

About two months ago, I sat in a Zoom meeting with colleagues from around the Virginia Synod to put together the Epiphany worship service that many of you attended last Wednesday evening. We went around and around in circles for an hour and a half, because we just couldn't quite put our finger on what we wanted the service to be, how we wanted it to feel. We wanted it to be prayerful and meditative, but also have moments of connection. Eventually, small pieces started to join together...Holden Evening Prayer...we could sing together, it's reflective of light and life and hope, which is after all the message of Epiphany, but we weren't really sure how we could do that online, but we knew we wanted to do it so we would figure it out. Did we want the Bishop to do anything or did we want to give him a chance to just relax and worship? More conversation flowed around how much of the Matthew story we wanted to tell. Did we just stop at the Wise Men's visit or did we push through the difficult, the slaughter of the innocents, the flee to Egypt? What kind of prayers should we use? Should we have time for others to pray? Should it be a litany with responses? Should we have people muted or not? What do we want to pray for?

In the midst of the conversation, one of my colleagues said something about using prayers from the Armed Forces service book and then pulled up the litany for a nation in a time of war. It was at that point, an hour and a

half into a Zoom meeting that I was just kind of like, huh? Like how did we get from the message of Epiphany to war? How would these prayers be relevant to what our overall message and focus was for this service? And I mean we talked about wanting to make sure that we were inclusive of the world we live in and taking time to pray for our military and our government, which made sense, but I still was like...this is kind of weird. Litany for a time of war during an Epiphany service. Ok. And then, somehow, I volunteered to lead it! By the end of the meeting, we had some sort of something in terms of a worship outline, but it was all very fuzzy and I still wasn't certain we knew what we had put together.

Fast forward to last Wednesday evening. Last Wednesday evening which found all of us sitting there at 6:45, fifteen minutes before worship was supposed to start, entirely gobsmacked at the day we had just encountered, the day our nation was still enduring. I said to the Bishop that I was deeply grateful that we had decided to ask him to begin our service with words of welcome and blessing...because more than anything, all of us, clergy and lay people alike, needed to hear from the Bishop that night. His overwhelming presence and calm, a balm to weary souls. Holden Evening Prayer began...a service which on a good day makes me teary, and as we sang out together the words of the Magnificat, about God casting the mighty

down from their thrones, about God favoring the weak and lowly, about God humbling the proud, about God's justice and love being strong, tears just poured out of me and I wondered why on earth I volunteered to lead the portion of the service that came immediately after this song. I pulled up my prayers, the ones I didn't fully understand why we had chosen, and I found words praying for those in authority, for the well-being of our nation, for the day of peace to come, for the threads of hate to disperse, for forgiveness, for those who delight in war to be scattered. We heard the scripture read in full, not shying away from the hard or the difficult, but hearing the reality that in Jesus' time so much innocent blood was spilled out of fear and terror.

We finished the service and I just sat there...jaw slightly ajar at what had just happened. All those decisions we had made months ago, decisions that all of us weren't solidly sure of, decisions that we went back and forth on, ended up being *exactly* what we needed for the moment we were living in, a moment none of us could have anticipated or seen coming. I sat there just baffled because I wasn't sure that ever in my life had I experienced the Holy Spirit so profoundly present. All my confusion and bewilderment about why we chose those prayers for this service? The Holy Spirit whispering in our ears, you're going to need these...

And the thing is, for as grateful as I was that we had that nudge, that tap on the shoulder, that guidance to give us the right words for the moment, I also sat there and wished beyond all hope that we wouldn't have needed them, that Wednesday hadn't happened, that the reason I was moved to tears during the service was just because Holden Evening Prayer is gorgeous and not because the day had been devastating. And as I rolled that around in my head, wondering how to connect that with the message of this week, one thing resounded...the Holy Spirit always shows up, but she never promises that she'll make it easy.

The Holy Spirit is intimately present at creation. The Spirit of God, the breath of God, a wind from God hovering over the deep, over the dark void that would become creation. Light comes into being through that Spirit and God said it was good. Every molecule of creation breathed into life from the work of the Holy Spirit and every inch declared good, but good doesn't mean perfect. Creation isn't easy and it wreaks its own hand of destruction at times and it causes chaos and raises questions, all the while being miraculous and beautiful and a wonder to behold. And in the midst of it all, the chaos and destruction, the awe and breathtaking beauty, the Holy Spirit dwells all the same.

The Holy Spirit is the key for the people of Ephesus. They've been baptized before but the gift of the Holy Spirit didn't dwell within them. Paul comes along and gives them the gift of baptism by the Holy Spirit and suddenly they are awash in spiritual gifts and capable of wondrous things. Yet, as we all know spiritual gifts don't always call us into places of ease and simplicity. Being able to speak the word of the gospel also means sometimes speaking truth to power, saying the unpopular thing, and standing alone in the midst of a crowd that doesn't agree and yet you can't stop speaking your truth. For the people of Ephesus, the Holy Spirit dwelling in them meant they were bound for the incredible gift of life in the church, the joy of community and grace and love, and the tangle of persecution and challenge and rarely being able to walk the easy road.

The Holy Spirit is who tears the heavens open and descends on Jesus at his baptism, bringing him the message that he is God's Beloved, he is God's Son. The Holy Spirit is who gives Jesus the assurance that he is on the right path and that he is cherished for that path. Yet, it's a path that is going to lead to the cross. Being God's Beloved, having the Holy Spirit descend on your life, is not a mark for the easy path ahead, it doesn't destine you for gentleness and peace and simplicity. Jesus knew that, but he still

took that assurance that he was loved, that he was who he was, and he let that settle his heart for the difficult road ahead.

The Holy Spirit runs rampant over our lives, over your life. You, like Jesus, had that moment in your baptism when you were declared a beloved child of God, when the gift of the Holy Spirit was breathed into you bringing out your creativity, your passion, your gifts which are uniquely yours and which can be uniquely used along your faith journey. The Holy Spirit settled in each of our hearts with a promise to stay, to remain, to abide, to guide, to comfort. But it never promised to carve out a smooth and simple path, as much as we might want it to. We all so desperately wish that the life of faith meant we were destined for a life of simple, a life of ease, but we know that's not the case. What the Holy Spirit promises is that we don't do that alone. Jesus knew that same Holy Spirit which called him Beloved would be the one to drive him into the wilderness to be tempted, but whether he was in the waters of the Jordan or in the wilderness of Judea he was never alone. The Holy Spirit remained. The Holy Spirit abided.

On Tuesday morning, before any of us had any idea what the next 36 hours would hold, one of our Bible study folks pointed out that there was something about these texts with Jesus and Holy Spirit, how there always seemed to be this violent imagery—the heavens being torn apart, the curtain

of the Temple torn in two—paired with these deep moments of peace and abiding love—you are my Son, the Beloved, Father, forgive them. She said it reminded her of childbirth, and how there is all this pain, but all this promise, all this hope, all this love. That reality hit home for me Wednesday as my heart felt torn in two by all that we had seen and heard on the news, but also so steadily at peace as we as a Synod worshipped together with words the Holy Spirit had placed in our hands months before.

That I think may be the hope of our lives...there will be pain and struggle and hardship and things that feel as though they might tear us apart, but there will also be peace and calm and hope and a promise that we are never alone, and sometimes those moments happen simultaneously. Honestly, that's what happens so often in baptism isn't it? The baby that screams and screams and screams, while also being claimed and named as a child of God. That is the beauty and the struggle of life. It will make us want to cry, to scream, to rail against the world, and yet God keeps claiming us and naming us as children of God, destined for grace and peace, even when the world feels like it's spinning out of control. Jesus knew what was ahead even as the Holy Spirit descended on him and there was peace. What lies ahead of us may be difficult or hard, and yet the Holy Spirit will descend and abide...and there will be peace. **AMEN!!!**