



“We Will Continue” Paper Contest Winning Submissions

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[October 11, 2021] The "We Will Continue" Panel of Readers announces essay contest winners, following the call for papers issued to the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas by the Rt. Rev. David Reed in June:

1st Place: the Rev. Brian Fox of St. Helena's Episcopal Church in Boerne for "Levity as Resistance: Finding Safety In Suffering With Julian of Norwich"

2nd Place: Catherine Spainhour of Epiphany Episcopal Church in Kingsville and Grace Episcopal Church in Georgetown for "Focus on the Good"

Honorable Mention:

The Rev. Patrick Gahan, "Viral Love"

The Rev. Tom Turner, "Adaptation"

Bryan Gonzalez, "Red Doors For Justice"

Marjorie George, Carla Pineda, and the Rev. Patricia Riggins, "Harvesting A Lifetime: Deepening Our Spiritual Journey"

In the call for papers, Bishop Reed stated, "This request is another opportunity for us to speak and listen to one another across the Diocese of West Texas, to reflect theologically and practically on what we have lost and found during this season as well as consider ways the Church can live faithfully in the coming years...guided by the questions of the Baptismal Covenant."

The Panel of Readers was served by five members of the diocese, led by the Rev. Alex Holloway and including the Rev. Dr. Canon Ann Normand, Daniel Jaime, the Rev. Ram Lopez, and Raymond Reynosa.

Levity as Resistance: Finding safety in suffering with Julian of Norwich

THE REV. BRIAN F. FOX

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*"Will you **persevere** in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?" (Book of Common Prayer, pg. 304)*

"All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." This well-known saying of the 14th-century English mystic, Julian of Norwich, may seem trite at a first glance — but in truth, it captures the radical defiance of Julian's writings. Julian received a divine revelation from God, and recorded her visions in a text titled *Revelations of Divine Love* (the first known book written by a female author in English). I was introduced to Julian's work through Amy Laura Hall's book *Laughing at the Devil*, and while reading the latter in lockdown last year I was struck by the way Julian's circumstances mirrored our own. Writing in the aftermath of a deadly plague for a world gripped by unjust social systems, Julian's reflections cast a vision for resisting evil. Amid a world where things are certainly *not* well, Julian boldly proclaims that all shall be well. In the face of suffering, she laughs at the devil knowing that the all-loving grace of God will overcome. As we persevere in defying the forces of evil in our own time, Julian reminds us that levity can lend us strength. When we see God clearly, we can undertake the holy work of resistance with light hearts and high spirits.

Julian's visions are timely, rooted in her experience of 14th-century England. Europe was still picking through the aftermath of a devastating pandemic. ¹ The great plague had swept the continent, both highly dangerous and highly contagious, and it harmed more than just physical bodies. Fear and confusion spread as quickly as sickness, and communities suffered from deep psychic trauma. It was not just the loss of life, but the loss of life as people knew it — the loss of fellowship, trust, security, hope. The plague even impeded the sacramental life of the Church, as

clergy who gave last rites would soon become casualties themselves. With no clergy available or willing to visit the sick on their deathbed, many people died without final absolution — a damning fate in the popular theology of the day. The devastating effects of the plague lingered beyond the immediate pandemic, as communities lived in fear of residual outbreaks and struggled to grieve the profound loss of life and opportunity. In turn, the plague had also laid bare the inadequacies and injustices of the medieval social hierarchy. Authority figures shirked their responsibilities. Apocalyptic fear turned people towards self-dependence rather than mutual support. The rigid social hierarchy ranked some lives as more valuable than others, and the disenfranchised were painfully aware of how they had been denied a seat at the table (and even in churches, a seat at the Lord's Table). Into this tumultuous world, Julian envisions a reality where God's goodness — not earthly misery — has the last laugh.

Julian's visions are timely: they speak to our own present circumstances. We are picking our way through the wreckage of a global pandemic, nursing sicknesses of body and soul, painfully aware of grave social injustices that were entrenched long before the first COVID cases. Like Julian, our baptismal vows call us to persevere in the face of such overwhelming suffering — a calling that often feels like an impossible task. Amy Laura Hall writes,

“A reasonable response to the manifold traumas around [Julian]... would have been precisely to catch a contagion of terror... [but] rather than viewing the world around her as filled to the brim with misery, she saw miracles and resilient safety. She did not deny that there was a fiend to be conquered. She did not pretend the world was simple. The Devil is a no-thing, but that does not mean Julian denied the evil around her. Because of this her laughter is all the more powerful an antidote to a religion of fear.”²

In her vision, Julian describes the contagious laughter she experiences in the presence of Jesus, as all those gathered around him laugh and cheer because the Devil has been conquered. This defiant laughter does not deny the reality of suffering, but instead resists despair. Julian sketches the balance that Christians ought to hold in order to persevere in resisting evil. On the one hand, we must be honest about the evil we find lurking in our world (how can we resist evil if we cannot name it?). On the other hand, we must approach that evil with hope — rejoicing in the triumph of Christ over evil and death. As we stumble on towards a post-COVID world, Julian’s visions invite us to laugh at the Devil along with her.

Laughter is a powerful force in Christian theology. There is an old, anecdotal church tradition known as the “Easter laugh”. It describes Easter as a season for telling jokes, recognizing that God has made a laughingstock of death and the Devil. The resurrection is an occasion for rejoicing, for feelings of light-heartedness as we sense the heavy weight of the grave being lifted. Another English writer, G.K. Chesterton, describes it like this: “Moderate strength is shown in violence. Supreme strength is shown in levity.”³ Resisting evil is serious work, but we can undertake it with a spirit of levity. Our lightheartedness becomes an act of defiance, a persistent joy rooted in the certainty of God’s great power working for us. No matter how grim the world may seem, we can refuse to be brought low. This levity gives us not only power, but energy. It is hard to sustain the holy work of resisting evil and death. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly illustrated that fact: we felt the exhausting influence of pandemic fatigue, as our vigilance slipped and our attention spans grew shorter. But levity, laughter, light-heartedness; these keep our spirits high and help us persevere for the long haul. A theological posture of joy, even in the face of suffering and misery, is not cheap optimism. It is resistance, a stubborn

refusal to succumb to despair and a persistent conviction that God’s saving promises will ring true.

This spirit of levity helps us handle not only the pressures of an unwell world, but the challenges of living in community. Throughout the pandemic, we have inadvertently trained ourselves to view our neighbors as possible threats: spreaders of sickness, agents of misinformation, pawns of nefarious political agendas. We often tell stories about the ways tragedy promotes unity, how hard times bring us together. But that narrative is not intrinsically true. Hall notes, “the idea that suffering brings people closer to God or to one another is hardly an existential fact... it is as likely that suffering divides people within themselves and from one another, and that times of possible change can also tend people toward fear and a retrenchment in old divisions.”⁴ Julian witnessed many horrors — some caused by impersonal forces, and others wrought by human beings upon one another. The pandemic has revealed similar horrors in our own time. But Julian holds fast to the hope of God’s goodness. Hall continues, “Julian’s visions penetrate into the crux of this truth, inviting people, in spite of all risks, to see one another as kin, in the foolish safety of God’s present.” Julian views love as God’s chief attribute (*omniamity* is the term Hall coins), and sees God’s love as drawing all people together as kin. Again, this universal kinship sounds foolish and naive — as out of place as Julian’s laughter. Yet again, Julian expresses radical defiance. She resists all forces that strive to separate and divide human beings from one another, which is part of our baptismal calling as well. We affirm the dignity of every human being, because we know that we cannot resist evil on our own. We can only persevere by persisting in community.

Julian’s light-hearted resistance invites us to balance safety and vulnerability. Throughout her exploration of Julian’s visions, Hall frequently refers to the theme of safety:

“One response to suffering would be to build up a layer of protection from any potential intruder, seeing each person as a possible danger... Our task is not to be stronger than or impervious to the evil around us. [Julian’s] version of safety makes us part of God’s crown, and that crown is on a savior who is also like a nurse, caring for children.”⁵

In our own time, we see that defensive response to suffering — the impulse to lean into same-thinking silos that quickly become echo chambers. We pull away from our neighbors, looking for comfort in the presence of people who agree with us. But Julian finds safety not in invincibility, but in vulnerability. She describes the radical kinship we experience as jewels in Christ’s crown as he hangs on the cross. It’s a paradoxical image of safety, juxtaposing the bloody suffering of Christ with the care a child might receive at the hands of a nurse. Describing Christ as a nurse would have been an unusual metaphor in Julian’s day — these women were not figures of power or prestige, but figures of messy and unflinching service. Nurses would willingly expose themselves to the contagious sickness of others, risking their own health for the benefit of people who might be very different from them. Many of us have witnessed the powerful testimonies of nurses who have served on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Julian’s timely wisdom suggests there is something Christ-like in the sacrificial way these nurses have cared for others. This is a different vision of resisting evil — not the violent, militaristic language of conquest and victory; but the gentle, healing image of a nurse caring for children. This is the surprising sort of resistance Julian envisions, a subversive way for us to re-envision safety in God’s all-loving presence.

Ultimately, Julian invites us to resist evil with levity as we continually remind ourselves of the safety we find in God’s love. She recasts what perseverance might mean — it is less a

picture of gritty trench warfare against the armies of evil, and more like the contagious joy of friends who cannot stop laughing. There is plenty of healing to be done on the road ahead, and perhaps the Church should be reminded to picture Jesus as a nurse who tenderly cares for her children. Our baptismal calling is to be agents of hope, joy, and health on the road ahead; resisting spirits of fear, division, and destruction. The road will not be easy, but Julian warns us that God never promised an easy journey: “He did not say, ‘You shall not be tormented, you shall not be troubled, you shall not be grieved,’ but he said ‘You shall not be overcome.’”⁶

Early in the pandemic, I first heard the song “Persevere” by the Australian rock band Gang of Youths. The singer writes about the death of a friend’s infant daughter, and trying to make sense of such unspeakable loss. In a moment of the singer’s doubt and anger, his friend speaks back to him in verse: “‘God is full of grace, and his faithfulness is vast; there is safety in the moment when the **** has hit the fan... It’s not some disembodied heaven,’ he assures me then he laughs and says through tears, ‘You got to persevere.’”⁷ Julian invites us to return to the Lord with both our tears and our laughter. We can persevere in the unassailable hope that the Devil has been conquered, that there is safety in our suffering, and that all manner of things shall be well.

Focus on the Good: Proclaiming by Word and Example the Good News of God in Christ

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*"Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?"
(Book of Common Prayer, pg. 305)*

In mid-June, Camp Capers is one of the loudest places in the Diocese of West Texas. Campers arrive and race to greet old friends. They stuff their belongings into their cabins and shout farewells to their families. They fill camp with song, shouts, and laughter. Days are filled with activities, arts and crafts, food, music, swimming, worship, and prayer. Youth scale the climbing wall and take kayak trips. There's the Screamer, part of the camp ropes course. Throughout the day, youth and counselors take turns pulling a long rope on a pulley, hoisting their cabinmates high into the air and then releasing them to a freefall rope swing. They scream cheers, laugh, and celebrate with each camper as they overcome their fears and fly in the air. They play games like Human Clue that send campers and counselors running across camp to solve the whodunit. The youth hold devos (devotionals) where they share deeply and pray together. Camp in June is loud and filled with the energy of the Diocesan youth.

But not today. It's June 2020. There are no campers in sight, and there is great uncertainty about whether traditional summer camp will happen at all this year. COVID cases are increasing across Texas and across the globe. Camp is very quiet.

Even so, a dozen or so summer program staff and counselors have been at camp for the last two weeks quarantining to be ready to serve in case camp happens. They don't know what that might look like, but they are here, quarantining on site, and they are prepared for whatever work they are called to do.

Jesus said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask

the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Luke 10:2-3)

When I read this verse, I think of these young adult servants at camp. They could have stayed home. Instead, they are here; they are ready to serve.



I am at camp because my daughter has come to help with a service project, and she has invited me to join her. Diocesan camp staff and counselors are making over 2,000 camp-in-a-box kits to be mailed to youth in need as part of a virtual summer day camp. It's hot, and the buildings we work in have all the doors open to increase fresh air circulation. The work is tedious. For one activity, we fill paint from a big tub into single portion containers. There are five colors of paint needed for each camper. Five colors of paint into 2,000 boxes. That's over 10,000 condiment-size paint containers. At another table, people assemble kits that look like they may become God's Eye crafts. They are in an assembly line: two craft sticks go into the baggie, which is passed to the next person who adds two arm-lengths of yarn, beads, shells, and a glue dot. Zip the baggie and toss it into the box. Repeat 2,000 times.

Jesus tells his followers, "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" (Luke 10:8-9)

These young adults are living missionally; they are proclaiming the Gospel by their actions one task at a time. Most people have no idea the hours they are spending out here.



During a break, I go do what I wanted to do at camp. I leave the summer staff, who just finished singing the Doxology at the top of their lungs to the tune of Hedwig's Theme from the Harry Potter movies. My destination is the Guadalupe River that forms the eastern

boundary of camp. The direct path from where I am to the river is a field, which is currently covered in tall, prickly thistles, so I stroll around the red barn and the garden. I decide to walk past the amphitheater and access the river down by the floating dock. Taking pictures outside in nature is one of my favorite ways to spend a day. I walk and wait for inspiration. There are so many interesting things to see, things that I would not even take notice of if it were not for my camera in my hand.

First, there's a birdhouse on a post. It's interesting. I take a few pictures. Then I move closer and closer. I see places where birds have pecked on the wood. The wooden post it is mounted on has great texture. When I walked over to photograph it, initially, I thought I wanted to take a picture of the birdhouse with the Guadalupe River flowing behind it. I pause. I back up and take the picture with the birdhouse and the river. Then I step forward and take a picture of the birdhouse from up close. Now closer.



I move on to the river. I walk down the steps to the floating dock and step onto it. I am startled by the drop down; the dock bounces on the water as I step. For a second, I am afraid I am going to drop my camera, but I regain my balance. My heart races, so I stop and sit on the

dock. I pause. I breathe deeply. I center. I came down to the river to take a picture of the Guadalupe with this canopy of trees overhead. I point my camera at the river, change my aperture setting and shutter speed to adjust from the shade at the birdhouse to the bright reflection of the sun on the water. I focus the lens and take the picture.



I look at the river, and I am captivated by the roots of the bald cypress across the water from me. I came here to photograph the river, but I am now more fascinated by these roots. With my camera and my longer lens, I can see them up close.

I arrived at camp feeling restless.

It's been two months since we started living in lockdown. I am worried and tired of worrying. This hour along the river has calmed me in a way that I have not felt in weeks.

Camp Capers is a holy place for many, including me. I make up excuses to drive supplies out to my adult daughters on staff. I watch for days when camp needs volunteers. I attend Diocesan retreats with friends. Our youth love this holy space, too. They make annual summer pilgrimages to the St. Francis Chapel, to the river, to the dining facility in hopes of Cuban sandwiches and circle pizzas.

This camp walk is also special because I am alone to pray and simply be in the presence of God. During lockdown, all five members of my family came home bringing their schoolwork and work. We have three home offices set up across the house. We also added an electric organ for my college daughter who is studying organ performance. As I walk through my house, I am equally likely to pass by conversations about insurance analytics, healthcare appointment scheduling, or home building. I may also overhear Gawthrop's *Toccata Brevis* playing on the organ or a college lecture. I love that my family is safe in our bubble, but I have been craving this time alone.

With my camera in hand, I set out seeking beauty. I look at the world with interest and curiosity. I am willing to take the time to be still and wait for what captures my attention. Once I find it, there are several steps I take before I start taking pictures. These steps parallel ones I take when I am seeking to be close to God.

First, I set aside the time for photography; I must also set aside time for prayer and contemplation. Before a photography day, I block out time for it. I gather my equipment, charge my batteries, map my route. I pack a snack and fill my water bottle. It's a thoughtful process, in contrast to the pictures I snap on my phone from the passenger seat on family road trips: funny billboards, trucks with odd items in their beds, signs cities with silly names, and goats on the side of the road. Similarly, I must set aside time for prayer and reflection, even if I am worried and

stressed about the day ahead, especially if I am worried and stressed. It's not enough for me to utter "Lord, have mercy" as I see a fire truck racing past me to an emergency. I need intentional time for silence, prayer, and reflection.

Second, I take time to choose my photography subject. This afternoon at camp I walked to a wooded area above the river. I picked up my camera and thought, "What is my subject for this picture? What do I want to focus on?" Is it the copse of oaks on the ridgeline or these tiny white wildflowers at my feet? In my daily life, I don't spend much time choosing where to set my gaze. I know my way from the bed to the coffeemaker with my eyes closed. Driving to work, I focus on the road and the traffic around me. Filtering out every distraction in my daily life is efficient and allows me to focus on my daily work. I also need to look up from my coffee mug and the road and consider if I am focusing on the important parts of my life. What would You have me focus on, Lord?

Finally, when I take photographs, I control the camera settings. How bright do I want this image? Do I want to freeze the splash of water or have it blur? Do I want that sunbeam to create a lens flare, or should I shift slightly and avoid it? I have many choices that will result in a good picture, but the decisions I make change the mood and composition of the photograph. Life is the same way. What are the camera settings of my life? Will I respond to crises in a way that encourages those around me, or will I despair? Can I slow down and pray for those at church and in my community or will I blur past them in haste? Do I acknowledge the person who is having a difficult time, or do I crop them out of my life? Taking the time to choose the camera settings of my life helps me ensure that the image I am developing in my soul and in eternity is the one I want to remember and be remembered by.

I finish my photography meditation and walk back to camp. The staff and counselors are already back at work when I return. Everyone is racing to pack the boxes we worked on earlier. There is a truck coming to take these boxes to the Community in Schools program. The staff has been working from breakfast until well past dinner for days, but their energy rises to fill, seal, and label the boxes. When we leave, there are still three more truckloads to assemble and pack in the upcoming days. The harvest is still plentiful, but the laborers are still few.

My daughter and I return to camp to help a couple more times. The job is too big for the number of workers, and yet, they complete it. And yes, the Kingdom of God came near.



Viral Love
THE REV. PATRICK GAHAN
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"Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?"
(Book of Common Prayer, pg. 305)

At 11:35 AM on Friday, March 13, 2020, I stepped out of *Jim's* on Hildebrand and made the call. Josh Benninger, our Music Director, and I were returning from visiting Brent Boller, a Texas Public Radio announcer, parishioner, and a dear friend, who was dying from a returning onslaught of cancer. Josh had been Brent's Bible study leader, and by the look on Josh's face, we needed to stop and talk about the painful farewell. Stepping into the restaurant, we found it eerily empty of the expected chattering lunch crowd. I excused myself to phone an infectious disease physician. She confirmed what I dreaded; Sunday worship at Christ Church must be cancelled.

I returned to the table and said, "Josh, we must broadcast the 9 and 11 AM services on Sunday." Setting his grief aside, he answered, "That gives us about 20 daylight hours to get ready." We did so, and on Sunday morning, March 15, we offered our first-ever *streaming* worship. Music, prayers, readings, preaching, and a joke or two, all issued from Josh's tiny *iPhone*. While the whole enterprise seemed otherworldly to me, the real miracle is that so many tuned in to the broadcast. Love, emanating from that familiar 107-year-old chancel, was the medicine we needed to combat the Coronavirus.

During those first days of the crisis, we made some fundamental decisions. One, we were determined to offer the congregation live worship. As people retreated behind the ramparts of their homes, they needed contact with real people in real time, such that even the on-screen hiccups, flops, and faux pas were welcome signs of life. Two, music was essential. Worship is propelled by singing. On that first Sunday, we asked people to send in requests for their favorite

hymns. For 15 minutes before each celebration, our quartet led an online sing-along. We have continued that practice, because the requests keep rolling in, such that we repeatedly sing *The Old Rugged Cross*, *I Come to the Garden Alone*, *Abide with Me*, *Rock of Ages*, and *Great is Thy Faithfulness* – confirming that a good number of our people have come to us via the sawdust Gospel trail. Three, we had to preach Jesus Christ and his indefatigable faithfulness to us.

Abstract or angry messages would not assuage the hurt and fear our people were experiencing amidst the roiling waters of lethal disease and poisonous politics. Four, humor was a gift. I began our first live broadcast on that first Sunday with a joke, albeit a bad one, and they are getting worse. Laughter disarms us, so that we take ourselves a bit less seriously. Fifth, and crucial to all of our innovations, was the determination to stay connected to the congregation. Spread over fourteen zip codes, our worship needed to be an antidote to the viral isolation blanketing our everyday lives. Love defeats fear.

Complementing our worship and fortifying our efforts to stay connected were our Sunday school classes, Bible studies, pastoral ministries, and outreach. *Zoom* was a verb or a noun describing jet airplanes or spaceships before the pandemic. Afterwards, *Zooming* became common parish vernacular, as we *Zoomed* all our Sunday School classes for children, youth, and adults in addition to ten or so weekday Bible studies. Love has a face.

Pastoral ministry necessitated less tech and greater touch. Thus, we began planning neighborhood Eucharists in backyards, front yards, parks, pool sides, driveways, and nursing home parking lots. Participants remained masked and physically distanced, but the presence of others was restorative, if not lifesaving. I'm convinced that the twenty-six burials held at Christ Church from late September to early December were as much from isolation and suffocating

loneliness as from viral infections. Our JOY group (*Just Older Adults*) implemented a phone-tree to converse with every person in the parish, and discovered some were awash in pain. Love calls.

Our outreach ministries adapted and ballooned. For twenty-five years, Christ Church has provided essential weekly groceries for needy families. By April 2020, the number of families coming to us on Saturday morning doubled. We were providing food for 450-550 individuals, clothing them, providing them essential toiletries, and supplying them with cat and dog food. While we could no longer serve our Saturday friends with the accustomed sit-down breakfast and coffee, we did our best to extend hope and demonstrate compassion to those desperate for help. Love acts.

We were reassured by our timely response to the congregation and larger community, and yet we knew it was not enough. People were set adrift in their tiny apartments and cavernous homes. Even ranches, beach houses, and RV's became islands without others beyond family and clan. Christ has made us an interdependent body and we ignore that to our spiritual, emotional – and yes – physical demise. Paul confirmed this with the spiritually strident, go-it-alone Corinthians, “*The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you.’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you.’*” (1 Corinthians 12:21). Heeding his admonition, we moved our worship celebrations outdoors in early June 2020; although we continued to livestream both celebrations. Across the heart of the campus, we set up 200 chairs, in varying assortments. This was a pivotal decision for us. Being outside, the singing and preaching took on the guise of a frontier revival, and the announcements were laced with levity. We were overjoyed to be in each other’s presence, so that we were experiencing firsthand the Lord’s promise, “*For where two or three are gathered in my Name, there am I with them*” (Matthew 18:20). Love is with us.

We are back in our buildings now, and our eyes confirm what our fears predicted: the parish *body* has shrunk. Eighteen months of Covid-19 has winnowed our congregation. Some are afraid to return with news of fresh waves of the virus coming ashore in the Delta-variants. Others have settled comfortably in front of their screens, happy to experience worship pajama-clad with coffee at hand. The greatest number of missing, we fear, are no longer worshipping. Worship is a habit, a habit that can be broken by the seductive calls of lesser things. Our Lord is always *seeding* our pathways with tokens of his love and signs of his kingdom, but long uncultivated faith becomes *shallow* and easily *strangled*.¹

Because the Church has a long history of calamity and rebirth, we are not staring at a blank page in this task of reconnecting and rebuilding. The first crisis that literally forced the Church to abandon its usual meeting places occurred in Rome during the late third and early fourth centuries, under the reigns of the four Tetrartic Emperors Diocletian, Maximian, Constantius, and Galerius (286-305). Providentially in the preceding century, Christians had dug into the soft basalt rock beneath the capital city to bury their dead in catacombs, setting them apart from the pagan shrines dominating cemeteries on the surface.

Scarcely a hundred years later, those four tyrannical emperors arose with the determination to stifle, if not destroy, the nascent Church. Unable to worship openly any longer, congregations descended into the catacombs to celebrate Sunday worship amongst the sarcophagi. Sixty of the Christian catacombs have been excavated, and bereft of windows and light, we have discovered the congregations' created evocative wall-paintings. Two pictures predominate in all sixty recesses: Christ the Philosopher and Christ the Good Shepherd.²

The drawings of Christ the Philosopher on the catacomb walls depicts the Lord with a staff in one hand and a book of the Gospels in the other. The staff represents Jesus Christ

stamping out death, a poignant reminder to adorn a cemetery wall. Because death did not have the final word with Christ, death will neither have the final word with those at rest in the underground tombs, nor with those secretly meeting beneath the city streets for Sunday worship.³

Our present congregations must hear this message afresh. The Coronavirus has tyrannized us, forcing many of us to huddle in our homes for a year and a half and leading us to envisage a terrifying future. Many of us constantly lament, “Is this the new way of things?” We Christians have a far more hopeful and enduring message to impart: *Jesus Christ is setting things right*.⁴ Most people erroneously believe that sickness, pain, epidemics, and death are the natural order of things, when, in fact, those things are an aberration – vestiges of a fallen world. Christ’s crucifixion on Calvary is the cosmic vaccination for the healing of humanity and the world, and his resurrection and ascension portend our full recovery.⁵ The Holy Spirit has been given to the *body* as evidence that God is healing us and that his kingdom is shattering the dark powers that have infected us, working in us like a strong antibiotic that breaks the hold of a festering disease.⁶ Fueled by the Spirit, we become heralds of the Good News that God is not finished with us.⁷ Love has a voice.

In Christ the Philosopher’s other hand, he grasps a book of the Gospels. Christ holds the secret to meaning in this present life. The sirens of affluence, entertainment, sensation, and self-help have shipwrecked us on the barren shoals of egotism. Countering the voices that once beguiled us, Christ invites, *‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’*, just as he is herded to the cross (John 14:6). His words intersect his subsequent march to crucifixion to paint an unmistakable portrait. Real meaning is found, not in sheltering, but giving away our lives for love’s sake.⁸ Dying to self and living for Christ puts us on the voyage to a full life instead of a truncated one.⁹

The other picture painted most often on the catacomb walls is Christ the Good Shepherd, a graphic assertion that those escaping underground to offer their praises and raise their petitions were known by the Lord -- "*I am the good shepherd,' says Christ, 'I know my own and my own know me.'*" And they were loved by him, even to the point of death -- "*And I lay down my life for the sheep'*" (John 10:11-14). Standing in that subterranean cemetery, they would have been revived by the truth that Christ leads them into death, and Christ leads them out.¹⁰ The modern Church is one of the few places where people are not deftly sequestered from death. The reality of life's end is acknowledged in stark contrast to a world that strives to anesthetize the fact. We publicly commit our loved ones to the resurrection, boldly proclaiming that Christ's love has the final word and not death.¹¹ This is the heartbeat of the gospel we must share, for the message is not some ethereal wish of "pie in the sky," but has immediate concrete consequences. As C.S. Lewis famously asserted, "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next... It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this."¹² Our sacrificial actions in the present are fueled by the hope that our lives have meaning, that our personal histories are going somewhere, and that we are being led by the one who walked through death for us. Christ is guiding us out of the shadowing enclaves of the Coronavirus, and the fear and dispassion it has sown, so that we may light the way out for others.¹³ Love, after all...is contagious.

Adaptation
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“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?” (Book of Common Prayer, pg. 304)

On March 17, 2020, a brand-new world opened before us.

A new world that would change the way we would “continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers”.

The changes were unexpected, often confusing, and challenging.

Since February, and perhaps earlier, we were hearing more and more about a virus that had been designated as COVID-19. It had been expanding, presumably from China, to other nations and was expected to find its way here, to America.

Soon we were hearing about more and more people testing positive for the virus. Organizations throughout the country were calling on staff and employees to begin working remotely and our churches were hearing that there would soon be instructions and guidelines disseminated from the national church and our respective dioceses.

On March 17th, at our regular vestry meeting, I had informed the vestry that these guidelines would soon be provided through the diocese. After the meeting I returned home, checked my email and discovered a communication from the diocese that there would be no further “in person” gatherings for worship or any other purpose and it was recommended that there be no personal contact with other members of the congregations or staff until further notice.

We communicated the information to the congregation, along with the more comprehensive letter from Bishop Reed, and also began planning how we could continue our worship, fellowship, Eucharist and traditions.

The worship service for March 22nd was cancelled.

Something else, more personal to me, was occurring at this time.

My daughter, Kristen, and her partner, Mike, who live in New York City, asked if they could come to Alice to live with me for what they thought might be a couple of months. The answer was, of course, yes.

To add some perspective, my wife, Darlene, died suddenly in September 2019. I was just coming to grips with living alone. That, plus the fact that Kristen hadn't been home except for a few vacation days every year since she left for college in 1990. I'm sure we were all wondering how this arrangement would work. Ultimately, I believe it was a gift from God which gave me strength and support to manage my personal life as well as the issues of the pandemic.

I picked them up in Houston on the evening of March 21st. On the drive home, and in the days following, we spoke of all that was happening in NYC, at home, and here at the church.

Kristen, because she had already begun working remotely, was familiar with some of the media platforms that might be used for remote gatherings for church. There was talk of Facebook Live and others. The platform that Kristen was using was Zoom. I, not being media savvy, had never heard of Zoom, but Kristen got us going, and we had our first Zoom Morning Prayer service on March 29th - broadcast from my home.

To move ahead rapidly, we found a way to broadcast with my iPhone from the church. Soon we managed to use Kristen's laptop. After a short time, I was gifted a laptop, making sure we could continue when Kristen returned to NYC.

Getting back into the church was a major step to working our way back to more traditional worship. Experimenting with different set-ups, we finally used the laptop placed on a six-foot ladder approximately 25 feet and at a 45° angle from the center of the altar.

As time and guidelines allowed, lectors and eucharistic ministers were able to return to the church and participate in the service.

Though we couldn't have in person communion, we adopted a form of Spiritual Communion where we offered a prayer inviting all who could not join physically in communion to join with us in that Spiritual Communion as we celebrated in the manner allowed by our guidelines.

As we progressed through the pandemic and as cases lessened and vaccines became available, we were all able to return to more traditional worship. And even though we are not fully able to do all that we could prior to the pandemic, we are getting closer.

We at Advent, Alice, (and most other churches) are not giving up on the things we learned during the pandemic, not only in the ways and means to be together while apart, but in the way we treat and care for one another.

Within the context above, there are many examples of how we will "continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers".

When we were suddenly tossed into an unforeseen and uncertain time, we had to learn from others so that we could continue to be the church. All of us, to a certain degree, had been doing what we do for a long time and, for the most part, were generally content. It wasn't perfect by any means, but it was good – it was us.

COVID-19 struck, and we scrambled to find a way to meet the needs of our congregations.

First, we recognized that we were all in this together, which encouraged everyone to share any knowledge of how to deal with the circumstances with one another. There has always been sharing of thoughts and ideas, but now it had become critical to maintaining a life in Christ.

And there were people who came into our lives who had the knowledge to help and guide.

One of the ways the pandemic has informed how we will move forward is the continuing use of media platforms to reach people who may not be able to appear in person to share in fellowship, prayers, teaching, and communion.

One example for Advent, Alice, though small in the overall measure of the pandemic, is Kristen, herself. She arrived at a time when her particular expertise was critical. She attended worship services on Zoom and in person. She was able to help a book club to which members of the congregation belonged continue their meetings on Zoom. She also joined the club. Kristen, though having left Alice, continues to join the Sunday worship services, Compline on Wednesdays, and the book club meetings on Zoom.

The congregation, as a whole and individually, accepted the restrictions with the attitude of Christian charity to protect themselves and others. When the time came, everyone committed to doing whatever was necessary to enable us to gather in person – and that willingness to serve continues with even greater determination as we move forward.

There are many more instances of individuals' taking the initiative to continue making contact, caring for and loving other individuals when physical contact was distanced.

As we move forward, the experience of the pandemic has caused us to recognize how critical it is to find ways to gather for fellowship and worship, to pray and meet Christ at the altar, and to share whatever we may possess – to adapt our resources to our faith.

We continue to pray for the souls of those lives claimed by the pandemic, to ease the pain of their friends and family, and to heal those who have contracted the virus. And, God willing, there will be an end to COVID-19. But, even in the worst times, there have been prayers that

were answered and perhaps even some miracles and through it all we know that God will give us the strength, faith, and love to be His people.

Red Doors for Justice
BRYAN GONZALEZ
ST. LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SAN ANTONIO

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” (Book of Common Prayer, pg. 305)

The year 2020 will certainly be one for the history books, one where we and our neighbors were confronted with the reckoning of both a pandemic and massive societal change. For the first time in many of our lives we found ourselves forced to shut down one of the core aspects of what makes us human, the drive for human interaction. Alongside the isolation, we were also faced with deep questions in regards to social justice and what it truly means to love our neighbor as ourselves. As we gradually find ourselves coming out of the haze of the pandemic, we must not forget the events that have occurred that spurred so many to action in the defense of social justice for all. It is up to us as the Church to decide which of the roads before us we take to ensure a world of equality for every soul. To fully understand the road for the future, we must also address our past and how we have been shaped by being born into a system ingrained with the sin of racism.

Everything we are and ever will be, stems from and leads back to us. Humans occupy a truly unique space in the world in that we exist betwixt and between the past and the present. The person we are in the present is shaped by the traditions and lessons of our past, which form the basis of how we will interact with our fellow persons day to day. However, humans also have the capacity to shape the past and choose what aspects of our lessons and traditions we wish to continue and which ones we wish to leave behind. For those of us who have grown up in the United States, we often state that the original sin of the country was the maintaining of the institution of slavery after independence. This notion is certainly true, but it is equally true to say

that we as a nation have never dealt with this original sin. As Christians we know we are each born into a sinful world, and we must acknowledge that this includes being born into the sin of racism. Whether we like to admit it or not, many aspects of our day to day lives have been shaped by the long arm of institutional racism. From the segregation of towns by railroads to being able to get a bank loan, the sin of racism continues to raise its head and impact the lives of many of our fellow Christians and neighbors. It is in this same notion of being born into a system of racism that we must also address that in our own lives we will make mistakes. We will at times have racist thoughts, and we will commit the sin of reacting out of racist notions. While the committing of these sins will certainly bring us low, it is also through the redeeming work of God that we can become advocates for the change we wish to see in the world. It is through our faith lives that we will strive for justice and peace among all peoples, with dignity for every human being. It is now time for us to explore the roads we must take to make this world a reality.

The greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we dive into scripture we see through the acts of Jesus and the disciples a myriad of examples of service to both those we walk in Christ with and those we share our lives with. Just as Jesus's death and resurrection was for the whole world, so too must our work as The Episcopal Church be for all and not just those we gather with on Sunday mornings. Reaching out into the communities that have been avoided and establishing relations with those who have been turned away is beneficial not only in helping to mend the wounds of the sin of racism, but also to mend the wounds we all carry from our pandemic isolation. The opportunity now exists to create new friendships and work in ways that just a few years ago would not have been considered. But we must also remember that there is a fine line between being an advocate for those who are marginalized, and someone who co-opts their experiences for their own benefit. To truly be

advocates for social justice we must listen to those we wish to form relationships with and discover what it is that they call out for. And if by chance a news team shows up to a church to highlight these new works, we must remember that it is not praise that we seek, but instead to highlight the trials and tribulations of those we engage in works with. The beautiful red doors that have served as the backdrop for countless wedding and family photos must be cast open with welcoming arms while those of us inside must prepare to go out and be deacons to those who wish to enter.

We as Episcopalians have always shown great pride in our traditions both at large and those in our individual parishes. From traditions of coffee hour to Wednesday night BBQ's there are many wonderful traditions which we can share with our neighbors. As Episcopalians we also need to acknowledge that we are a Church that has been involved in America's original sin. Many of our churches were built by those enslaved, and many of our members, from bishops to laity, at one time or another profited from the act of keeping another person below them through the act of racism. These will be hard truths to acknowledge, but they are not impossible for us to admit. As Jesus forgives us for our sins we are made well and whole. The time to utilize the strength of our traditions to reach our hands across the aisle and welcome those whose voices have not always been heard into fellowship is now. We must never forget that we are called to share this planet, our fragile island home, with all who walk it. In that sharing we also are called to strive to ensure that this island is one of equality and justice for all.

Harvesting a Lifetime: Deepening our Spiritual Journey

MARJORIE GEORGE, CARLA PINEDA, AND THE REV. PATRICIA R. RIGGINS

THE WISDOM YEARS MINISTRY

“The afternoon of life is just as full of meaning as the morning; only its meaning and purpose are different.” (Carl Jung, Collected Works. ¹)

*“For the unlearned, old age is winter. For the learned, it is the season of the harvest.”
(The Talmud)*

*“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”
(Book of Common Prayer, pg. 305)*

Introduction

In their book *Aging with Wisdom and Grace*, Wilkie and Noreen Au write that in the past, a medical model viewed successful aging as the absence of disease and disability. A more recent understanding suggests that successful aging has to do with an individual's felt satisfaction. It has to do with one's ability to adapt to physical and functional changes while maintaining a connection with other people and a sense of meaning and purpose. It is about whether a person is satisfied with one's life.²

Joan Chittister, in her book *The Gift of Years*, says: “What [the current study of] gerontology is lacking is the awareness of the spiritual dimension of the only part of life that gives us the resources we need to make a long-term evaluation of the nature and meaning of life itself. ***In fact, as the physical dimension of life diminishes, the spiritual dimension commonly increases.***”³

We spend the first third of our lives learning how to navigate the world in which we live. In the middle third of our lives, we build a family, career and acquire all that goes along with that stage of life. In the last third of life, unencumbered by societal and family demands, we are invited to explore more deeply our true character as a child of God. These are the years when we

have the time to look deeply at our relationship with God, to finally live into all that God is calling us to become, and to see these years as blessings rather than burdens. These are the years when we can gently look back on our lives and ask, “Where do I need to seek forgiveness?” “Who do I need to forgive?” “What relationships need reconciliation?” “What is the character of my soul and how can I leave that to my family when I die?” “What is the inner work I still have to do so that I may die in peace, for me and for my family?” “What can I harvest from my life that served me well and, and how can I pass that on to others?”

The world may say to us of a certain age: “You are no longer productive. Go home to your rocking chairs and your bridge games and your luncheons.”

But God says, “Listen to your inner longing; set aside all that keeps you from me.”

The Pandemic and traveling the Road to Emmaus together: Luke 24:13-25

By the time we are of a certain age, we, like Cleopas and his wife, have frequently traveled the road of broken dreams and have had our eyesight dimmed by tragedy, illness, anger, and disappointments. The death of a spouse or child, chronic illness, losing our work identity, or moving out of our home have handed us spiritual and emotional distress. We don’t feel old, but the messages from the outside world can be cruel. When we look in the mirror we are unprepared to see our mother’s or father’s face. We really *don’t* have as much energy as we used to have. And we ask ourselves, “Is this it? Am I done? Is what I have contributed all I am going to contribute? Was it enough?”

This road to Emmaus would be a hard journey in the best of times, but during the pandemic we began to feel like everything we had, who we were, had been crucified. We were living in a perpetual Holy Saturday mindset. The social isolation and inability to see family

magnified our fear of the uncertainties ahead of us. Our vision of hope and our experience of Church altered dramatically and quickly. Like those first travelers to Emmaus, we too found it very hard to see that Christ was in fact walking with us in our distress.

***The world may say,** “You're running out of time. Better spend these years getting your will in order. Be sure you have a medical directive in place. Pick out your funeral music.”*

***But God says,** "However many more years you live, those years are a gift for you to deepen your relationship with me. Your transformation into the person I created you to be is not complete. There is more.”*

Our Response: to seek and serve and love through The Wisdom Years

At the 2020 Council, 150 people from about half of the congregations attending came to a workshop exploring the call to address the spiritual needs of adults in the last third of their lives. This community affirmed the felt need for an intentional path of spiritual formation for those in their later years. One month later COVID-19 hit and eliminated the possibility of in-person gatherings.

After a few months, as the persistence of COVID became clear, the Wisdom Years group wondered if older adults could be brought together using Zoom’s online capabilities. In July 2020, we offered our first online book study using *The Gift of Years* by Joan Chittister. Twenty-seven people from fifteen different congregations participated in the 10-week Zoom study. In the follow-up survey, participants said the most valuable component of the study was the **companionship and community it offered**. The craving for interpersonal interaction and intimacy, even across Zoom, was palpable.

Responding to the voices of our new community, in September we offered a 6-hour

workshop - “Pilgrims Together in the Last Third of Life” – by Zoom and drew twenty-two people. Results were extremely positive. The post-event survey showed that older adults could indeed adapt to Zoom and requests for deeper conversations about this time of life were numerous. Over the past twelve months we have continued to offer a variety of studies on Zoom every Thursday afternoon from 4:00-5:15 pm. We are listening to what our participants are saying so we can adapt and discover their needs and desires. Our Zoom model allows for large group discussion followed by lengthier small groups of three to four people to reflect on questions, prompts, passages, and articles in a more intimate setting.

None of us has ever been this age before, and the Wisdom Years is not a traditional Bible Study. The participants want to experience a deepening of their spiritual life in the companionship and fellowship of others who are journeying during this time of their lives. Our offerings are fluid and organic, reaching into scripture, modern day writers, Celtic Spirituality, the mystics, poets, music, and humor. The Wisdom Years is a spiritual community dedicated to exploring with imagination where Christ is in our midst as our spiritual journeys unfold.

The World may say, “As people age, they get cranky!”

But God says, “Cranky people get old!”

We seek and serve and love by pondering as Mary did. John 19:25b-27

In his book *Sacred Fire*, the Rev. Ron Rolheiser invites us to ponder as Mary did and ponder in the Hebrew sense- to carry, hold, and transform tension so as not to give it back in kind. While Mary is standing under the cross, she is holding and carrying the tension of witnessed brutality and pain, refusing to give it back in kind.⁴ And in a very similar way, the Wisdom Years is holding space for all its participants to ponder where God is in their lives, to

transform the pain that a long-lived life has borne, and not transmit it. In his 2018 blog on suffering, Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, reminds us: “if we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.”⁵

Our 8-week study of forgiveness fostered intimate conversations in the small groups about how to forgive, the difficulty of forgiving, and practices for not absorbing the hurts and slights that everyday living can fling our way. Most of us arrive at this time of our lives with a history of joys and sorrows. We now realize that we must make peace with all that was. Being able to ponder and hold space for one another has helped transform the energies from our experiences and embrace this time of life with empathy for ourselves and others.

For Old Age⁶

May the light of your soul mind you.
May all your worry and anxiousness about your age
Be transfigured.
May you be given wisdom for the eyes of your soul
To see this as a time of gracious harvesting.
May you have the passion to heal what has hurt you,
And allow it to come closer and become with you.
May you have great dignity,
And a sense of how free you are;
Above all, may you be given the wonderful gift
Of meeting the eternal light that is within you.
May you be blessed;
And may you find wonderful love
In your self for your self.

We seek and serve and love through the knowledge that God comforts us in affliction, so that we comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:1-12)

Through our weekly offerings, we seek and serve over sixty individuals from Del Rio to Dripping Springs, Canyon Lake to McAllen, New York to Florida, Michigan to Oklahoma and Indiana. We offer liturgies when appropriate and have conducted a memorial service for a fellow traveler who died unexpectedly, and we ask for prayers for those who are ill and facing surgery.

We have prayed over individuals on Zoom, done virtual anointings, and offered comfort to those in distress. Through our website we offer weekly spiritual inspiration to more than one hundred people through readings, blessings, poetry, videos, and podcasts.

Loneliness ⁷

I too have known loneliness.
I too have known what it is to feel
misunderstood,
rejected, and suddenly
not at all beautiful.
Oh, mother earth,
your comfort is great, your arms never withhold.
It has saved my life to know this.
Your rivers flowing, your roses opening in the morning.
Oh, motions of tenderness!

We have learned that God feeds us, and we can in turn feed one another. (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15 and Exodus 16:1-35)

Bread of life images from the manna that God provided the Israelites on their journey out of bondage to the four Gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes, invite questions for this time of life. How is God feeding us? What bread do we need? In the last third of our lives, the food of angels (Psalm 78:25) includes, but is not limited to, engaging with individuals who share

similar experiences, processing our pasts, being thankful for what we have, acknowledging that our bodies don't work as we would like and asking God for the bread of health, compassion, and patience. We ask ourselves the hard questions in a communally-supportive environment and explore the gifts we can offer one another and to the church.

Our guides for the post pandemic world: Abraham and Sarah, (Genesis 17&18) and the Israelites following a pillar of fire and cloud (Exodus 13:21)

We are committed to continuing and spreading the community and work of the Wisdom Years. Cooperating with the Holy Spirit, we would welcome something as visible as a cloud or pillar of fire; but we suspect the Spirit's guidance will be more subtle. In our seventies we won't get pregnant like Sarah did, but we laugh like her when we think of what we have started: are we really giving birth to a new model of fellowship and learning? And then we remember the sixty people who join us weekly on this journey. So, we will continue to listen to their needs. And while we will explore in-person offerings, **Thursday at 4:00 pm is the Wisdom Year time** for the foreseeable future - on Zoom.

Our model attracts those of a certain age by offering a safe space for companionship, intimacy, and the material to do the hard work that this time of our life and God is asking us to do. The ease of being at home- not having to drive, especially when it is dark, having a consistent day and time to meet- have contributed to average attendance between twenty to twenty-five every Thursday. How else could you gather that many people weekly from across and outside the diocese?

www.wisdomyears.org

Endnotes

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3. G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1937), Chapter XIV.
4. Hall, 50.
5. Hall, 90.
6. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*.
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Viral Love by the Rev. Patrick Gahan

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3. Revelation 21:4
4. N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 179.
5. Romans 8:19-21
6. Ephesians 1:13-16
7. Philippians 3:12-14
8. 2 Corinthians 5:15
9. Luke 9:24; John 13:34
10. Colossians 2:12
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12. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 1952), 134.
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1. Carl Jung, *Collected Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), vol. 11, par. 114. Also found in *Aging with Wisdom and Grace*, p.xiii.
2. Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *Aging with Wisdom and Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019) p.xii.
3. Joan Chittister, *The Gift of Years* (Katoan, NY: BlueBridge, 2008), p ix-x.
4. Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, *Sacred Fire* (New York: Image, 2014) p. 147.
5. Fr. Richard Rohr, *Transforming Pain* (Center for Action and Contemplation), October 17, 2018.
6. John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Spaces Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008) p. 71.
7. Mary Oliver, *Devotions*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2017) p. 23.