II** from our own North Carolina preaching on **Isaiah 58**—a passage *we hear every Ash Wednesday*—reminding us of **God's call to justice and the care of the poor, the homeless, the oppressed, and the worker, God's call to us to be the repairer of the breach and the restorer of streets to live in. No matter if you agree or disagree**

with *Barber*, I'll give him one thing, **he is consistent**— whether it's **Republicans** in charge *or Democrats*, in **good prophetic fashion**, he is going to **hold our government and our society accountable** for its **treatment of the poor**.

All the rituals we have witnessed this week were meant to pull us out of our tribal places and into a place where we could see and experience our oneness, and also confess and repent of our division. And frankly we can't get to the one without the other.

So, with *all of the events this week as a backdrop*, *what do we hear in our lessons?*

First, from the Collect, we **pray for the grace to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, proclaim the Good News of his healing and his wholeness that draws this whole, suffering, beautiful, rich, complex world into his loving embrace, the Good News that can stand in the ashes and yet be full of hope for the new life that will yet come, the Good News that shows us how to let die the things that must to make way for what is laboring to be born.**

Our lesson from **Jonah** shows us that **calamity doesn't have to be our fate**. **Nineveh** was a **great city that had completely lost its way**. The **LORD** was pretty clear—they needed to **face up to their dire situation and fast**. **God chose Jonah to deliver the message—40 days more and Nineveh would be overthrown**. **Jonah's resistance to proclaim God's word is a story in and of itself, resistance borne of a deep desire to separate himself from those evil Ninevites**. But **proclaim the word he does, and lo and behold, the people of Nineveh were ready to hear what they had been unable to hear up to that point**. They **believed God, and they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth**. They didn't know what else to do but **repent and mourn**. They did a communal “**uncle,**” **completely surrendered, and threw themselves on God's mercy, and that got God's attention and God changed God's mind, and that really got under Jonah's skin**. **Jonah would have just as soon clung to his righteousness than see the confession and repentance and transformation of those he considered “evil.”** It's a cautionary tale—you can have a **righteous perspective**, but *what does that matter when your heart remains hard?*

Psalm 62 reminds us that **God alone is our rock and our salvation, our stronghold; in God is our safety and our honor; God is our strong rock and our refuge—not President Trump, not President Biden, not any President, not any human leader**. **No human can bear that messianic mantle—it's not fair to them, and it will not serve us in our work**. **As we pin our hopes and fears on those who would lead us, we do well to remember where our true salvation and strength reside**.

I Corinthians quite simply reminds us that **the appointed time has grown short and that the present form of this world is passing away**. Don't we know it! **Paul** is reminding all those who would follow **Jesus that there is an urgency to this time**. *We sense this in our own day, and the events of the last two and a half weeks have made this abundantly clear*. **We bear witness to this great turning happening before our eyes, and God is inviting us to midwife the form of this world that is groaning in labor striving to be born**.

Jesus reminds us that **turmoil in the state is always the state of affairs**. His cousin **John** had been **arrested by the state**. And **Jesus picks up John's work and carries it forward, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”** Notice that the **repentance that John proclaimed so boldly is still part of the deal**. It's **just not possible to believe in the good news and healing and wholeness that Jesus offers**

if we can't first name what has been rent asunder and is so broken. And for Jesus, the time for this work is NOW.

And so, **he calls out to Simon and Andrew and James and John, calls these *fishermen* to follow him and promises that he will make them *fish for people*.** It wasn't a dismissal of their vocation or gifts, but a *refining* of their vocation and gifts, **deploying them in a new way, in a new direction. All their powers of keen observation and intuition and timing and just plain skill now would be put in service of meeting people where they were and knowing just when and just how to pull them into this greater kingdom LOVE.**

And so too with us this day. Here's the thing. **The call we had under the last administration is the same call we have under this new one—to follow Jesus, to fish for people, to call ourselves and our world to repent of whatever would stand in the way of loving God, and loving our neighbor, and loving ourselves, and to proclaim the Good News of Christ's healing, saving, wound-binding, willing-to-be-crucified, life-transforming, resurrecting LOVE.**

It doesn't matter who the President is—this is our work, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. This is **both easier than figuring out how our call changes with the changing of our leaders, and more daunting** because **the responsibility to act as followers of Jesus and his way always answers to an authority higher and greater than the powers of this world.** And it means that, more than likely, **we will continue to be out-of-step with the world no matter who's in-charge.** John the Baptist was, Jesus was, and so will we.

It's **powerful to be a citizen of this country, and there is nothing wrong feeling proud of what we witnessed this week as we all moved through our national rituals—they are *powerful rituals* indeed—just remember where your true salvation lies.**

Today, **listen for the One who is calling you; drop the nets you've been casting, drop the ones that you know are full of holes—the ones that haven't been working well, the ones that you've been trying to mend—*leave these nets behind*, and follow Jesus.** He's **calling us to a new expedition, and he'll teach us how to catch people—how to catch their overstimulated minds, how to catch their weary spirits, how to catch their worn-down bodies, how to catch their aching, broken hearts—he'll teach us how to catch all those who are yearning for Good News and a different way, and in the process, we'll find that we took the bait—hook, line, and sinker—as we discover that in all our faithful fishing, he caught us up in the great LOVE, too. Amen.**

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