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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B2, W51
1 Epiphany (Year B) 11:00 a.m. Online Worship
Sunday 10 January 2021

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

Seeing the Bigger Picture in the Last Days of the Trump Administration

"You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Mk. 1).

"Our mysterious awe in the face of existence itself is always overridden by the more primitive fear of violence and destruction." Do you believe this is true? I asked you this question in a sermon only days after Donald Trump was elected president in 2016. And now it is time to ask this again. This sentence comes from the Russian writer Nadezhda Mandelstam (1899-1980) as she tried to preserve the poetic legacy of her husband Osip after he was killed by the Communists.¹

These days we are realizing that technologies that were supposed to bring us together, have more deeply divided us. What has been disrupted is not just the media as we used to know it – the newsrooms, professional journalists, small town papers and local television stations – but the traditions that helped us understand what is true. It is natural to feel afraid as human society becomes unmoored from truth.

How do we respond to "primitive fear" and the powerful lies that subjugate and divide us? How should we face the forces that distort and manipulate us? This week the president threatened the Georgia Secretary of State to overturn the fall election saying, "I just want to find 11,780 votes."² Then on Wednesday he incited a white mob both in person and through social media. They overran the US Capitol building. Five people were killed including a Brian Sicknick, a Capitol police officer.³

We all know that far more blood would have been shed if Black people had acted in a similar way. My 70 year old aunt was arrested at the Capitol a few years ago protesting a massive pipeline project. She could not believe what she saw this week.

And so here we are with those persistent images in our consciousness. A confederate flag being waved in the rotunda. A grinning white man with his feet up on Nancy Pelosi's desk. The doors to the Senate chambers being barricaded by a heavy table as an agent points his gun through a broken window. Shameless politicians telling us that really the mob was a group of liberals impersonating right-wing protesters. Broken glass. Smashed doors. Other nations looking on in horror. The Dean of Canterbury Cathedral sending a video message to America saying that it is darkest before the dawn.

This is the natural culmination of years of hearing people like Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh telling us that our own government is the enemy. Beyond the totally unnecessary loss of life, and the ugly desecration of a place that is sacred to democracy, there is such a tragic element to all of this. That crowd really believes a conspiracy theory that is clearly not true. They accept the president's lie that the election was fraudulent or stolen.

And yet after all that shouting on the Capitol steps that this was their house, once they made it in they hardly knew what to do. All they could think of was to break things, steal some stationary, to take pictures of themselves on the senate floor and post them on social media. Is that it? Is that all that matters these days? Does it really just come down to how many likes we get on Facebook? Isn't there more to life than this?

After the events of the last few days it is a relief to get back to the truly big picture that encompasses all time and space. The good book says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1). And today we celebrate the ancient Feast of the Epiphany. It's name comes from the Greek word *epi* which means upon and *phaino* which means to shine as when John writes, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn. 1:5).

So we are entering a season of epiphanies, of new insight into our connection with God and the world. Another way to put this is that we will be looking more deeply to see the unveiling of the truth, the longstanding reality, that we only barely apprehended before. My old teacher Peter Gomes used to describe Epiphany as the season when the "identity of Jesus" becomes "clearer to all those who will look and see."⁴ He says that the story begins with the angel's appearance to Mary and like a stone in a pond ripples out through all the water of time and space even as far as you and me.

Traditionally at Epiphany three stories in particular reveal who Jesus is. The first is the story of the Magi, that group of wise ones from the East who, over great distances follow a star. They suffer in order to experience Jesus and to present their gifts to him. The second is the story from the Gospel of John in which Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus takes our watery life and makes it infinitely more delightful. The final story is what we have before us today.

Mark calls this, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk. 1). He doesn't tell the story of Jesus' birth and in a way this is his Christmas story. John appears in the wilderness. People who seem vastly different from one another are deeply attracted to him. They come from urban and rural places, from Bakersfield and Santa Monica, from Salinas and Carmel, from Hayward and Belvedere.

They share an understanding that something is wrong in their lives. They suffer in the way that we do when things go badly and there is no one else to blame and we wonder what we could have done differently. John really sees them. Like the best of preachers he helps them to discover a new relationship with God. He baptizes them with water.

Then Jesus comes with all of the power of the Holy Spirit. Mark writes, "And just 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" (Mk. 1). Immediately after this the Spirit casts Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted for forty days by the Devil.

The writers of the most ancient Jewish scriptures saw the ocean and the wilderness as tumultuous places of terrible chaotic forces that threaten human life. I can't help but think that the wilderness is where we are these days as COVID continues to overwhelm us spiritually, emotionally and physically, as we wonder what the future will bring for our nation and the world.

But again let's take a wider view beyond our current situation and look very briefly at ideas from three of the most ancient Christians. The first is from the second century figure Justin Martyr (100-165 CE). Justin points out that Jesus had no need of a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk. 1). But out of humility and deep desire for solidarity with all people Jesus chose to be baptized. He wants to be with us. Justin says that the spirit descending shows the world that he was "far more than a mere worker of wood."⁵

Also from the second century Irenaeus (130-202 CE) writes that God anoints Jesus of Nazareth with the "Holy Spirit and power." Our baptism in his name gives us a share of this same power. This is what renews us even in the face of fear and uncertainty.⁶

Finally I want to quote from a fourth century hymn by St. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373 CE). "See, Fire and Spirit in the womb that bore you! See, Fire and Spirit in the river you were baptized! Fire and Spirit in our Baptism; in the Bread and the Cup, Fire and Spirit!" Being baptized we become the children of Mary fully participating in the divinity of her Son.

As I said earlier I've been wondering if, "Our mysterious awe in the face of existence itself is always overridden by the more primitive fear of violence and destruction." At my lowest point, after the longest day of worrying about the people of this nation, I decided to go for a run. I was too late and the sunset just looked like a smudge in the western

sky. But as I ran alone on the walkway 265 feet above the dangerous currents of the Bay over the Golden Gate Bridge, I received my answer.

Looking East the light blue color of the Bay perfectly matched the blue of the sky. Instantly I knew that although everything appears to be distinct and individual, we are all one in God. We are all God's children, the beloved ones. Over the last ten months, as we have wandered this desert together we have had Epiphanies: about the importance of being together in person, the value of our human connections, the simple joy we take in singing. What is also being revealed to us is the terrible situation of healthcare and employment insecurity, racism, inequality, the vulnerability of the natural world.

After the last ten months, after the last four years, we see more clearly what we are called to do. These are not tasks that we grudgingly take up. This is the work that we were made for, that gives us meaning as children of God.

Our identity shapes our habits and our habits in turn determine our identity. The crucial question for each of us today is what kind of people will we be going forward? Are we going to be people who live in fear and are therefore habitually outraged, angry and hopeless?

Or will we be children of God rejoicing in our share of Jesus' spirit and power. How will we humbly and quietly help the people around us who are struggling right now? During this season of epiphanies the truly big picture is that despite all our failings we are beloved to God.⁷

Let us pray: Holy God protect the world from COVID. Bless this nation and its ideal that each person matters and has a unique and irreplicable dignity. We pray for all the political leaders who may not understand any better than we do, the forces we are unleashing, or the demons we are serving in our fear and lack of trust in you. Give us the peace that passes all understanding and through the grace of your son Jesus, let us see the fire and spirit in the river in which we are baptized. Amen.

¹ 26 Pent (11-13-16) 28C. "There is a story about the composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975). As an internationally recognized twenty-nine year old he seemed to have everything. Then on January 2, 1936 the Communist Party officially instructed him to attend his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District*. The country's dictator Joseph Stalin himself was in attendance but invisible behind a curtain. Stalin left before the end and although the audience seemed beside themselves with enthusiasm, Shostakovich felt "sick at heart."

Two days later the official Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* wrote an editorial about *Lady Macbeth* entitled "Muddle Instead of Music." It condemned his work as "artistically obscure and morally obscene." It went on to say that Shostakovich was playing a game that "may end very badly." In hindsight we know what ending badly meant in Soviet Russia. One could be declared an enemy of the people, publicly

humiliated, privately tortured and then executed. Others were sent to prison camps and many more simply disappeared.

Alex Ross writes that, "Shostakovich never shook off the pall of fear that those six hundred words in *Pravda* cast on him." Sadly, while he agonized over whether his compositions would cause offense, this had nothing to do with the music. The same editor of *Pravda* later said privately about this incident. "We had to begin with somebody... Shostakovich was the most famous, and a blow against him would create immediate repercussions..."

Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007) 220, 216, 228.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-raffensperger-call-georgia-vote/2021/01/03/d45acb92-4dc4-11eb-bda4-615aaefd0555_story.html

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/us/politics/police-officer-killed-capitol.html>

⁴ 1 Epiphany (01-07-18) B. Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002) 30-6.

⁵ I'm grateful to my friend Donald Schell who answered my late night call for help on this sermon with such wisdom. This next section comes from the email he sent me. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*.

⁷ Here are some words from Brian McLaren that give us a sense for how our ministry supports what God is doing in creation, "The universe is God's creative project, filled with beauty, opportunity, challenge, and meaning. It runs on the meaning we see embodied in the life of Jesus. Newness multiplies. Freedom grows. Meaning expands. Wisdom flows. Healing happens. Goodness runs wild." Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (Jericho: 2015), 11, 12, 14.