

2021 Jan 10 Rev. Sara M. Holland Sermon

Scripture: Psalm 29 & Acts 19:1-7

Title: “Into What Then?”

Theme: 1st Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of Christ Sunday, New Members

Intro:

We read in Acts that Paul passed through Corinth – this is around central to southern Greece, a bit west of Athens. In moving on from Corinth, Paul passes through the Aegean Sea to get to Ephesus or modern day Selcuk, Turkey. In looking at images of the Aegean Sea, it is easy to imagine that Paul might’ve felt God’s Spirit move during his travels. And arriving in Ephesus, a city that feels wonderous to this day, even though it is now an archaeological site, it is again somewhat easy to imagine how he felt God’s spirit move. See Ephesus has a wonder about it – the structures there are powerful, even now as remains. *(cats?)* In the distance from Ephesus, mountains surround in an awe-inspiring way. It is not surprising that Paul was ready to preach! Paul starts discussing Holy Spirit and asking about who has received Holy Spirit. Those he encounters say: “We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul replies: “Into what then were you baptized?”

Into what then were you baptized? Into what then were we born? In what now do we live? In the short note I sent our community this week I mentioned that while some of us were unable to look away from the reality of the situation on Wednesday others of us had to turn off our screens and our radios to simply land in a space of self-preservation and resilience. I fall into the latter of the two categories. As I listened to the real time stories of violence my mind and heart had no place to go. Whether we look on with horror or we turn off our devices, the truth remains that there are hardly words to describe the depth of hurt that we feel when such a violent and senseless act is committed. While we already have grief from the loss of life as a result of a global pandemic, we witness death to a gun from a situation that lacks reason or clarity.

And for us Christians, especially those of us who have joined institutions, we start to think about the big questions which some of us have answers to and others of us just let hang with mystery:

If God is almighty then why is there suffering?

Is God present in the face of violence and if so, how?

How do I respond to this situation as a Christian?

How do we respond to this situation as a Church?

Again, many of us are able to let these question drift in the air and settle in the clouds in which we imagine the Holy Spirit dwells but so many of us are tormented by these questions. Our faith becomes shaken as we might relive an event of the past which feels similar. We are left shaking our head as we try to sleep: Where are you God? Into what then have we been born?

We read in the Psalm that the voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl – we are reading here of God’s might. And yet, we want God to show up the way a mom defends her child from a dangerous situation.

Weeks like these are the ones that even those of us who love mystery start to long for a divine clarity which we sometimes struggle to name.

This psalm is the spelling out of a great theophany or a divine appearance. God’s voice over the waters, God is thunder, God’s voice breaks the cedars and shakes the entirety of the wilderness. Into what then, have we been born? Have we been born into a fully different world than what our parents or grandparents imagined for us? Have we come into a world of only self-reliance and disregard for neighbor? Perhaps that is what it feels like for you today. All or most of what you had hoped for in our country, in our world is disappearing. We start to feel separate from our faith identity because the world around us is so tattered and worn.

In reading Acts today, we begin to wonder how the disciples Paul encountered might have also felt separate from their belief. I was lucky enough to be able to travel to ancient

Ephesus, modern day Selcuk, Turkey about 6 years ago. I have to admit that in some ways it was difficult for me to imagine Paul walking around the historic site as someone who loves cats - see there are many cats walking around the site of Ancient Ephesus. I know, that is silly, I know. . . I overcame this small barrier in closing my eyes and working to imagine Paul, on the very grounds of rubble and grass that I and my classmates stood.

I walked over to the long rectangular space that was once a portico of sorts - the remnants of the stone are still there. Some of the columns in fact.

7 mins 15 seconds

As I had closed my eyes and walked slowly with my eyes barely opened, I sensed this spirit that must've moved with Paul as he walked. I sensed his deep desire to share this spirit with the people he encountered. And Paul, of course, was existing in places that were controlled by the Greco-Roman state. People were to bow to individuals rather than to God. And Paul had this good news to bring to these people who were struggling Christ followers. He was bringing a word about what it meant, what it means to follow Jesus.

Paul outstretches his arm and Holy Spirit moves in the moment. All at once, in Paul's actions - a ritual, the disciples were given opportunity to relearn the meaning of baptism, like relearning the meaning of membership. These parts of our institution mean more than membership or certificates - these rituals of joining and belovedness are indicative of a deep call to the presence that God will provide all people - a spirit. Holy Spirit. As I believe I have mentioned before, one of the Greek phrases to describe Holy Spirit is paraclete.

Paraclete means advocate, guide, sometimes especially in financial or law-related situations.

When we are baptized, when we join communities like these, we say yes to having a great Advocate. We remind ourselves of what we are born into. We remind ourselves the way that we most belong. For baptism, of course the water is an important symbol and the God parents matter, the person presiding, that matters too but what is truly critical is the Advocate, our Advocate, Holy Spirit.

See Holy Spirit will be beside us as we struggle during this chaos. Holy Spirit will join us as we turn off our TVs and our radios and hang our heads, sometimes, a deep and painful resignation. And Holy Spirit, *God's* Holy Spirit is what will move us to action and word in the ways that we are able to be moved. We are not only welcomed by the waters of baptism and the air fives of Christian love, we are welcomed by a Spirit that will never, no never be defeated by fear or hatred.

Into What then are baptized? Into what then do we come as people seeking on a Christian Path? Into What?

A hope, a truth: a God who came and sat beside the people who were pushed to the side and pushed to the side and pushed to the side.

This week some of us thought of the black, indigenous and people of color who protested last summer. We thought of them as we watched or after we watched the chaos at the capitol. We noticed the stark contrast between police response this past week and police response to protests last summer after years and years and years of unlawful deaths of black folks at the hands of government officials.

Some of us name disbelief as we exist in a false sense of the American dream which, by all factual accounts, has yet to be realized.

Some of us laugh angrily with assertions like, "I knew this was going to happen."

Some of us simply state sadly: "But I, too, am a patriot."

And some of us sympathize with the white supremacy that was made so clear.

From each of these points of relative cynicism, anger, sadness and ignorance, we separate ourselves from our neighbors.

In the first case, we have fallen into the trap of ignoring the pains that already existed for those most vulnerable. In the second, we rank ourselves above other advocates and allies, ignoring God's call to be humble. In the third, we forget the notion of reclaiming a term for ourselves. And in the fourth, we fall prey to the lies that we, as white people, have somehow been disenfranchised there are no numbers in our country, or even the world to support such a claim.

On this baptism of Christ Sunday, we must make space for a great theophany and name God in the face of this discord and fear. We must not just join a community - we must name that we will exist with our neighbors, peacefully. We must take our anger and let God make it righteous. We must take our cynicism and let the great potter shape it into an ideal vision. We must take our own white fragility and cease some of our talking. It is time for us to listen, listen and then act and act and move hills and then mountains for the efforts of racial justice. For this is what The Advocate placed in the actions of Jesus. As our ancestors have proclaimed - it is time that justice flows as the greatest and mightiest of rivers. And into this river, I pray that we each be born this day.