

Epiphany 1 January 10, 2021

“Silence is God’s first language.” I was reminded of this saying by one of the participants in the Diocesan Antiracism Action book group. “Silence is God’s first language,” was written by a Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross in the seventeenth century. What struck me as particularly astute about this mystical saying is that it was my first reaction to the appalling events of this week, the insurrection that took place at the Capitol in Washington. That silence, that stunned silence, was driven even deeper in hearing that this violent insurrection was incited and set into motion by the President. I literally had no words. Not a good thing for a preacher, that’s for sure! And still a few days later, time to reflect on what took place. Time to read some accounts of the day and analysis by various political writers and reporters. Listening to interviews of people who lived through the day on the radio and watching the breathless television coverage, during which highly trained and highly paid professional broadcasters seemed to have as much difficulty overcoming the stunned, shocked silence as I did. Looking into the chaos of the violence, seeing the deep anger and hatred on full display, my own silence seemed somehow a comfort. Rather than papering over the rage and wickedness, my silence forced me to witness it, and as painful as it is, to look directly at the evil that confronted us. My silence, my loss for words to explain or understand; my silence, that gulf, it opened up a place, first a place to pray, to listen for God’s word, to lament, lament as did the prophets and lament as the Psalmist did, to bring to God the utter loss, the deep despair, to seek God in the void...a silence...and a place to ask for that divine mercy we have no right to expect, a mercy not deserved, a soothing mercy only God can give...a silence that drives me to my knees to pray, to open my heart, to bear my soul...a silence that is God’s first language.

Prayer: O God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who hast brought us thus far on the way; in your mercy open our hearts and souls to your word of grace this day and transform our lives with your amazing grace. This we ask in the Name of our savior and friend Jesus. Amen.

Yes, appalled and shocked by what we saw on Wednesday, a sight never seen before and unimagined, unimaginable prior to unfolding before our eyes. So many emotions, too. Anger at the senseless violence and fear of moving our nation into a dangerous place never seen before. That fear, of course, still runs deep as the shocking events of the past few days make us wonder what could be next? Is there another outrage or another unforeseen disaster brewing, yet to deliver its full toxic load in our midst? I so much wish I knew, so much wish I could share news of the future with you, but you know as well as I do this isn't going to happen.

There are however a couple of lessons, or maybe that's expecting a little too much, so how about "observations" I'd like to offer in this context, the I hope will be useful to you. First, I was impressed with Senator Mitt Romney's point during the Electoral College certification as it resumed Wednesday night after the violent mob was cleared from the Capitol. He pointed to the deep need to tell the truth. He lamented the lies and distortions that have driven truth out a many of our institutions and he pleaded for bringing truth back into our civic life. Second, I heard numerous times, both in the Senate and House speeches and through many commentators on the storming of the Capitol, that is "not who we are... we're better than that." Well, if we take Senator Romney's admonition seriously, we have to shatter that myth of innocence, because yes, this *is* who we are, and as difficult as that truth is to face, I think we have to face that truth before we can ever hope to change. Not only is there a long history of violent political clashes throughout our history, but more

insidiously, the white supremacy that was on display Wednesday afternoon, is something that has been an appalling part of our nation's story from the beginning as well. The chant of "stop the steal" is part of the lie that sought to take away the votes of black and brown voters from places like Detroit, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Phoenix and Milwaukee. These, of course, are cities with large African American and Latinx communities that overwhelmingly supported the incoming Biden-Harris administration. The lie of rigged elections covers for an uglier spectre of white supremacy, and this is an ugly truth, but a truth we must face, that yes, this is who are, in order to have any hope of changing this ugly reality and any hope of advancing our democratic project in republican self-government for future generations. I believe that telling the truth is absolutely central to recovering any hope of moving forward into the future, but it is a hard truth that we are not innocent and that the work to re-establish our society will take a great deal of time and a great deal of effort.

We gather today, however, in contrast to the dark days of the events we witnessed this week, we gather today as a time to celebrate the light of God's love. Epiphany, the story of the sages from the East following the star to Jesus is the story of light dawning in our world, the light of God's love dawning in our lives. During Epiphany, we will hear the story of Jesus' ministry and teachings, the showing of God's love walking among us, healing, comforting, but also confronting the evils of this world, going to Jerusalem to speak that deep truth of God's love to the corrupt leaders of his day. Today, we begin that journey with Jesus. We begin this journey as Jesus did, on the banks of the River Jordan with John the Baptist. John's call is to all Israel to come out to the wilderness and to give a truthful account of their short-comings, but also John proclaims to them the good news of what God is doing: bringing the Messiah to them, bringing the one who will manifest the power of God's loving Spirit in the world.

Then, then as Jesus emerges from the water, he sees the Spirit coming to him, and the voice rings from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In celebration of Jesus’ baptism, this morning we will renew our own baptismal covenant. This morning, once more we will once more pledge our commitment to the way of Jesus. This morning we will re-affirm once again that Jesus is the Lord of our lives and that we will seek to follow in his way. Once more we will commit together to continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, in prayer and, at least nowadays in the pandemic, breaking bread together in a physically distant form when we can, commit to resisting evil and repenting when we fall, affirm our willingness to proclaim the Good News of Jesus by what we say and just as importantly by what we do, we will acknowledge our need to serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and finally striving for peace and justice for all people respecting the dignity of each person. This is our baptismal faith, our way to follow Jesus in the way of love. The God who has created all that is, God who first creates this light in which we will walk. The God who becomes human like us and gives his life for us brings this light of God’s love to lift us up out of the depth of darkness from the tomb on Easter. And the God who is the Spirit of this love going forth calls us into the fellowship of the Church. We remember our baptism today, we celebrate this baptism of Jesus and give thanks to God for bringing us to the waters of baptism to share this love and life and to acknowledge Jesus as our Savior and friend.

But there’s something special about the way Mark tells us the story of Jesus’ baptism. Mark says that as Jesus come up out of the water, “he saw” the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending upon him. Mark, in this description of the baptism of Jesus, puts us inside Jesus’ head: we see through Jesus’ eyes, we see what Jesus sees. I believe Mark does this very

deliberately, showing us that in baptism we are saved because we can now see the world as Jesus sees the world, teaching us to see as Jesus sees; showing us what it means to look at the world in the power of the Spirit of love. To me, this is the power of the grace bestowed on us in our Baptisms, that we are called to see the world through the eyes of Christ, to see the power of the Spirit of love in our world, transforming our lives and calling us to share this love with others to transform our world. As we renew our Baptismal Covenant this morning, we are called again to deepen our faith, to see again through the eyes of Christ as we journey on the way of Jesus, walking in Jesus' way of love.

Against the backdrop of the insurrection and carnage we saw on display at our nation's Capitol this week, it might appear feeble to assert that that our baptismal faith, seeing through the eyes of Christ is going to change the world. Indeed the wickedness we face is widespread and pervasive, but the God who created the heavens and the earth, that God who brings light into existence to shine in the darkness, the God who proclaims this light as good, this is the God who loves us and loves our world into goodness, a goodness from the depths of all that is to the heights of highest heaven, bringing all into line with God purpose to create goodness and peace for all.

I began this sermon noting that silence is the first language of God. That sense really summed up how I felt in the aftermath of the insurrection this past Wednesday. A bit later, though, there were words that spoke to me, words that captured the sense of God's resistance to this violence, words that expressed the the long arc of history bending toward justice, as Dr. Martin Luther King put it. I remembered the words written by James Weldon Johnson in what has been called the African American National Anthem, the hymn, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." These words stand in stark contrast to the violence of the insurrection and they give me hope, a

deep and abiding hope, in the power of God's loving kindness to sustain our lives and our world.

*Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring,
ring with the harmonies of liberty;*

*let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies,
let it resound loud as the rolling sea.*

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
let us march on till victory is won. Amen.*