

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11

Death and New Life

Hello! Long time no see! I'm feeling much better, and am humbled by the outpouring of concern, prayers, and help that this presbytery family has sent me these last months. I am feeling closer to "normal" than I have in a long time, though of course nothing is normal these days.

Recently I've been thinking about the first time I visited Japan as an adult. It struck me that all the cities looked brand new, which I first assumed was a reflection of Japan's emergence as an economic and technology world power. But then someone pointed out that the cities were new because every city in Japan but one had been bombed out during World War II. The one city that retains its old character is Kyoto; I was told that a key US military leader fought to preserve it for its cultural and historical significance.

Many of us are now living out our own destruction-and-renewal dramas in very tangible ways. When one of my cousins offered to give me a coffee maker she had, I told her that I am blessed with resources that allowed me to get a fresh start on many things, and since my morning coffee is important to me, I wanted to buy the model of my choosing. Because of my health issues, I wasn't able to do much, but I could buy things mail order—so my household is being restocked by way of my sister's hand-me-down clothes, and Amazon boxes.

We are living out a Lenten season with this parallel in our lives. Is it too far a stretch to remember that Lent is the yearly season of reflection on our mortal, fallen state, and the new life we are given through Jesus' sacrificial love? As we are plunged into the waters of baptism (even through the faint facsimile of Presbyterian sprinkling), we die to sin in order to emerge into the new life of restored relationship with God.

Whether we are saved from the destruction of our homes from fire or the destruction of our souls from sin, let us remember to live out our blessings of salvation and new life in gratitude and service to God.

As with many disasters, the disparity of those with and without resources is revealed in troubling ways. Earlier this month, the program staff of PDA (Presbyterian Disaster Assistance) and Jihyun Oh came to Southern California, and Wendy Gist set up several meetings for them to talk with folks impacted by the Eaton fire. One thing I learned after these meetings was the difference between faith networks in our area. Two of these networks we know: ACTS (Altadena Congregations Together Serving) and the Clergy Community Coalition. A third network is the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance.

Of the three, ACTS was the only network made up of Altadena (not Pasadena) faith communities, the only one that is interfaith (among its active members are the Pasadena Jewish Temple, Masjid al-Taqwa, and the Baha'i community), and tends to be more liberal, and with more involvement from mainline Christian churches. In their meeting, most of the church leaders (about half of whom lost their church buildings) talked about the challenge and opportunity of rebuilding (like my coffee maker upgrade, there is talk about rebuilding in a new way for the needs of our community now, which means less open grassy areas and more affordable housing). But generally, their church members had insurance, and were in a position to survive the crisis. One community volunteer asked how to figure out which people truly have need without being oppressively bureaucratic; he mentioned how the pop-up distribution programs were attracting many people who were not in need, but who saw the opportunity to benefit from the open generosity of donors.

However, one pastor with a different report was Rev. Tyrone Skinner of Metropolitan Baptist Church, who has not been active in ACTS but was invited to attend the meeting with PDA. His church, near Fair Oaks and Woodbury, has over 30 families severely impacted by the fire, and they have no or insufficient insurance with which to recover. There was also mention of First AME in Pasadena, who has been providing very practical help to over 40 impacted member families and the community, including pointers to manufactured housing companies that will enable families to rebuild homes much more expediently, and opening their campus to the Masjid. The Clergy Community Coalition also has direct connection with community members in need, so it is likely that the best way for us Presbyterians to offer tangible assistance will be through connections with congregations whose members need help if they are to keep their property in a reconstructed Altadena.

I am so grateful for the ways that God provided for me and the Presbytery these last few months, even in the face of disaster. As we move forward, we will start again to look into the future, and to discern God's call on us in God's plan of salvation for San Gabriel Valley. We have a Presbytery meeting coming up very soon—it's on Zoom; have you registered yet?!—and we are continuing and starting some long-term initiatives. A few churches are on the verge of welcoming new pastoral leadership. The Personnel Committee is making great progress starting the process for seeking a new executive presbyter. There continues to be endings and beginnings in the lives of our congregations. And we will step forward and say "Here are we!" when God looks for servants to do God's saving will for this hurting world. With tentative hope, I am feeling more able to walk with you again on this journey.

With thanks,

Wendy