

The Bishop's Report

As I look over the past year, I am aware that these have been times unlike any we have personally experienced before. I was ordained a transitional deacon in 1986. Through the years, there have been recessions, small scale epidemics and even wars. I began my episcopacy with the economic crash of 2007/2008. There has been nothing like the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic. Historians tell us that we have to look back to the Spanish Flu epidemic after World War I to find a similar time. Hawai'i has been particularly impacted. The economy is struggling with unemployment and an outlook for a long recovery.

As a nation, the United States has been trying to come to grips with issues of justice and systemic racism. The non-violent "Black Lives Matter" movement has been an attempt to come to grips with our history and the impact on our collective reality as a nation. We are heirs of colonialism, the forced displacement and even genocide of the indigenous peoples of an area that is now the United States, and the enslavement of peoples based on race. "White Privilege" is the too often unconscious reality of our history. At a deeper level, the sin of "White Supremacy" has become public and encouraged violence. This past year showed the world the public face of "White Supremist" and openly neo-Fascist groups. They have been met by anarchist and other groups who answered violence with violence. In addition, there has been unreflective and equally sinful non-ideological violence in the streets of cities in the United States. In history, we perhaps have to look back to the 1930's for similar times.

This year, 2020, is a watershed year for the nation, Hawai'i, and this Diocese. All seemed "normal" the first months after the 2019 Annual Meeting of Convention. Finances were solid. Several congregations had just completed or were in the process of calling new clergy. Design Teams and Task Groups were going about their work. I was making my regular visitations with congregations. Then everything changed.

I have made some sense of our current reality by praying the Psalms. I have been particularly helped by a little book: [Spirituality of the Psalms](#) by Walter Brueggemann (Augsburg Press, 2002). Brueggemann suggests that the Psalms have been and can be prayed as:

- Psalms of Orientation
- Palms of Disorientation
- Psalms of New Orientation

"Psalms of Orientation" keep us grounded in what is well-ordered and reliable. These are often the Psalms that celebrate creation and the certainty of God (see Psalm 33), Psalms of Torah or religious/moral certainty (see Psalm 15), and Psalms of Well-being (see Psalm 133).

I have pondered that it is in the "normal" times that we sing the Psalms of Orientation almost unconsciously. Psalm 133 reminds me that I last played with my Grandson over a year ago and that I have never held my Granddaughter. I know we all have such stories.

Psalm 133 (Common English Bible translation)

- ¹ Look at how good and pleasing it is
when families live together as one!
- ² It is like expensive oil poured over the head,
running down onto the beard—
Aaron's beard!—
which extended over the collar of his robes.
- ³ It is like the dew on Mount Hermon
streaming down onto the mountains of Zion,
because it is there that the Lord has commanded the blessing:
everlasting life.

Such Psalms harken to the time that we could gather for Easter celebrations. These Psalms remind us of the time before the pandemic. These Psalms express a joyful expectation for recovery, but we're not there yet.

It seems that we have been singing Psalms of Disorientation for months on end. Some of us have been sharing Psalms of personal complaint (see Psalm 13). That has come in the form of unpleasant emails to the priest or to the bishop wanting to know when we can worship together again. Often these carry a sense of personal loss and loneliness. Other painful stories come to me when families need financial help because of the loss of a job or the death of a loved one. We miss the reality of just being physically together as God's people. We missed this year's Easter celebration altogether and are looking forward to Christmas even with masks and social distancing (and what about the carols?). We have been awkwardly singing Psalm 137:1-6 to ourselves:

Psalm 137:1-6 (Common English Bible translation)

- ¹ Alongside Babylon's streams,
there we sat down,
crying because we remembered Zion.
- ² We hung our lyres up
in the trees there
- ³ because that's where our captors asked us to sing;
our tormentors requested songs of joy:
"Sing us a song about Zion!" they said.
- ⁴ But how could we possibly sing
the Lord's song on foreign soil?
- ⁵ Jerusalem! If I forget you,
let my strong hand wither!
- ⁶ Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth
if I don't remember you,
if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy.

We have to acknowledge the anxiety and grief of these past months. We have lost members of the Diocese to COVID-19. Some have lost jobs. We have had to be away from one another. God

is still with us, but life has been changed. Things will never be the same as they were. We have changed as God's people.

The Psalms of New Orientation find God in a transformed reality. Things are not the same, but we are still God's people and we are finding our way through the wilderness. Here I am reminded of Psalm 121:

Psalm 121 (Common English Bible translation)

- ¹ I raise my eyes toward the mountains.
Where will my help come from?
² My help comes from the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.
³ God won't let your foot slip.
Your protector won't fall asleep on the job.
⁴ No! Israel's protector
never sleeps or rests!
⁵ The Lord is your protector;
the Lord is your shade right beside you.
⁶ The sun won't strike you during the day;
neither will the moon at night.
⁷ The Lord will protect you from all evil;
God will protect your very life.
⁸ The Lord will protect you on your journeys—
whether going or coming—
from now until forever from now.

As a Diocese, we have changed. We have adapted to wearing masks and practicing social distancing. We have done so to fulfill the Great Commandment:

Mark 12:29-31 (Common English Bible translation)

²⁹ Jesus replied, "The most important one is Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord, ³⁰ and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength.³¹ The second is this, you will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these."

I am proud that our clergy have adapted to online worship and formation. God's people have gathered on Zoom, Facebook and YouTube. We found new ways to be God's people gathered. It has not been the same, but this virtual reality is going to be part of our common life long after the current Pandemic has passed.

God's people have continued to give to their churches. At the same time, the leaders of the Diocese and of congregations have reduced spending. Your Diocesan Council waived two months' assessment and the Diocesan Support Center cut all but the basic expenditures. Yet, we still responded as a Diocese to those needing help with technology and needed outreach initiatives.

We welcomed new clergy in the midst of stay at home orders. We have welcomed new members into the Church, and we have buried longtime members.

As your Bishop, I am proud of the way God's people have responded. There have been few complaints. I meet online with the clergy weekly for study. We have begun a deep conversation of racism in the Diocese and in Hawai'i. While it has been tiring, the clergy have been renewed by the response of you -- God's people -- to all that they have tried to continue in worship (either online or engaging safely in-person) and fellowship, by your generosity, and by your continued care of the hungry and the houseless. I am grateful to God that I have been with the people of this Diocese during these hard times.

As we look to 2021, we will not be the same. We will sing old songs in new ways. We will have to come to grips with old pain. We will have to grieve lost friends. We will have new ways of being God's people:

Psalm 96:1-4 (Common English Bible translation)

¹ Sing to the Lord a new song!

Sing to the Lord, all the earth!

² Sing to the Lord! Bless his name!

Share the news of his saving work every single day!

³ Declare God's glory among the nations;

declare his wondrous works among all people

⁴ because the Lord is great and so worthy of praise.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert L. Fitzpatrick". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

The Right Reverend Robert L. Fitzpatrick, Bishop Diocesan
The Episcopal Diocese of Hawai'i