

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Easter 6 (C) ~ 25 May 2025  
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda  
Acts 16:9-15  
Psalm 67  
John 5:1-9

Loving God, may you give us your blessing,  
and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe of you, *Amen*.

It has been yet another challenging week to be a person of faith, my friends –  
certainly here in Washington.

(That is an understatement, if ever I have spoken one.)

We have been praying for the peoples of the Holy Land, and for an end to the  
most recent iteration of conflict there, for so long. But just as in the war in  
Ukraine, or the carnage in Haiti, and “all those places beset by violence,  
injustice, and instability,” after a while it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain  
the same level of passionate concern and outrage, long-term – unless we are  
affected, personally.

I promise you that there is no judgment in that statement; if there were, I would  
be implicating myself, as well.

How do we maintain the intensity of our prayers over the long-haul, especially  
when it appears as though nothing really changes?

Discouragement, and feelings of helplessness, begin to creep in, like thieves in  
the night, and erode our hope, bit by bit.

*What's the point?* We may start to wonder. *It's just all too much.*

I'm reminded of that story from Hebrew Scripture – I bet you know it – where the people of Israel are in battle, and Moses vows to stand at the top of the hill, overlooking the battle, with the staff of God in his hand. As long as Moses holds his arms in the air, they are victorious; but when he gets tired, and brings his hands down, they begin to lose. So Aaron and Hur bring a stone for him to sit on, and they support Moses's arms until the enemy is defeated.

It's quite a compelling image.

Sometimes prayer can feel that way – that it is emotionally and spiritually, if not physically, exhausting to be holding individuals and situations before God, day in and day out.

Sometimes we have to put our arms down, metaphorically.

And then the need for prayer hits closer to home.

This past Wednesday, our collective hearts were broken by the senseless hate-based shootings of two young adults coming out of the Capital Jewish Museum, not 30 minutes from here. A couple poised to do so much good in the world, committed to interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding. A couple about to become engaged, filled with hope and joy. The kind of people any of us would be proud to know and delighted to welcome into our fellowship here at St. Dunstan's – as they had been at another Episcopal parish in our own Diocese for the past few months.

Suddenly the gap between the Holy Land and Bethesda seems a whole lot narrower. In the “six degrees of separation” way in which we are all related here in this city, it's very possible that someone here may have known one or both of them – or knows someone who did.

Now the conflict has faces, and names.

And that cracks open our hearts in a whole new way. The immediacy, and the hyper-local nature, of the tragedy makes it real at a yet-deeper level.

Again – no judgment here. That’s how we’re wired as humans: We are impacted most profoundly by that person-to-person connection. I believe that is precisely why we need Jesus – God in our skin.

And so hope took a hit again this past week, just as it has every time we discover that we know yet another person whose life and livelihood have been impacted by the events in our country over the past four months.

It’s been a brutal time.

How, then, as people of faith, are we to keep going in this emotional and spiritual marathon? It’s no sprint, that’s for sure. How do we, like Moses, keep our arms in the air?

Where are we to find hope?

In the Catechism of the Episcopal Church, the section of the *Book of Common Prayer* that summarizes the basic teachings of the Episcopal Church, it asks the question,

*Q. What is the Christian hope?*

And the answer reads as follows:

*A. The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world (BCP, p. 861).*

As Christians, we are to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, awaiting Christ’s return and the promised completion of God’s purpose for the world.

That’s one tall order, folks.

Yet it's worth pausing to linger on the assignment for a moment now, because this is precisely how the Church has understood our mission since its earliest days. Theologians like to call this the "already and the not-yet": We have already seen and experienced the inbreaking of God's Kingdom with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, *and* we know that God's purpose for our world has not yet been brought to completion. The Kingdom has not been realized, fully – yet.

At least we hope not. It's difficult to imagine that God's fondest dream for us and for all of Creation is...this.

We know, all-too well, that we live in a fallen, imperfect world. No one has to remind us.

*And...* We cannot, we must not, give in to a sense of either complacency or despair. There is nothing that God's enemy wants more than for us to succumb to malaise. The stakes are simply too high for that.

As soon as we bring our arms down in exhaustion or defeat, that's when the enemy begins to win.

You may have noticed that the new Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Reverend Sean Rowe, talks a lot about the Kingdom of God. Bishop Sean wants to remind us, as St. Paul did before him in the Letter to the Romans, that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). Keeping our eye on the Kingdom means setting our current struggles in their larger context, pulling the camera lens back from the hyper-local closeup to the panoramic, "big picture" view.

In other words, we seek to understand the pain and the here-and-now brokenness of this time set against the backdrop of eternity.

This does *not* mean that the sufferings of this present time are not significant, or worth worrying about. They are not to be minimized, or ignored. On the contrary: The pain and the struggle of our world – here and now – are the battlefield on which our God is fighting for us.

As Bishop Rowe recently wrote to the Episcopal Church, “As Christians, we must be guided not by political vagaries, but by the sure and certain knowledge that the kingdom of God is revealed to us in the struggles of those on the margins.”<sup>1</sup>

It is God’s will, God’s purpose, that we and all of Creation be brought to completion, to “perfection,” to healing and reconciliation, understanding and peace, and new life. And nowhere is the need for the completion and healing more evident than in the sufferings of those who have the fewest resources, the least access, and the most diminished hope.

You and I can choose to cooperate with that healing work, to participate in the realization of God’s Kingdom here on earth, or we can get out of the way. But we must not stand as an obstacle, or a stumbling block, to God’s work in the world.

Last week, you may recall, I invited us to consider how we each sometimes hinders God’s purposes. We have a way of blocking God’s work in the world – consciously, or not.

Today’s Gospel holds up that same mirror to us again.

As we just heard, a certain man has been ill for 38 years, and he has come to the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem for healing. The pool there, called Beth-zatha in Hebrew (or *Bethesda* in Greek!), is known for its curative properties. Literally translated, it means the “house of mercy.” Some versions add that, from time to time, an angel would go down into the pool and stir up the water with its wings:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/letter-from-presiding-bishop-sean-rowe-on-episcopal-migration-ministries/>

Whoever stepped in first after the angelic visit would be made well in the waters of Bethesda.

And then here comes Jesus, Who asks,

*Do you want to be made well? Or, Do you want to be made whole?*

And the man replies:

*Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.*

To which Jesus responds,

*Stand up, take your mat and walk.*

And so he does.

End of story, right?

Not quite.

We may be tempted to romanticize this man “on the margins,” to decide that he is pure and noble in the face of struggle and *that* is what leads to his healing.

We tend to do that, don’t we? *Oh, those poor people in Haiti...or Africa...or, you name it: They are suffering so much, but they are so hopeful! They are so faithful!*

Maybe – but that kind of generalization about the marginalized only really serves to trivialize pain and struggle.

As we learn a bit later in John’s Gospel, upon leaving the pool, the healed man goes into the Temple, where he is confronted for carrying his mat on the Sabbath. He replies, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your mat and walk’” (John 5:11).

He doesn't even know Jesus's name! And John gives no indication that he thanks Jesus before shuffling off, mat in hand.

So maybe we're not meant to emulate his "faithfulness" or his "patient endurance."

What if we are meant to ask: *Where are all the other people who have been healed at Bethesda?*

Could not one of them, on returning from the pool, have lifted this man into the water?

Are they so focused on their own healing, on their own salvation, that they take no notice of this poor soul? Or, are they so concerned about being the first in the water after it bubbles that they just step over him?

Or are they so exhausted – physically, emotionally, and spiritually – from trying to help other people into the water that they just can't do it anymore?

We don't know – but we might wonder.

We might well say, *If it is God's will to bring each of us and all of Creation to healing and wholeness – whatever that looks like – then God's got this. Jesus can handle it. We've got enough to worry about.*

Maybe.

But: Having seen and witnessed and experienced the inbreaking of God's Kingdom, God's mission of love and reconciliation, firsthand, why *wouldn't* we want to do all in our power to help bring that Kingdom to fruition?

If we are too tired or despondent or beaten down to drag others into the healing waters ourselves, so to speak, then what about supporting and caring for those

who *are* continuing to do that work – around the world, around the country, and in our own community?

How about “holding up the arms” of those who are doing their best to navigate these incredibly challenging times in faith and hope? How about holding them in prayer?

How about not getting in the way of God’s healing purposes by defaulting to criticism and blame and division?

We are all tired, my friends. I know that, and I own it about myself. But this is a marathon, and not a sprint, and we must not give in to a sense of either complacency or despair. There is nothing that God’s enemy wants more than for us to succumb to malaise. The stakes are simply too high for that.

As always, the preacher speaks to herself, too. *Amen.*