

Bishop's Convention Sermon 2020

I think we all can agree that it is time for 2020 to be over. Yes, it is only late October, but I've had it with the pandemic and the election. Please no more hurricanes along the Gulf coast or stories about "killer hornets." I'm tired of illness and fear, of angry words and hate. I want to hold my granddaughter for the first time and play again on the beach with my grandson.

But it is only October. Yes, the election will be over soon and, hopefully, we can have a time of calm. There still, however, will be uncertainty and anxiety. The pandemic is still here and realistically it will continue for some months to come. Sometime in 2021, maybe we'll have some understanding of what our new regular life will be like. Maybe we can put away our masks and gather together again. Maybe we will be able to sing.

These past months have been difficult. Over 200,000 people have died due to COVID-19 in the United States alone. In our own Diocese, members have been lost to the pandemic.

But you and I are the followers of Jesus Christ. We know that this is life. Actually, 2020 has held no surprises. It has been focused for our generation, but for our ancestors this would have been a part of life.

In the lesson from Matthew today, Jesus warns the disciples, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." Suffering is part of life – especially for the Christian. As a matter of faith for us, suffering doesn't overwhelm us.

But what are we suffering? For most of us, it is certainly not suffering or a burden to wear a mask or practice social distancing. We do so as a duty to others. It is our small opportunity to live into the Great Commandment. Remember, Jesus is asked in Mark's Gospel (12:29-31): "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus replied, "The most important one is Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord, 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. The second is this, You will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these."

Many have and are suffering from the pandemic. Those who have been so ill that they have had to be hospitalized; those on ventilators; the medical staff members who have faced long hours with the sick and the dying; those who have lost jobs; those who are alone; and those who live in fear. Such suffering from the pandemic will not end with a vaccine but will be with us for some time to come.

The Black Lives Matter peaceful protests have reminded us of the general suffering of many due to racism. With it, we must be reminded of the displaced indigenous people of North America and of these islands. The twin sins of colonialism and racism have left suffering people in their wake for centuries. The violence of the riots and the white nationalist militias are the fruit of those sins. These are presenting sins of the nation. They are our responsibility to address.

How then does a Christian – more an Episcopalian in Hawai'i – respond to suffering? Suffering that is personal and suffering that is societal?

The lesson today from Exodus gives us the first hint: We belong to God. In the story, the children of Israel are just out of Egypt for a few months. Moses reports that God is confirming that these are his people: “This is what you should say to Jacob’s household and declare to the Israelites: You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to me. So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me. You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation. These are the words you should say to the Israelites.” Then people all responded with one voice: “Everything that the Lord has said we will do.” Now, we know that in the story that just isn’t quite what happened. The key to the story is voluntary ascent.

As Christians, we belong to God by our baptism. Remember the words in the prayer at Baptism: “We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” (BCP, pp. 306-307) And then after the Baptism, we welcome the newly baptized into the family: “We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.” (BCP, p. 308)

We face suffering because we belong to God. That relationship changes our behavior – no our very being.

In Psalm 115 we learn what those Israelite thought belonging to God’s family meant. Truly belonging to God, being allowed into God’s tent requires moral character and righteous action:

- ¹ Who can live in your tent, Lord?
Who can dwell on your holy mountain?
 - ² The person who
lives free of blame,
does what is right,
and speaks the truth sincerely;
 - ³ who does no damage with their talk,
does no harm to a friend,
doesn’t insult a neighbor;
 - ⁴ someone who despises
those who act wickedly,
but who honors those
who honor the Lord;
someone who keeps their promise even when it hurts;
 - ⁵ someone who doesn’t lend money with interest,
who won’t accept a bribe against any innocent person.
- Whoever does these things will never stumble.

You can't lie, talk stink, hurt others or charge interest on a loan, and get into God's tent.

For us as Episcopalians, the "required" behavior for being in God's family is summed up in the Baptismal Covenant. These are the basic requirements. The norms for the family, like taking off your shoes before entering the house. They come right after we affirm God in the words of the Apostles Creed.

What do we promise to do?

- TO: "continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers."
- TO: "persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord."
- TO: "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ."
- TO: "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself."
- TO: "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."

The first promise is key for me and needed to live out the other promises:

- Continue in
 - "The apostles' teaching and fellowship": Study the Bible and be part of a Christian community.
 - "The breaking of bread:" Take Holy Communion
 - "The prayers.": Personal prayer and praying with others. Talk to God (and, I think listen for God).

These are the practices that get us into God's tent. We don't have to do them all at once. They are the practices that form us to take up the other promises. They are the practices that allow us to live in a hurting world.

When we are challenged to take up our cross and follow Christ, we are not doing so by ourselves. We have the whole gathering of God's people – past and present – with us. We have the story of faith and the community. We have God in Jesus Christ.

It doesn't mean that the pain is less, but that burden is lightened. The suffering is temporary. We can be comforted that we are not in charge.

For us, it is all about Jesus Christ. We gather, we study Scripture, we celebrate the sacraments, we care for others, we protest injustice because of Christ. We have been allowed into God's tent and we know we are loved because we know God through Jesus. As Paul reminds us, in my favorite passage in the Bible from the Letter to the Romans, at the end of Chapter 8:

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us....

Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

As it is written,

We are being put to death all day long for your sake.

We are treated like sheep for slaughter.

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

So, we will get through 2020. We know some of us will fall ill of one thing or another. Some of us will likely die. The evils and the injustices of the world will still need to be peacefully, but forcefully challenged. Some will truly suffer.

We also will still be God's people. We will all we can to protect our neighbors. We will be allowed into the tent of God – remember, it's a tent and not a building. Through Christ Jesus, we are loved and know that all is well.

Gather with God's people to study the Bible and pray – in person or online as we must.

Take Holy Communion as you can.

Talk to God every day – and don't forget to listen.

Through it all, remember above all, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Let us pray.

Grant, Lord God, to all of us who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, that, as we have put away the old life of sin and now dwell in the Lord's tent, so we may be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and live in righteousness and true holiness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.