

Epiphany 2 January 17, 2021. Annual Meeting and. MLK, Jr.

In past years I have used the sermon on our Annual Meeting Sunday as a time for a Pastor's Report, both to tie our worship and the Annual Meeting together and to save some time as well, killing two birds with one stone if you will. I think that is an appropriate use of today's sermon time as well, but I also think it is important to reflect on our appointed Biblical lessons for the day as well, so this will be a little bit of a hybrid effort this year. But let's start with a prayer:

Most merciful and glorious God, be present with us this day as we focus on our mission, and may your Word inspire us to do your will in all we undertake. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Over the past nine months or so, I have said that this is a topsy turvy time over and over again. And indeed that is what it has felt like over and over as well. The pandemic turned everything upside down as we sought to find the ways to keep ourselves and others safe. I am so pleased to say that over the course of the year, we have been a good part of that effort here at Good Shepherd, moving our services online, finding ways to do outreach without being in contact with each other and supporting efforts in our community to make sure our neighbors are fed and stay healthy. We have also seen the ways in which this pandemic has exacerbated the already fraught racial relations in our nation, and with the murder of

George Floyd, It became even clearer that this concern must be given a loud voice and seen clearly in our streets if there is to be any hope for racial justice and reconciliation in our society. I believe that Good Shepherd has served in a very good way in this regard, as well, by being present at different public actions to proclaim that Black Lives Matter and by examining our own lives and our community through reading Ibram Kendi's book, *How to be an Antiracist*, and by participating with our Diocesan Antiracism Action team, learning about the awful aspects of our history by reading Bishop Hopkins' book.

Overall, however, I think that our deepest response to the pandemic and to the racial injustice that the last year brought so plainly into focus has been our prayer and Bible Study. It has been by gathering together on a regular basis, to pray and sing together, to read the Bible together and to reflect on God's call in our lives, it is in this way that I believe I have grown the most and I have seen that throughout our congregation as well. I know that this is so difficult, now that we cannot gather together in person, now that our lives are much more circumscribed by staying at home, staying safe and limiting contacts. Even the simple act of putting on a mask is hard, because I miss the smiles, the grins, frankly even the frowns I would see on different faces. But still, regardless, it is the coming together for a time of prayer, coming together in fellowship, coming together to reflect on how God is present with us, even when we cannot be

present together. This has been the real touchstone for Good Shepherd over this past year, and will be in the months yet to come.

There will come a time, though, when we get through this pandemic. In that time, I believe, just as we said from the start, we will get through this together. And we will take what we have learn, the manner in which our faith has grow, and most importantly, the way in which our faith has deepened, and we will, I pray, bring these into our mission. I know this time is a ways off yet, but just as our nation will make a new start this week with the inauguration of a new President and Vice President, we will start to make the preparations to undertake our mission in a new way. Throughout this pandemic, God has especially called us t be aware of our neighbors, to take care of others by taking care of ourselves; to wear our masks as a sign of care and respect, well much more than a sign, an actual safeguard and a really effective means to cut down the transmission of the coronavirus. As we are also deeply aware, the economic devastation in the wake of the pandemic has caused and will continue to cause suffering that we are called to address. I believe that in the coming year, it is this devastation, and its attendant crises of homelessness, addiction and depression that we will face over and over again as we undertake God's mission here in Barre. But I also believe that the manner in which this pandemic has tested out faith, kept us apart, yes, but sown us the deep

lessons for coming together in prayer and reflection, that it is this faith that will enable us and strengthen us to meet the days to come.

Last week, when we heard the story of Jesus's baptism in the chilly waters of the River Jordan by John, we heard the manner in which Jesus saw the Holy Spirit descending upon him, the voice of God proclaiming Jesus as the Beloved, the one God has chosen to manifest God's divine love in our world. This morning, we hear of Jesus's first encounters with those seeking God's love in our world, that Jesus sees them in their need, Jesus sees that within the suffering and despair, within the violence and the wickedness they encounter, that God's mercy will bring. New truth to our world. And then Jesus calls them to live in the light of God's love. That call still holds for us, for you and me today. As we meet during these difficult times, in the midst of this long, day winter of the pandemic, as we come together once more in prayer and praise, that same call is made to you and me. And Jesus's simple command, the same two words said to Philip, "Follow me," are given to each one of us: to follow Jesus in seeking the love of God for our lives, for our community, for our world in this day as well. As we gather here this morning, and as we spend time later in our Annual Meeting, it is to take up this call once again, to give God thanks for the blessings we have been graciously given, and even in the midst of suffering and distress, to find the ways to respond in faith to show the love of God to ring us through together. I have often said that the

most frequent command in the Biblical witness is the simple command, “Fear not!” “Do not be afraid.” This command runs throughout the entire corpus of the Scriptures, said by Jesus, Isaiah, the angels of God and Paul, among others. But perhaps the most important command from Jesus is this invitation, “Follow thou me,” to join with Jesus in the life of living fully in the love of God, to see with the eyes of faith that in the midst of death and sin, in the midst of violence and chaos in the midst of all the suffering that befalls us and that we see so evident in the world, God is present with us, God is bringing God’s mercy into our world and into our lives that we might manifest the love of God ever more brightly, shining the light of God’s truth in the darkness which surrounds us. This is God’s mission that calls us, you and me, as the members of Good Shepherd here in Barre as we start this new year in our life together this morning.

This weekend is also a time when we as a nation commemorate the life of one of our extraordinary national leaders, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King, of course, was the founding president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, established after his leadership in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, to bring the struggle for Civil Rights to the national stage. For his work and dedication to the Civil Rights struggle he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and he succeeded in passing national legislation to overcome the discrimination in voting rights and public accommodations for African Americans and all citizens. Dr. King

also worked tirelessly to overcome poverty in our nation, mounting the Poor Peoples' Campaign in the months before his assassination to bring justice to all in our land. But through all this, at his core and his sure foundation, Dr. King was a Black Baptist preacher, nurtured by his faith and his commitment to follow Jesus in his quest to bring equity and well-being for all. As we undertake our Annual Meeting this morning, as we gather this morning in remembrance of Dr. King and his example of faithful Christian action to bring God's love into the lives of all, I thought it would be good to conclude not with the words of one of his stirring, historic speeches to our nation, but rather with the word of a prayer, a prayer given at a worship service, for Christians like himself, seeking to follow their Lord Jesus in carrying out God's mission of reconciling love in our world:

“O God, our Heavenly Father, we thank thee for this golden privilege to worship thee, the only true God of the universe. We come to thee today, grateful that thou hast kept us through the long night of the past and ushered us into the challenge of the present and the bright hope of the future. We are mindful, O God, that man cannot save himself, for man is not the measure of thing and humanity is not God. Bound by our chains of sin and finiteness, we know that we need a Savior. We thank thee, O God, for the spiritual nature of man. We are in nature but we live above nature. Help us never to let anybody or any condition pull us so low as to cause us

to hate. Give us strength to love our enemies and to do good to those who spitefully use us and persecute us. We thank thee for thy Church, founded upon thy Word, that challenges us to more than sing and pray, but to go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depends on us and not upon thee. Then, finally, help us to realize that man was created to shine like stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace. Help us to walk together, to pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children, Black, White, Red, and Yellow will rejoice in one common ban of humanity in the kingdom of our Lord and of our God, we pray. Amen.”