

January 15, 2023

God Calls Us Continually

Isaiah 49: 1-7

Second Sunday after Epiphany

St. Clare's Church, Ann Arbor

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

Theologian Stephanie Paulsell says, that "God never ceases calling" [us]...from the rising of the sun to its setting. (*Feasting on the Word: Year A Vol 1 p 244*) God calls us over and over, little and looming, big and small, God calls us.

I don't know about you, but lately, I've found myself on the verge of being overwhelmed. And some days, truth be told, I'm probably a bit on the other side of that snowy apex, hip deep in powder, feeling the ground begin to shift under me, and wondering with an abiding anxiety if I am going to be able to stay on top of this avalanche of expectations.

The crisis of COVID is seemingly behind us, yet the virus continues to mutate and linger and throw a vague haze of dread.

Our communities of faith are back together worshipping but some attitudes and practices have shifted and going forward is not proving to be easy.

Our government, while the buildings are not being physically assaulted, I have a sense that the democracy, we studied in school seems to be perched upon a fault line of tectonic proportions. It's kind of stable now, but what's coming next? I read the news with a compulsive urgency.

And to add absurd to the important, I got clocked in the jaw on Monday night at my middle-aged ladies' water basketball game.

It's not an easy time.

Then I read the words of the Second Prophet called Isaiah,

God said to me, "You are my servant,

Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

But I said, "I have labored in vain,

I have spent my strength for nothing and for vanity..." Isaiah 49:3-4

I think to myself—"yes—this is how I am feeling! I've been called and yet, what am I doing, am I making any difference, or have I just labored in vain, spent my strength for nothing and for vanity?" Thousands of years ago, people were feeling the same asking the same questions:

What am I doing?

Am I making a difference?

Did I just try all these things to what end?

Thousands of years ago people were wrestling with the same feelings.
I feel seen in scripture—the resonance warms my heart.

The passage goes on, *“The Lord says, I formed you in the womb...God is your strength—*

Yes!. Now I feel hope, buoyed up.

But the passage continues. In rough paraphrase God goes on to say,

Actually its just too easy for you to take care of only the tribes of Jacob and the survivors of Israel, I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth...Isaiah 47:6

Sure you are exhausted, but God says, I actually think there is so much more you can do, not just for the people in exile in Israel, but salvation for the ends of the earth.

And it's at this point, reading, that I feel myself getting buried in the avalanche—
overwhelmed----more-- you are calling us to do more?

It's not an easy time.

Tuesday, I got a text from a young woman who I first met some 20 years ago as a newborn in the Children's Hospital Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Grace, who is a twin, was born with very complicated heart issues. She sent me a text on Tuesday, asking if I might come see her play that is being featured in the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival. She has a major role and she was one of the authors.

When is it Grace? I text

She writes back “Wednesday.” (Tomorrow I say?)

Yes.

Where is it?

University of Michigan—Flint. (I live in Detroit.)

What time Grace?

9:00...

9:00---Grace your play starts at 9:00 Wednesday Night in Flint?

Yes.

It's called “Memento Mori”—Remember Death.

Can you come?

Then comes a text from her Dad---Grace was wondering if you might be able to come to her play.

I looked at my schedule---turns out I was free at 9 pm.

I talked Susan into going.

I was exhausted. I prayed I wouldn't snore loudly during the performance.

We got there an hour early because I didn't want to wander aimlessly around the campus trying to find the theater---I've done that at Univ of MI in Ann Arbor.

We bought popcorn and watched the shows before Grace's play. Between acts we scored front row seats and settled into watch the show with a 600 college students.

When Grace made her entrance on stage—it took my breath away. Here was a kid I'd known for almost 20 years. Someone for whom I'd sat with her parents and her brother waiting for the results of surgery after surgery. Wondering if she would live, how all this trauma would affect her.

There she was, playing the sister of a young woman who has died.

The play is good, its really good. It went from good to soul searing when Grace's character says, "When I was a child I have five open heart surgeries. As a child I thought I would die, adults always spoke differently around me."

Then I knew that this was autobiographical, and I flashed to an image of sitting in her room after surgery 4—hitting a balloon with a face on it that I'd made by blowing up a latex glove. Or talking to her mom when they had gone to Stanford for a month for surgery number 5—I remember the fear, the pain, the helplessness I felt as I listened to her mom and prayed with them all.

There Grace was on a stage talking about her life and death, in a play that talks about the need for ritual, remorse, audacity and grace.

And as I sobbed and held Susan's hand in the front row of a theater in Flint, watching a kid I had known for years reveal herself to be a poised young woman, I knew that there was no other place I was supposed to be. We had been called to Holiness through Grace, by God.

Remembering Death, Memento Mori and embracing life, by answering God's call.

It's a hard time in the world my friends.

Yet God, who formed us in our mother's wombs, continually calls us, to carry on.
For we are honored in God's sight, filled with God's strength, and the "Lord who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel has chosen you." Has chosen me. God calls us, all of us, continually.
Amen.