

## **Last Sunday after the Epiphany Year C 2025**

This past Monday evening Wade in the Water gathered in the All Saints Chapel for our monthly meeting. For those of you who may not know, Wade in the Water is the partnership between All Saints and Bethel AME Church that has been meeting each month going on four years now. Our purpose is, within the context of maturing friendship, to help bridge the racial divide between whites and Blacks in the city of Mobile... through shared meals, and honest conversation... and prayer. Implicit in our gatherings, in our conversations, is the awareness that injustice for any people, or person, is an injustice for all of us.

This past Monday we invited the executive director of Dwell Mobile to speak to us. Her name is Jeri Stroad. Dwell Mobile is an organization that assists immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in resettling in the United States. They assist with housing, legal referrals, transportation, job placement, moving furniture... whatever is needed for immigrant families seeking a better life in this country. Many of these immigrants are fleeing violence threatened by gangs and even their own governments in their respective home countries. In between our invitation, and our meeting, the Trump administration put a hold on all funding for immigration resettlement services. Dwell has lost several grants; one from the National Episcopal Church who was a recipient of government assistance regarding immigration; and there is a great probability that they will lose their principal grant from the federal government upon its scheduled renewal in mid-March. Currently, there are twelve or so staff committed to this ministry at Dwell, most of whom will lose

their jobs. And then for the immigrants themselves: The government has been subsidizing rent, and has provided a modest stipend for them who need financial assistance as they make the difficult transition from foreign lands into the United States. Most don't speak English; many arrive with only the shirts on their backs. The process of immigration is an ordeal that most of us can't imagine.

Suffice it to say that Jeri, the executive director, is stressed out, overwhelmed by uncertainty. She, and a dozen or so like her, here in Mobile, Alabama, have given their working lives for the good of a marginalized people in a country that at one time took pride in welcoming the immigrant into this country of promise and possibility. What has happened to us? One would expect that Jeri would be angry and bitter... but there was no bitterness in her voice as she spoke to us. What I heard in her calm and compassionate voice, in spite of her compromised situation, was hope and resolve. How can this be?... I thought. Toward the end of our gathering she said something that has been on my mind all week. She spoke of the resilience of the immigrants they serve; their contagious hope, their practical ingenuity; their courage... and then she said it: "I have decided that my colleagues and I must become like the people we serve." (repeat)

I thought of Bryan Stevenson's proclamation, vis a vis his ministry to those on death row... that we must be "proximate" to the broken of our world. But this was more than that it seemed. This was a call to a radical empathy, a spiritual bond, if you will... a profound knowledge of the other; of common ground... the embrace of contingent souls.

Our Gospel reading for today is one of the more famous. It is the account of the Transfiguration that we read each year on the last Sunday after the Epiphany. All three Synoptic writers tell this story. Jesus, along with Moses and Elijah, appear on the mountain to his disciples; his face glowing with a heavenly light. All three writers are employing their typological chops making the case that Jesus, in his teaching and preaching, is proclaiming the way ahead for the people of Israel, just as the prophets in his tradition did before him. All three Gospel writers evoke the giant figures of biblical history, Moses and Elijah, to make the point that Jesus, his life and ministry, are in good company; that he is rooted in the venerable tradition of the Judean faith. His face glows with the light of God like Moses on Mt. Sinai centuries before. Scholars love this passage so rife with biblical lore. On the mountain Jesus speaks of his departure... the word in the Greek is ἐξόδός... *exodus*; an obvious reference to Israel's departure from Egypt, from slavery to freedom. Biblical scholars point out that Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets, the whole of biblical history. Here on the mountain top, they say is the culmination, the climax of the Judean faith. This story is where we get the saying... "a mountain top experience" in which we bask in the glow of revelation. This passage is the definitive proclamation as to Jesus's place in biblical history.

If you're into belief, and belief systems, this passage is for you: Three notable scribes proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah, the embodied hope of Israel up and against the violence and abuse of power gone wrong; the anointed of God, no less, to lead God's

people into a new and just way of life. In the ancient world, gods, and the occasional god-like human tend to hang out on mountains. But the revelation on the mountain is only prelude to where the energy is in this story. The imaginative energy of the narrative occurs the next day... when Jesus and his friends come down the mountain. There they encounter a child beset with terrifying seizures; mauled by the demonic spirit that possesses him, Luke says. The boy would have been kept out of the public eye, and his illness would have brought shame to his family. Jesus heals the boy, restores his health and gives him back his dignity... not only his, but that of his family.

In our culture, we look longingly for the mountain top experience. We wish to know God; we yearn for the understanding of a mystery beyond our reckoning. We want to look upon the glowing face of God. Alas, we will always be disappointed. Good people, the experience of God is found down the mountain; it is found among the broken, the outcast, the marginalized of our world. We must become like them. I imagine Jesus wiping the foaming mouth of the boy he healed in a moment of profound and intimate empathy... soul to soul; body to body. It is in the suffering of the other that we meet ourselves... and there we find hope, and resilience and courage... and perhaps most of all, freedom from the illusions, and false promises of our world. In the other we see that our neighbor is more than we knew; and we find that we are more as well. In the other we see the very life of God.

I'm describing Love, of course. Our Christian mythology teaches us that God became human in Jesus of Nazareth because Love demands that God become like us. Jesus's martyrdom is testimony that God suffers with us in a broken world. Sometimes I think we should pray for God's suffering, for God's healing. God chooses to become like those God serves; and we must do the same. We become the lonely, the shamed, the abused, the sick, the outcast, the poor. Jeri Stroad is one such soul; laying down her life for the lives of others. Hearing her voice, a voice full of hope, and, dare I say joy... Hearing her words was enough for me to know that all, in its time, will be made well. As long as Jeri is in the world there is hope for us. And may we too, choose to be the hope of the world, sisters and brothers. May we bear the light and the truth of God. I know deep in my soul that the powers and principalities of our world, in our own time, in our own country, won't triumph over the faith of God's people. We just have to bring that faith down the mountain, give it voice, act upon it... and let it ramify.