

These Stories, Your Stories, God's Stories
 November 22, 2020
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 Ephesians 1:15-23, and Ephesians 3:20,21
 Preaching in the Age of COVID-19

So, what are you waiting for? Time is nigh. The end draws near. Now. Now we are called to be who we are. Look in the mirror. What do you want? Hope. Hope. Hope. We long to be filled with hope. And all we can see is that winter is near. Who? Who do you long to be? Where? Where is God? Where is the Holy of Holies?

When will we know, what we need to know, to be who we long to be? Why are we hesitant now, on the precipice, the edge? How, almighty one, will any of this change? How will we know when we are seeing you?

This is what I've been thinking and praying in this liminal time, this time between time, from moment to moment, in the pauses in between. We wait for an election to be certified. We wait for a virus cloud to end. The days grows shorter, the nights are colder, we complete our season of ordinary time and turn toward Advent, something new, that we've known before, but perhaps will see again for the very first time. It's on the horizon; lodged just on the edge, the line in the distance where the sun cracks into light. We are poised in this moment, in this time. Now. Now. Now. Between dark and light. Night and day.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians, wrote to the people of a faith community in a city in Greece in a time somewhat like our own. The author, most likely a disciple of Paul's offers them a clear direction for how they may regain their sense of hope, holiness and wholeness. In the midst of trying, polarizing times, when false doctrines and teachings threaten to divide and break apart their communities of faith, (The Women's Bible Commentary, pp 338-339, 1992), the author of Ephesians writes,

"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...
 will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation...
 I pray that the eyes of your heart
 will have enough light to see,
 what is the hope of God's call,
 and the greatness of God's power
 that is working among us..." Ephesians 1:17-19

My paraphrase of these words: I pray that you will feel God's hand, even now, that you will know what God can do.

When we are faced with stilted Thanksgivings and muted Christmases. Vacant holes where once was: anticipated trips, twinkling gatherings and abundant feasting. We are left with the decisions to stay home, try to stay safe, and find some joy in yet another

God-forsaken zoom call. In our country where we are still being pummeled by an election yet unsettled, and those of us in Wayne County, find ourselves with the disturbing possibility that Jim Crow voter suppression is rearing its ugly head and our choice, our votes, will not be counted.

We are in a time, more than ever, in need of a word from our God.

I want to tell you, I have heard that word. I have seen that word. Over and over again these last few months I have been gathering with our congregations, meeting over zoom with our communities and in each gathering I begin with this question. "In the midst of your time with this community of faith, can you tell me of a time when you had an experience of the Holy, can you share a moment of time when you felt God's presence?"

And after a pause, to give the introverts among us time to think, people begin to share. People, you all, begin to tell me and everyone else on the call a moment when you knew God. When you felt God's presence. When you knew of the greatness of God's power working among us.

These stories, your stories, touch my soul and fill my heart. Let me offer to you now just a few of the sacred moments I have heard.

There was a woman who had unexpectedly lost her husband. She was awash with grief and pain and loneliness. She found herself at a retreat at her church, the rector invited the people to wander in the pews of the sanctuary as if it were a labyrinth, and at a certain moment the rector would ask the people to stop. The woman filled with grief, heard the invitation to stop and there, looked up and found herself looking at the cross, the crucifix by the altar and it was then that she felt God wash over her and she knew, she would be ok. Still sad. But ok. Not alone.

Another family, described a time, when their grandson had a renaming ceremony marking his transition from one gender to another. As a part of that liturgy, the rector invited the people in the congregation who supported this young person in their journey, to please stand. And the granddad, standing there with his grandchild, turned around and saw his entire church community standing in affirmation and support. He said, then, then I felt the power of God, washing over us, such acceptance, such love.

A parishioner described the Holy transformation she had while participating in a congregational book study on *White Fragility*. She said she was completely blown away by the distinction between her intent and her impact on people of color. I heard her say, "It just changed everything for me."

There are literally hundreds more stories like these. It is my profound honor to hear these stories, your stories, for they, touch my soul, fill my heart and offer me hope, holiness and wholeness.

Your stories, our stories, the stories of our congregation's lives. When I hear them I remember again, that we are not, and never have been in this alone. Through your stories, I remember in the marrow of my bones what the author of Ephesians wrote O so long ago:

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. (Ephesians 3:20, 21.)

My friends, our hope is in the Name of the Lord. The Maker of Heaven and Earth From this time forth and forever more.

Amen.