

January 10, 2021
First Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
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Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84
Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a
Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

This has been a tough week. I don't know about you, but I feel sad and tired.

I saw on Facebook that some of my fellow clergy sent missives to their congregations about Wednesday's events. I wondered whether I was supposed to do the same. But I couldn't think of anything new to say. To be honest, I struggled to think of anything new to say today. So let me begin by sharing some words from Yale history professor Timothy Snyder. He is an expert on authoritarianism and the growth of authoritarian regimes. Writing in *The New York Times* yesterday, he addressed the lie of the stolen election with these words:

On the surface, a conspiracy theory makes its victim look strong: It sees Trump as resisting the Democrats, the Republicans, the Deep State, the pedophiles, the Satanists. More profoundly, however, it inverts the position of the strong and the weak. Trump's focus on alleged "irregularities" and "contested states" comes down to cities where Black people live and vote. At bottom, the fantasy of fraud is that of a crime committed by Black people against white people.

Watching white supremacists among the people storming the Capitol, it was easy to yield to the feeling that something pure had been violated. It might be better to see the episode as part of a long American argument about who deserves representation.¹

In short, the takeover of the Capitol Building has provided another particularly painful bundle of evidence of something we've talked about before, which is this: the evil of white Christian nationalism is alive and well in our nation. I'll add this: that lightly sleeping dog was easily whistled to heel by the self-serving opportunist currently occupying the White House.

Considering recent events, Wednesday's march to the Capitol Building was *not* surprising. But the extent of its "success" in actually occupying the building was *quite* surprising. Perhaps we should be used to it by now; for four years, we have been less surprised by the extremes that have been *attempted*, and more surprised by the degree of *success*, success for which Conservative Christians have helped pave the way. I'm speaking bluntly today. Maybe that's because other mainliners are doing so as well. On Friday I opened Facebook to discover that the National Council of Churches had issued what it titled "Open Letter to Vice President Pence, Members of Congress, and the Cabinet Calling for the Removal of President Trump from Office."

Over the last four years, we've seen a lot of things we never thought we'd see; add this to the list. Here's part of what it said:

President Donald J. Trump's actions and words have endangered the security of the country and its institutions of government by inciting a violent, deadly, seditious mob attack at the U.S. Capitol. His words and actions have placed the lives of the people he is supposed to serve in grave danger to advance his own interests. Further, he not only failed to stop or condemn the attack after the Capitol had been stormed but instead encouraged the mob by calling them patriots. ...

For the good of the nation, so that we might end the current horror and prepare the way for binding up the nation's wounds, we, as leaders of the member communions of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC), believe the time has come for the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, to resign his position immediately. If he is unwilling to resign, we urge you to exercise the options provided by our democratic system.

In addition, we recognize the need to hold responsible not only those who invaded the Capitol, but also those who supported and/or promoted the President's false claims about the election, or made their own false accusations.²

The signers of this letter included leaders of important ecumenical partner churches, including, among others, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Own Presiding Bishop Michael Curry also signed it.

We'd rightly like to distance ourselves from the Christians who were at the Capitol on Wednesday. I can't even imagine how they read and interpret the Gospels so as to justify their beliefs and actions. I don't really care to. Still, we shouldn't look away. If nothing else, they stand as a clear if horrible evidence that the Christian tradition remains polluted with centuries of anti-Blackness and anti-Semitism. That is an uncomfortable and inconvenient and important truth.

And so is this: any surprise I experience about events of last week, or about events of the last four years, is really just another example of my own privilege. In ways small and large, I continue to benefit from and even to perpetuate the racist systems that have harmed so many. Sadness is a small price to pay for the removal of another layer of scales from my eyes.

Speaking of removal of scales, this week felt rather as if the liturgical calendar had turned backward, and we had returned to the apocalyptic revealing with which we edge into Advent. But no. Wednesday's violence took place on the Feast of the Epiphany, the day we observe the first manifestation of Jesus' divinity, to those wise men following a star. It's a day of celebration, but that story that has a terrible side. Remember, the wise men first consult with the lying King Herod, and then they subvert him: rather than return to tell Herod Jesus' location, they leave "for their own country by another road," and thereby protect Baby Jesus from Herod's murderous subsequent directive.

Today, though, the First Sunday after the Epiphany, is marked on the church calendar for the observance of the Baptism of the Lord. That protected Baby Jesus has been able to grow into adulthood. Rather than supplying a star, God pronounces Jesus' divinity: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In Baptism, we are said to be reborn in Christ. This week, I thought a lot about those Christians at the Capitol whose baptism we share.

Some days I wonder whether it wouldn't be best to give up, walk away, and let *those* Christians have Christianity. I tried that as a young adult. But God called me back in a way so stealthy that I still don't know quite what happened. Surprises aren't all bad. Now I'm the hired hand, but none of you has any obligation to be here today. And so it seems that God called you back, too. God *is* reconciling and redeeming the world. God continually invites us into the mystery of Godself. The only fruitful response is to live lives of faith that we try to make ever more true to the path that Jesus laid out so very clearly. That's what Bishop Curry calls the Way of Love.

The Baptism of the Lord is considered to be an especially appropriate day for Holy Baptism. Even if there are no baptisms, the Renewal of Baptismal vows may replace the Nicene Creed. And so we'll renew our baptismal vows in just a moment. I encourage you to spend some time today pondering those vows and the Way of Love into which you were anointed through baptism. You might find both *consolation* and *encouragement*, both of which we all need in abundance for these tough times. We have long-delayed work to do, work that really amounts to progress along the Way of Love, and which has the capacity to bring surprising joy.

On Friday, Bishop Curry released a videotaped address. In it, he holds up as the example of the Way of Love the reconciliation modeled by Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. After that, he makes his ask of us. That's where I'll start and then play the end of the video, giving Bishop Curry the last word.³ [*Play video beginning at 11:35.*]

Notes

¹ Timothy Snyder, "The American Abyss," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2021, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/magazine/trump-coup.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage> (accessed January 10, 2021).

² National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, "Open Letter to Vice President Pence, Members of Congress, and the Cabinet Calling for the Removal of President Trump from Office," available at <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/open-letter-to-vice-president-pence-members-of-congress-and-the-cabinet-calling-for-the-removal-of-president-trump-from-office/> (accessed January 10, 2021).

³ Michael Curry, "A Word to the Church: Who Shall We Be?," January 8, 2021, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGnda1eid48> (accessed January 10, 2021).