

"From the Bishop's Desk - Events of January 6, 2021"

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(Copied from the synod website.)

Dear Friends in Christ,

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This morning, clergy from Delaware-Maryland and Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synods gathered in prayer as protest at Luther Place Memorial Church in Washington, D.C. What began as a solemn, peaceful witness, was interrupted by self-identified Trump supporters who barged into the encircled sacred space held by those present. These individuals proceeded to re-enact the murder of George Floyd in our midst and took pictures in front of the Black Lives Matter sign and Martin Luther statue.

In the words of Bishop Bill Gohl of the Delaware-Maryland Synod, "This holy ground was desecrated by those who mocked our purpose and prayer, including a man dressed in a faux animal skin vest who made fun of quote, 'that n*gger George Floyd.' This is a surreal experience that our Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) colleagues know all too well. Kyrie eleison."

I am writing this as a Bishop who is Latina; as one who has experienced first-hand the sinful nature of racism and white supremacy throughout my entire life. As I stood with my colleagues and witnessed evil manifest right before my eyes, I was paralyzed. I was paralyzed by the audacity and the spirit of entitlement and pride. I was paralyzed by the utter inability to recognize the humanity in Black and Brown bodies to the point of mocking and re-enacting such a violent act.

Later, as we left the space and blessed Pastor Karen Brau, along with those who were staying in prayer locally throughout the night, we received word of protestors growing in number around the Capitol. I safely arrived home to the unfolding of utter chaos.

I am writing this as I watch the news and witness anarchy. Our democracy has never been perfect and what we are collectively experiencing is testing the resolve of our nation.

I honestly don't have the words in this moment, so I turn to the prophets of our past. The words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have been guiding me personally and professionally. In his sermon entitled, "Transformed Non-Conformist," inspired by Romans 12:2, Dr. King states:

In spite of [the] prevailing tendency to conform, we as Christians have a mandate to be nonconformists. The apostle Paul, who knew the inner realities of the Christian faith, counseled, 'Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your

mind.' We are called to be people of conviction, not conformity; of moral nobility, not social respectability. We are commanded to live differently and according to a higher loyalty.

The conviction and loyalty that we are called to as people of faith is to the Gospel. Dr. King continues, **"If the church of Jesus Christ is to regain once more it's power, message, and authentic reign, it must conform only to the demands of the Gospel."**

What we are witnessing today is a conviction of sorts and, some might argue that, the actions of the protestors in D.C. are an embodiment of their convictions. However, we must interrogate the convictions that inspire such actions, behaviors, and presence in the world.

As people of faith, we are called to conform only to the demands of the Gospel; demands that always bend towards justice. The demands of the Gospel never justify the killing of a community, of a body, of a spirit. The demands of the Gospel recognize humanity in each of God's beloved human creation. The demands of the Gospel require dignity and respect, for stranger, for neighbor, and for creation. The demands of the Gospel speak to life, and life abundant.

As the church of Jesus Christ, in this moment, you and I are called to "...stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. We are called to take up the whole armor of God so that we may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." - Ephesians 6:11-13.

I am in prayer with and for you, myself, and our nation and I ask that you join me. Look to hear from me and your church leaders in the coming days and weeks as we live into our call as the church of Jesus Christ, for such a time as this.

May God give us grace never to sell ourselves short;
Grace to conform only to the demands of the Gospel;
Grace to lean into life and life abundant;
And grace to stand firm in bold and boundless love.

In the name of the Triune God, the One who creates, liberates, and sustains us all. Amen.

Message from Bishop Leila Ortiz of January 15, 2021
(Transcribed from You Tube closed captions by Pr. Cathy)

Grace and peace to you all from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This week I met with various leaders throughout our church. Many shared that they were feeling a heightened sense of emotions, including an increase of fear, uncertainty, rage, deep sadness, and borderline despair. In these conversations and connections, it was clear that we are all struggling.

This reality alerted me to, and confirm the fact that, there is nothing we should hold onto more closely than the Gospel. A Gospel that gives us permission to tell the truth, to name a thing what it is. A Gospel that reminds us that no evil will ever have the last word.

This is not the first time that the church has been in the midst of utter chaos, destruction and crisis. Through it all, and in every age, the church has always remained the key presence of assurance that God has not and will not abandon God's beloved. The church has a long history of providing spaces and places of hope and healing. Spaces and places that are not restricted to buildings or structures. Spaces and places that are daily and consistently co-created with the holy.

I'm writing to you, I'm sharing this with you, with the hope and expectation that we will continue in the inheritance that we have received. An inheritance that is not defined by culture, color, gender, ability, class, or any other construct that has been used to divide us from one another. Rather, the inheritance we have received is one gifted to us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Dear friend, to be clear, we are church today, not because of what our ancestors have done or left undone. We are church today, because of the Holy Spirit's stubborn and persistent work in and through humanity and all of creation through us. I'm writing and I'm sharing this with you, because I'm convinced that we have been anointed by this powerful Holy Spirit, for such a time as this. I want us to cling to that promise, rather than be seduced by the spirit of fear, the spirit of despair, the spirit of hopelessness and insecurity.

I'm sharing this with you, because...we're not called to lean on what makes us most afraid. And, we are also not called to lean on false security or illusory hope in the midst of what is clearly a crisis in our nation. We are called to lean into this both/and moment. A moment that challenges us to wrestle within the tension.

On one hand, we are followers of Jesus who proclaim resurrection hope, and we acknowledge that we are living through one of the darkest times of our generation. On the one hand, or on the other hand, we are living through one of the most difficult seasons of our lives and ministries and in, even in this moment, you and I get to be the embodiment of the church of Jesus Christ. This embodied reality of wrestling with the both/and is our faithful response to the demands of the gospel.

In addition to the reminders of who we are as the people of God, I want to share recommendations related to safety for local congregations in the Washington, D.C. Synod....

In conclusion, it is not lost on me that today, January 15, 2021, is the birthday of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and, that the inauguration week coincides with the day our country remembers this prophetic leader.

As I shared last week, when my sighs (?) are too deep for words, I find grounding in the scriptures and in the wisdom of the saints before us. In light of the traumatic events of the past week and my deep sighs(?) searching for words, again, I return to Dr. King. I invite you to reflect on this expert excerpt from his sermon, "Love and Action," inspired by Luke 23-34.

Dr. King says,

Jesus eloquently affirmed from the cross a higher law. He knew that the old eye for an eye philosophy would leave everyone blind. He did not seek to overcome evil with evil. He overcame evil with good. Although crucified by hate, he responded with aggressive love.

What a magnificent lesson. Generations will rise and fall, men will continue to worship the god of revenge and bow before the altar of retaliation. But, ever and again, this noble lesson of calvary will be a nagging reminder that only goodness can drive out evil and only love can conquer hate.

As I reflect on these words, I am comforted in the midst of my own concern. For what lies ahead for us as a people, as a church, and as a nation. My personal tendency is to pull back and retreat from community and loved ones when I am hurt, perplexed and disappointed. However, the spirit has awoken me to the non-negotiable necessity of leaning into collective lament, of engaging community and of trusting the power of relationship and goodness to drive out fear.

I pray we dare believe that care for ourselves and those we've been entrusted to serve, is essential for our work ahead. I pray we dare believe we have indeed received the inheritance and anointing gifted to us by the power of the Holy Spirit for such a time as this. And I pray, I pray we dare believe the power, love, and the power of love in action. To conquer hate with God's help and in Jesus' name. Amen.