

Feast of Our Lord's Baptism
January 10, 2021
The Rev. Emily Richards

The Tragic Gap

I was thinking this week about Parker Palmer's image of "the tragic gap". In *Healing the Heart of Democracy* he writes, "One of the most fundamental and challenging tensions we hold as citizens of a democracy is the capacity to stand and act in the tragic gap. On one side of that gap, we see the hard realities of the world, realities that can crush our spirits and defeat our hopes. On the other side, we see real-world possibilities, life as we know it *could and should* be because we have seen it that way. We're surrounded by greed, but we've seen great acts of generosity. We're surrounded by violence, but we've seen people make peace."

In the classic sense of the word Palmer asserts that "the gap is tragic because it's an eternal part of the human condition. We're not going to achieve perfection on these things. The founders knew that. They called for a more perfect union, but they established institutions of government that were designed to deal with our imperfections - an act of political genius. The challenge is to stand and act there without flipping out either on the side of too much of 'what is' - which leads to corrosive cynicism - or too much 'what might be' - which leads to irrelevant idealism. Both of which take us out of the action - out of the tragic gap. We have to stand there and keep putting one foot in front of the other, keep working for a better world, witnessing to what we know to be possible despite the discouragement of the hard realities around us."

Even before the horrific and tragic events that took place at the US Capitol building on Wednesday, I was thinking about Palmer's idea of the tragic gap in connection with our Gospel story. Mark's account begins with John the Baptist inviting his followers to join him in the wilderness, away from the center of political and religious power. And it is in this place on the margins of society, with the outcast and the oppressed that Jesus' ministry begins. As he comes out of the waters of the Jordan, the heavens are torn apart - a dramatic moment that can be lost on us, overshadowed by the voice declaring the truth of Jesus' identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." This has, more often than not, been the focus on this Feast Day - a message that is comforting

and affirming. But at his baptism Jesus is given not just an identity, but a mission—and his mission is as dangerous as it is affirming. The only other time Mark uses the word “to tear apart” is at the moment Jesus breathes his last on the cross, and the veil of the temple is torn in two.

His mission drives him into the wilderness to wrestle with the devil. It leads him into the heart of the world’s suffering, chaos, and despair. When God hears the cries of God’s beloved community, Jesus stands in the tragic gap of what the world is and what it can be. He never loses sight of his mission, speaking and acting from the truth of who he is and what he has been called to do. And it is by remaining even to his death on the cross in this tragic gap that we and the whole world are given the promise of wholeness, of recreation and restoration as God’s beloved. And a new vision of the beloved Kingdom.

Not since 1813 has a mob invaded the hallowed halls of the Capitol with destructive purposes in mind. Images of fellow citizens desecrating the People’s House sickened me. Five people died as a result of this attack. And instead of repenting, they rejoiced - posting pictures of themselves throughout social media. In the days since we have once again as a nation had to grapple with the truth ungirding these abhorrent actions. That many of our fellow citizens who entered the Capitol did so out of a place of white Christian superiority and nationalistic fervor. In the early morning hours of Wednesday, we heard that the grandson of a sharecropper became the first Black Senator from the state of Georgia. And in the afternoon, we saw a Confederate flag flown for the very first time in the halls of the Capitol. Standing in that tragic gap, we all must repent of our collective complicity in the self-serving rage and vitriol that enabled such violence.

It broke my heart to see a cross, the central symbol of our faith amid the angry mob with the proclamation, “Jesus Saves” written upon it. This is antithetical to the message Jesus embodied. Antithetical to the Jesus I love and serve and preach about, the Jesus that came to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed and healing to the sick and suffering. The Jesus who stands in the tragic gap and promises us a better life, a better world. The Rev. Lauren Stanley, a fellow Episcopal priest declared in a sermon, on Wednesday, the Feast of the Epiphany, “that Epiphany is an invitation to participate in a revolution. But not one based on white supremacy, conspiracy theories and white privilege. Our revolution that Jesus invites us into and which we have already said we

want to be part of because we are baptized is a revolution of love. Because after all isn't that what Jesus demonstrates in his ministry and mission? Jesus' ministry on earth was a demonstration of the wild, radical, inclusive and eternal love for all of God's beloved children."

I stand here before our baptismal font because I believe today more than ever, we need these waters to wash over us and help us begin anew. To die to the old ways of sin, to repent of the evil the enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf. "If we are to stand and act with hope in the tragic gap and do it for the long haul," as Parker Palmer believes "we must judge ourselves by a higher standard called faithfulness." As Christians our higher standard is found in our faithful commitment to carry out the mission and ministry of the Prince of Peace. To reclaim the truth of what it means to walk in the way of the cross as followers of Jesus and his way of revolutionary love. To actively plant seeds of healing and mercy rather than remain complicit through our silence or wanton ignorance in the hatred, violence and terror we witnessed on Wednesday. When commitment to Jesus' way of love is our standard, God's Beloved Community will come on earth as it is in heaven. We will with God's help. *Amen.*