

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring
Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:21-28
August 30, 2020



I've been thinking lately about a question posed to a group of church leaders from across America that I was on a call with this week. Each of us have our particular contexts and challenges, yet we share in common this same pandemic reality that gave the question posed its edge: are we preparing for requiem or renaissance?

As is most often the case with these sort of things, it is a false dichotomy, and anyone on that call, each seasoned in the life of ordained ministry, would answer that it is always both, and: requiem and renaissance.

There are things we have lost, aren't there? On this Sunday when following this service we will hold our annual Parish Meeting and take stock of our life as a church, I am struck more than any other time in my years of ordained life at how bereft the church is without a lively and loving connection to its people. We have lost each other, not completely of course, but O how strange and empty this beautiful church building is without you this morning. We have lost those courtyard conversations after services, those bonds of affection, the signs of the joy and care that we find in one another. I knew I was in for the ride of my life my first Sunday at All Saints' now a little over three years ago, when my family and I struggled to find a seat at the parish picnic. 'Get into the crowd...with the rest of us' was what I felt was being said to me, and how keenly I miss that crowd, how keenly I miss you, today.

Requiem, though, has run much deeper than the absence of regular church life, hasn't it? From the iconic losses such as our own Congressman, John Lewis, to the personal, we, along with so many cities, towns and villages across this nation, have felt the absence of those who have gone on to glory. Some of you have felt that loss for yourselves, and others of you have been at the forefront among those who care and lead as medical practitioners and public health professionals, as teachers and care-givers of all sorts. Some of us have said goodbye to those we love, masked and in the room, or on the phone or on a screen and at a distance. And that has been a loss all of its own.

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Beyond all of this, yet intertwined within it, has been a whole raft of other concerns for our hearts to find room for. As the weeks and months of this pandemic have passed, patterns have emerged that have seen the poor, the domestically crowded, the already sick, the multiply disadvantaged falling victim to a virus in disproportionate numbers. The vast inequities in healthcare provision and educational opportunity in our country today, neighborhood to neighborhood, urban to rural, have been laid bare in terms that can hardly be starker, as we count our dead.

Yet at the nexus of all of this has been America's great unfinished business with regards to race. George Floyd, Breana Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Jacob Blake have become more than names; they have become embodied monuments, yawning gaps of grief and loss through which all manner of life has passed by. We have witnessed a requiem to be sure, with lament after lament: those who lament unarmed black men and women killed by police; those who lament damage done to businesses and violent encounters on our streets; those who lament the rule of law, so take it into their own hands like a teenage boy running down a city street discharging a military weapon; and those who lament the rule of law, and so take to the streets to protest its absence.

As we take stock of our life as a church, this is not the year to be tuned-out from the events of the world. This is a year when we have to tune-in and ask where we are in this maelstrom? Requiem or renaissance?

In many ways, this was Moses' question too, and not an easy one to answer. Even at his young age, his life's context, much like ours, was already a very confused picture. A Hebrew by birth raised by the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter, dwelling among a people who were not his own. A murderer who fled his own reckoning with justice. All set within the Hebrew's more than 400 years of enslavement at the hands of the Egyptians. As Moses encounters the LORD in the burning bush the challenge could not have been more profound: go to that from which you have fled and proclaim life. Out of requiem, out of the groans that God has heard high in the heavens, go and pronounce that it is time for renaissance, time for a new birth.

It would be tempting merely to portray this as a simple shift of gears - for the ancient Israelites or for us. But we can't just choose rebirth and then live into it left to our own devices. As Moses' mountain top conversation with God at its most basic level implies, rebirth requires sharing common ground. It requires the company of others.

Furthermore, in the part of the story read to us this morning we hear the essential first element that makes sharing common ground possible: that Moses makes a choice, to come aside and see this burning bush for himself. And so, what becomes a nation's defining narrative – the exodus – begins with the entirely personal. I believe that it is exactly the same for us.

For me, these past few months have been a personal sort of epiphany, a series of burning bush kind of moments. Something about them has penetrated my interior. You may have felt the same. I don't truly know why. But I do know how clearly it feels: that a door has opened, and that God is in the midst of that opening, not at all in causing these losses of life but in helping me, and I believe others, see the world with new eyes.

While the murder of George Floyd and the events that followed it have felt to me like an opening act of a desperately needed reckoning with our past, in all honesty, cognizant of the swirling discord that any conversation about race has in America today, I have wondered, a bit like Moses, 'What shall I say to them?' 'What shall I say to you?', the parish of All Saints' Episcopal Church.

Truth be told, I don't know. I don't have the right wording available to me, the right combination of thoughts and feelings that I can be sure will somehow open a way for you yourself to come aside and linger on the same ground with others and talk about where we really are as a parish, as people of faith, with regards to race. I don't have the perfect answer for how we as a church might learn in this most polarized of times how to listen to one another, well enough and long enough to truly hear one another. I do know, however, that this is our time to be a community which faithfully seeks to remember who we have been and summon the courage to offer to one another who we wish to become.

Church is where these sort of soulful conversations belong. It doesn't matter whether you get your news on FOX or on MSNBC, nor which way you are leaning in the upcoming election, because we truly won't make any progress with ourselves unless we claim the common ground that already belongs to us. That we are a people of communion. Of one bread and one cup. That we are a people not constituted by being one side or the other of any particular issue, but by our belonging to each other in Christ.

In the years gone by in this church, predecessors of mine have stood in this pulpit and invited this parish to expand the definition of who we love. When Milton Wood and Frank Ross were asked whether or not black men, women and children should be welcomed at All Saints' they responded by saying that that particular question had been settled 2,000 years ago. When the nation was gripped by fear because of another deadly virus, AIDS, it was this parish, it was you who opened the doors of this church to host the funerals of loved ones lost, and to extend the care of this community to the hurts others could not find room to care for. While people protested on the streets of this country for marriage equality, for equity and freedom for people of all sexual orientations and identities, and for the rights and liberty of refugees, All Saints' dug deep into its gospel values, found shared ground to hear what fellow parishioners felt, and remained a church in and for this city in all of its diversity.

The invitation that is clearly before us as a country today to have a long overdue, explicit, ongoing, truth-telling and soul-searching conversation about race is an invitation to help us once more expand our understanding of the neighbor we are called to love. I invite you to be part of it and see for yourself the bush of racial justice and healing that is burning so brightly in our midst.

In the spirit of that invitation, I will share that in this program year ahead, we will come aside as a parish to meet one another on the holy ground of racial equity and healing. To that end, a steering committee of fellow saints has agreed to discern with me what our mission might be to contribute to Atlanta's striving for racial equity and healing. In that effort, black leaders in our city will offer us their insights and vision, in recognition that this is a time when we need a wider circle of belonging, a wider lens to help us see what is so hard for us to discern alone.

While this goes on, your vestry and staff will undertake a year of leadership development, equipping us to help guide this church in the years ahead in becoming a more diverse and awake community of faith in this city.

Throughout the year, you will hear preachers and teachers, artists and change-makers from across the black communities of Atlanta, in this pulpit, in our virtual gathering spaces for formation and spiritual nourishment, and I hope, most profoundly, in the inner lives of your hearts. Because in all of this, you will be invited to see where your life might have an opening to engage in these opportunities for discovery and growth in ways that are loving, and respectful, and true to the life we know as a church.

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In sharing all of this, I want you to know that I don't extend this invitation to you from any place of advancement on this journey. I extend it as one whose sins are ever before him. I am in need of finding those openings for grace and transformation, too. I have neglected to see just how much pain, black and brown people have endured in this country, and indeed in our world. I have left unaddressed what I need to change about my own life and how I see myself within the world God has made. I know that I cannot be the author of my own salvation, but I also trust that in the company of others I will come to know myself better than I do today.

Years ago, as the parish wondered whether it had the capacity to care for men struggling with addiction and homelessness, a beloved member of this church commented that while All Saints' cannot do it, All Saints' must do it. Thirty plus years later that conviction lives on in the witness and extraordinary ministry of Covenant Community, still here on this very block.

We are beckoned to a burning fire, to something that will be hard yet illuminating for us in ways we cannot even imagine. I ask you to meet one another there, on holy ground, the very place of God's becoming in us, trusting that at the last, God will make all things new.

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