



# *A Lenten Invitation from the Rt. Rev. A. Robert Hirschfeld, Bishop of New Hampshire*

*Adapted from a Lenten address to the Clergy of the Episcopal Church of New Hampshire on  
March 6, 2025.*

## *Part I*

In direct response to the gathering chaos, ugliness, and banality of our day, I want to invite us into a time of spacious prayer and contemplation.

We are in a time of trial, my siblings in Christ, and I urge us to purge ourselves and to fast from the attractiveness and the lure of magical thinking. There are no signs, no credible or reasonable signs, that things are going to improve before they get worse in our rupturing world. If there is a purgative element to a Lenten fast, this is it. I invite you into such a Lent. It is time, now, to stop believing that any of the parties are going to turn, or rally, or stand up, or stand down from their hardening position in a way that will bring harmony or a sense of political optimism. I am eager to be wrong, but after so many years, I have realized that every prognosticator, on the left, right, or center, has proven mistaken.

For so long, I have thought that our Church was God's gift to this country. For so long, I have believed that right belief, proper liturgical manners, and solid formation of conscience, mediated by winsome preaching and compelling teaching, would somehow influence and guide us and our people to be good, loving, merciful, just citizens with ever-expansive hearts. For so long, we have believed we could build the Beloved Community, marked by racial and gender equity and harmony. We have believed that we could bring, by our own power and sense of righteousness, the Kingdom of God on earth. We have encouraged, prodded, and sometimes even shamed those who dared question our stances. To this day, our Church and our partner advocates in state and federal legislatures share what bills are on the docket and they tell us what is harmful and what must be opposed, what is beneficial and demands our support—by vote, by letter writing, or by demonstrating. The implication is clear: side with us or side with them. Win or lose. Succeed or fail. It is a zero-sum game.

Everything about this present moment is screaming at us to keep this futile oscillation going.

Here's an example:

Our friend Bishop Marianne Budde is called to preach the gospel. She appears in her pulpit in full strength and in the full power of both her office and her humanity. She is a woman of authority, that is both of herself, her own essence, and of the office bestowed upon her by us, her church, and the whole ecclesiastical scaffolding that we uphold. She speaks to the President and his entourage and simply

asks for mercy and for compassion. She stands in the long tradition of religious authorities through the ages who have dared to question the political climate.

What happens is predictable and timeworn. The man in authority, like Herod, reacts petulantly, egged on by his followers, and makes ad hominem remarks below the dignity of his office, demanding an apology. Even though it's not surprising, it is not any less nauseating.

While we are outraged at his reaction, we do not really notice what we do at the same time. The supporters of Bishop Budde, understandably, me included, engage in a kind of victory dance at the end zone after a touchdown. "We stuck it to the man!" The memes explode on social media. We have a new rock star because we feel that we are so in need of one.

And so it goes. And goes. And it feels increasingly like an addiction. We need more. And if the culture wars don't give us an opportunity to get another fix, we don't feel quite alive. But this is not life. Certainly, this is not the life God sought—entering, inhabiting, suffering, dying, and rising. God sought to break this cycle of hurt, retribution, re-hurt, and revenge. The cycle is constricting, and it is increasingly airless, without hope for a path out. It is a kind of violence in which both the right and the left are complicit. It was once a collusion of both the agents of the oppressive empire and the temple hierarchy (on the conservative side) and Judas and the Zealots (on the radical left) who conspired to crucify Jesus. Both used force, shame, coercion, and self-righteousness to make the Jesus the scapegoat.

French philosopher and political activist Simone Weil saw links in their understanding of the use of force between "The Iliad" and the Gospels in her essay on Homer's epic:

*The man who is the possessor of force seems to walk through a non-resistant element; in the human substance that surrounds him nothing has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, the tiny interval that is reflection. Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice or prudence. Hence we see men in arms behaving harshly and madly. We see their sword bury itself in the breast of a disarmed enemy who is in the very act of pleading at their knees. [i.]*

No doubt, there are those in our pews who are anxious and impatient to know, so what are we doing? Where are the statements of our positions and our outrage? Where are the demonstrations and protests? Where is the church? I heard of an email this week from someone who said, "Well, Jonathan Daniels must be rolling in his grave!" Though it may not be intended, these kind of emails hook me. What I hear is, "You're a failure. You are not doing enough. If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. Wake up. Be Woke. Prove your worth!"

Is not this the same tone the devil takes when he tempts Jesus? "If you were a real leader, if you were a real priest, if you were a real deacon or bishop, I would have heard from you by now. But I guess this is not the church of Jonathan Daniels." This statement forgets that what Jonathan did first was pray. In his prayers, at worship, he had an epiphany while hearing the Magnificat chanted in a church. Then he chose to go and be with those that the culture belittled and dehumanized, even risking and giving his life. His was a witness of radical presence, not statement making.

When Donald Trump used tear gas and an incendiary device to clear his way to St. John's, Lafayette Square so he could have a photo op with his unopened bible in front of the church, I wrote the statement for the Bishops of Province I that condemned this deplorable act. When it happened, I was totally

hooked, my soul was hijacked. I could only react. I sped down to my little basement desk and pounded out a statement. You can look it up. It's pretty good.

And it did nothing, really, except escort a good number of our church members out of The Episcopal Church, slamming the door behind them.

During the President's speech, did the Democrats accomplish anything with their signs and shouting except provide red meat to their churlish opponents? When I offered to have conversations over coffee or lunch with church members who had left, they had already decided there was no point. There was no space for reflection and thus no space for justice or prudence.

Paul wrote to the Ephesian church "for our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the spiritual forces (the powers and principalities) of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12)

We are being hit. And hit hard. And when we are hit, we want to hit back. This is how the world works. This is how the State House, Washington DC, the U.N., NATO, the World Trade Organization all work. I would say it's also how the back rooms or even the front rooms of our General Convention sometimes work. It seems sometimes that, "it all started when he hit me back."

I am hearing questions among us, both clergy and lay, about how to be in this struggle in a way that is more effective than our usual way. We are wondering if we can be engaged in this struggle in the way Jesus Christ was engaged in the struggle. What does it look like to live the transfigured life in Christ that this disfigured world is longing for?

I am hearing from several colleague bishops as well as clergy in this diocese that despite the terrible rupturing of our society, the rending apart of our social fabric, and the further shattering of American Christianity, they are sensing some light. One of our priests referred to seeing breadcrumbs leading the way through the lightless forest. This path, this light is revealed to us in contemplation, meditation, and the re-grounding of our spiritual practice that runs deeper than the quest for social justice. Justice is the fruit of a tree whose roots need tending, again.

The German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a time that bears some analogy to ours—and may God save us from the extremes of his time during the rise of the Third Reich—chose to gather the pastors who confessed Jesus and Jesus crucified. He urged them to live in a community of study, of prayer, of self-examination, knowing that so much of what they were all witnessing in the dominant culture of the oppressing party was also evident even in their own hearts. They believed that the only way to break the power of evil was to confess it, to speak it aloud to a sibling in Christ, and break the shackles that bind us to the endless cycle of cruelty, of mistrust, fear, and hatred.

So, I suggest we spend some time reflecting on our sins. How have we—you and me—and our church had a role in some intentional or unintentional way in exacerbating our current predicament? Whom have we not heard, not listened to, not loved? Where have you and I failed? Where have we proclaimed our own righteousness and acted so quickly that we—like Peter on the mountain of the transfiguration—manipulate, categorize, or put in a booth rather than dwell in the cloud of revelation together.

How have we, as, let's face it, religious elites contributed to the present predicament? If we insist on our own correctness and moral purity here, how will we be able to receive God's repairing grace? Or do we

believe we don't need God's forgiveness? If we don't have the courage to ask that question, how hard will it be for us to continue to proclaim the Gospel of grace, always having to be right, or correct, or proper, or just. It will be impossible for us and more difficult for God to change us into the likeness of Christ.

O God, we pray, widen the tiny interval between our impulse to be right and our actions and words. Help us behold your glory and your presence through the silence in which you speak to us.

## *Part II*

In "A Contemplative Christianity for Our Time," author Sarah Bachelard frequently quotes from Bonhoeffer. She does so because she sees parallels between the Lutheran Church in Germany in the 1930s and the Anglican Church of Australia, Great Britain, and North America in this time, even a few years before now. She speaks of the truth that the authentic church will be a kenotic church, a self-emptying church, a church that is faithful enough in the power of the resurrection that it is willing to go to the cross. The word she uses toward the end of the book is "a self-dispossessing church." Such a church reflects the "mind of Christ" that Paul speaks of in Philippians 2:5-11, the mind of Christ that we confess to being unfaithful and untrue to on Ash Wednesday.

Bachelard writes, "[Bonhoeffer] considers the unfaithfulness of his church in this regard to be a primary source of its loss of authority. 'Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption ... to the world. Our earliest words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease.'" Bachelard goes on: "... self-obsession of a church desperate about its own survival means that it looks little different from 'many purely human institutions, anxious, busy, competitive, and controlling.'" [ii.]

You're probably tired of me saying that I am concerned that our worship gatherings and the culture of our churches sometimes feel like nothing more than an ACLU or a political party or a town meeting with hymns. Worse, I feel so sorry for the clergy that we have who feel so compelled by their congregations to be entertainers, as though the worship and the sermon are all about giving our people a variety show of some kind. I have deep compassion for the priest who must follow the priest whose goal was to make people feel happy and comfortable on a Sunday rather than to make the living God real to them.

Blessedly, I believe the experience of COVID and the current cultural distress, which I hope and pray does not lead to greater civil unrest and costly crisis, has had an effect of bring more and more people to their knees, if not literally, than figuratively. I pray that the current rupturing is already, even now, showing tiny glimmers of healing. Breadcrumbs that are leading us on a path toward repair.

My last two Sunday visitations are cases in point. Church of the Messiah in North Woodstock is a church without pretense. It is increasingly shoehorned and crammed behind the brewery of the Inn at Woodstock with its backyard of detritus, dumpsters, a silo, pallets, and storage units. The people who come are not wealthy or of any obvious means. Their worship is according to the Book of Common Prayer, there is no procession, their music is via a Bluetooth speaker, there is no bulletin. Yet, the people know why they are there and for whom they are there—to worship the Living God. The prayers are unaffected and from the heart; almost everyone, including the young children are eager to share thanksgiving and intercession. "I am just grateful there is a world to live on," said a 10-year-old boy. There is time for silence. Not much, but enough.

At Grace Church in Concord, the people are attentive to the liturgy, seem to be receptive to my wandering sermon on the Transfiguration, are open and transparent in voicing their petitions and thanksgivings, and are eager to receive Communion. The service was reverent, but not uptight. Solemn without being precious. Real people coming to the Real Presence. At the coffee hour, we had a time of conversation and right off the bat a young man asked me, “How? How do we live in these days? Even a family meal reveals deep divisions. Friendships are at risk. How do we talk to each other? How are we going to survive?”

If we believe our purpose is to win an argument, compete in a debate of ideas, wrest reason from those who refuse to reason or even agree on what is true, then we are of all people to be pitied. Holding firm to that Enlightenment assumption that we can reason, argue, debate, or deliberate ourselves and our neighbors into salvation is exactly what has got us into this mess. And it won't get us out. This is not a capitulation to the Anti-Intellectualism which has been a hallmark of American life, and which is clearly in full flower in this present hour. It is rather a humble reckoning that our understanding needs to recover a faith that is pure, humble, and acknowledges that the Presence, the Logos, is deeper than our words and our arguments. It is found in contemplation and presence that precedes word and action.

Bachelard writes, “Jesus gives himself to the world not to displace or conquer it, but to love and reconnect it to the source of its fullest life, so the church must be. The church exists only for the sake of deepening the world's integrity by enabling its connection to and transformation by the life of God.”

She then quotes former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams: “the church's fundamental challenge is to occupy ‘space in the world solely for the sake of the world's eschatological solidarity’ that is for its fullness and reconciliation.” (page 101). New York Times columnist David Brooks has said that a culture changes not by political or governmental fiat, but when a small group of creative people find a beautiful way to live and the rest of us copy it. There is a shifting of the heart that is the result of how we see each other with a gaze of wonder. That requires, I think, a willingness to set aside our need to be right, correct, or even to appear smart or competent.

What does a contemplative church look like? How does the present moment in our life together as people of faith call us? If you watched the recent address to the joint session of Congress and its lack of charity and grace, then you do not need convincing that this is indeed a disfigured world. Or if your fingers are at all on the pulse of how people are relating to each other in parking lots, marketplaces, town halls, school committees, and even playing fields, which are now becoming battle fields in the culture wars. Not to mention in the inner chambers of our souls and hearts.

I am convinced that God is active and present in this moment. This is a moment of transfiguration in a disfigured world. The transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain was not a moment when Jesus was changed, but rather it was a revelation of his true nature. What is being called forth in the church? We are called to shine like stars in a perverse and chaotic time, revealing our deepest nature, our truest gift to the world—our identity in Christ.

Part of what the transfigured life looks like in Jesus was his clarity about his identity as God. Notice how Jesus rarely gets hooked or emotionally hijacked. He takes his time. Having created time, it is his time to take! He dwells consistently in the interval between impulse and act, expanding that interval from a tiny claustrophobic sliver to the whole universe. Witness the time he takes to get to Bethany upon learning of the death of Lazarus. Witness the time he takes to engage with the woman with the flow of blood, even

when one in authority and power is pressing in him to heal his own. Witness the non-anxiousness, the resting, in the stern of the storm-tossed boat. Witness Jesus' grounding and surety in his response to the hooks and attempts at entrapment by the Devil in the desert.

A contemplative church is a church in which we dwell co-temporally (with the same sense of ample time) as Jesus Christ. We will be more aware when the Evil One is trying to provoke our reaction. When an earthly authority claims our authority, we will know it is a trap. "Be sober, be watchful, the adversary prowls around like a hungry lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith." (1 Peter 5:8)

For the church to rediscover its true mystery, wisdom, and spiritual authority, Bonhoeffer was convinced that it needed to undergo a long process of "conversion and purification" until it would be able to utter the word of God in such a way that the world could be changed and renewed by it. In the meantime, he said, "our being Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action."

While I am appealing for us to mirror a more contemplative Christianity, I also believe we are not really that far from being a contemplative church. Am I talking about a new initiative, a new gimmick, an entirely new direction for the church? I am instead simply asking us to become more of who we are already—claiming and expanding our identity in Christ through contemplative and righteous action. To be honest, we got nuthin' else, my friends.

I'm curious about how this feels to you. Does it strike fear, grief or anxiety? Do you hear the devil speaking words like, "If you were really a church you would... you could..."? And, hearing those accusations, you might feel terror or a sense of deep unworthiness. I sincerely hope that instead it gives you a sense of release and an invitation to draw close to the source of all peace and life, and gain freedom from the need to be right, to perform, to win, to convince, to grasp or exploit.

In the words of Simeon in W.H. Auden's poem, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio"

*And because of His visitation, we may no longer desire God as if He were lacking: our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to Him who is always and everywhere present. Therefore, at every moment we pray that following Him, we may depart from our anxiety into His peace. [iii.]*

It is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender. We are not pursuing the building up of the church, but surrendering to the love, power, and presence of God leading us through death to new life. We are no longer pursuing our own agendas but surrendering to our unknowing and confusion in this time, asking God to lead us in another way. We are no longer pursuing righteousness for the world with our own righteous efforts, fueled by our indignation, but surrendering to being God's true habitation on earth and inviting others to join us in learning how to empty ourselves to the fullest extent that God allows—to surrender into God's peace.

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[i.] Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," 1939, translated by Mary McCarthy (New York: New York Review Books, 2005)

[ii.] Sarah Bachelard, "A Contemplative Christianity for Our Time," (Kindle Edition, 2021)

[iii.] W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson (Vintage International, 1991)