

Digging a Well

A whole lot seems to have changed since the last time I stood up in the pulpit, three weeks ago. The election of Donald Trump came as a shock to most people I know -and to give you a sense of who I run with, I am close to both democrats and republicans, most of whom were appalled by his words. Maybe that means I lived in a bubble, maybe it means I am hopelessly ideological. I like to think that Jesus said to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself, and that mandate came without qualifiers and without limitations.

Now that the election has passed, though, we've entered for what many of us is a period of great uncertainty. (We've realized of course that many people were already experiencing uncertainty, long before the election season). There is so much we don't know. How do we be the church in a period of uncertainty? How do we find and speak a language of truth in an era when the words of our leaders and much of our media are less trustworthy than ever?

It is a moment that is painful for some, and I realize hopeful for others. But this is also a moment of great learning. I have learned a lot in the past weeks about the pain and hopelessness that a great many people feel, in particular those in rural and postindustrial areas.

You know that my sabbatical took me to a number of cities, but I also travelled a lot of backroads in North Carolina. I saw that while North Carolina's cities were the places to be, the folks in the wide spaces between them who work to grow our food or who once had industry to rely on are growing increasingly hopeless. I am learning about how deep that pain is for those whose small communities are dying.

But I have also seen in the past few weeks that exploiting our darkest instincts as Americans – and by that I mean our deep systemic racism and our fear of the immigrant (even though are almost all of us immigrants) – is a frighteningly effective way to gain power.

What I have learned is that we have a lot of work to do.

What do we do next? That's the question I've heard over and over again. "I don't know what to do next..."

I hope I'm not frightening anybody by talking about uncertain times. If I'm raising your level of anxiety then you might not have been listening very closely to the gospel. No one knows the day or the hour, but it's coming. There will be two in

the field, one will be taken and one will be left. There will be two women grinding meal together, one taken and one left. Paul says that now is the time to wake from sleep, that salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers. Do you hear the urgency?

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of the new church year, and the message is one of urgency and immediacy but not one of certainty. I don't want to suggest that the election should be more important to us than the gospel, or that the gospel predicted the election, but there is these texts a call to wake up, to rouse from our sleep and with sobriety and integrity to pay attention to what is going on around us.

Certainty will not help us here because certainty is in a way the opposite of attentiveness. Certainty is a kind of arrogant sleepiness. We are living in a moment of incredible uncertainty that is for many very painful and even frightening, but if grounded in change and transformation and really listening to the voice of our neighbors, far and near, it can also be a very fruitful time. It's hard, but stay with the tension, because Jesus invites us to move towards the pain of others, not to do violence to it by labelling it or condescending to it or pretending that it isn't grounded on something real. If there is anything we have learned, there is a lot of pain in our nation. There are those who will exploit it for personal gain, and their toolbox includes a lot of appeals to certainty. That is not our path.

OK, I am certain of one thing: this is the work of a lifetime, and the next few years may well require of us a great deal. I am passionate about expanding prosperity beyond the bubble, but that has nothing to do with hateful speech or acts of violence or a return to the fantasy of a white America in which everything was just great. Reconciliation and justice must be rooted in truth, not fantasy, in maturity and growth, not nostalgia. Wisdom and truth may well be our vocation in the years to come. This work will demand of us courage, stamina, discipline, and love.

Courage, stamina, discipline, and love. These things are really not valued by our culture anymore other than at the hallmark level, but we're going to need them. In fact without all four of those qualities I worry that we are little more than empty vessels with strong opinions. Where do we as followers of Christ find these rich spiritual resources?

We're going to need to put deep, deep roots down that will sustain and nourish us for a long time. We're going to need to know where that deep well is that will give us the living water that can sustain us. Whether your path is one of dissent or

support or just humble service, you will need in these uncertain times to be deeply grounded in the presence of the holy spirit.

We will need prayer. But I am speaking about a particular kind of prayer, because I think that without courage, stamina, discipline and love, the seductions of apathy or despair may prove too strong for us.

Since we'll need to draw on the living water of faith, now would be a good time to either find a well, or to dig one. I'd like to suggest that a toolbox for digging that well can be found in the sacred practices of the Book of Common Prayer.

Our Anglican tradition unfurls before us three ways of praying and worshipping that teach and sustain us through the most uncertain times of our lives.¹ The waters will rage and foam, but the dailyness of our prayer give us the regular reminder that God is still God. These three rhythms of prayer interweave and make us who we are. First of course is the weekly Eucharist: we come each week to be strengthened and consecrated to do the work of the kingdom by the Holy Eucharist. We do this every week, because we need that kind of regular nourishment.

Second is the practice of daily prayer, and I want to encourage you to do that. In troubling times: don't give up on your prayer discipline. And if you don't have one: start one. Whether that's the daily office (and it comes in many forms, including a liturgy in our prayer book), or Forward Day by Day, some kind of regular, daily practice of intercession and scripture reading is the daily bread that we all need. I know how busy we are, but if you're wondering about how to actually start a prayer discipline, come talk to me.

The third mark of Anglican prayer reminds us of God's story and indeed binds our hearts to it: this is the liturgical calendar. That's what starts today, or rather, starts fresh today. We begin in Advent a walk through God's time, experienced in our time and in the flesh. This coming year, join me in keeping the feasts and the fasts. Light the Advent Candles. Bask in the light of Christmas. Share communion and King Cake with us on Epiphany in early January. Begin Lent with ashes on your forehead. Walk with Jesus through holy week. Celebrate joyfully in the season of Easter, wear red socks on Pentecost. Find your favorite Saint on the calendar and celebrate their day with a dinner party. Figure out your spouse's favorite saint, and do the same.

This is a pattern of worship and life that has taken shape over the better part of two thousand years. In times of uncertainty, we need a rhythm of life that is

grounded in God's sacred time, on a practice of keeping and marking time that transcends the fears and fantasies of our present moment.

In these sacred practices – in weekly Eucharist, daily prayer disciplines, and keeping the feasts and fasts of the year - we might not find much in the way of clarity or clear answers, but we will find the grounding that will enable us to survive uncertain times and indeed the vision to see God is in the midst of it all. This will change us.

It will give us courage, it will strengthen us, it will root our words and our actions and our whole lives in the love of God. Now is the time to send those roots deeper, to a place of holiness and nourishment deep beneath the surface of the world as it seems, to the groundwater of the world that God has created. Now is a time to dig a well of deep spiritual life, of discipline and integrity, of hopefulness and love.

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¹ Olsen, Derek, *Inwardly Digest: The Prayer Book as a Guide to a Spiritual Life.* Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 2016). 21