

Back to the Future: So We can Learn, Change and Matter More

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Luke 4: 16-22

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry, XI Bishop of Michigan

Come Holy Spirit and enkindle within us
the fire of your burning love.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...” It is an insanely fraught, ferocious time in our world. I am aware that I offer these thoughts in the midst of a perilous period, and I understand that our siblings in the Middle East and in Ukraine are fearful for their lives, a threat we are seemingly not facing here in Michigan. Yet, I am convinced, that what we say and do, how we act, matters. How we embody our faith, how our actions are informed by our belief in Christ Jesus, matters in this moment more than ever.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...” As Jesus reads the scroll from the prophet Isaiah, he takes the people of his hometown synagogue back to a pivotal time in Jewish History. Not with a supped-up DeLorean and a “wack-adoodle” scientist, but with sacred words, embedded in the marrow of a faith community. Words from the prophet who proclaimed the year of the Lord’s favor. And called the chosen people to renew their faith and hope in God.

He invokes the words that Isaiah uses to call the people in exile, some 700 years earlier, back home to Jerusalem. Jesus goes back to Isaiah’s words to remind the people of his hometown synagogue of a time when the Lord God, sent a prophet to offer a vision of what could soon be. A vision of:

That which has crumbled will be restored, that which is in ruins will be renewed. The Jews in exile are being called to come home to Jerusalem to rebuild.

Jesus offers these words from the past, which have been fulfilled, to remind the people of his day of what can be, what is possible for them in the here and now.

Imagine seeing, a 30-year-old, who stands amidst his elders and says to them, *“Today, this day, it has all been fulfilled.”*

Jesus’ ministry begins in his childhood community of faith. His Galilean ministry, his public witness begins in a local community of faith. As it was then, it is now. This was a pivotal time for Jesus’ community of faith, this is a pivotal time for our congregations.

Many of our congregations, not all, but many have fewer people attending than ten years ago, many of our congregations have an average age of 65 or over, with fewer families and small children.

But I wonder, is it our numbers that matter? Is it our numbers that determine our efficacy? In the early church, the people were few, the earlier followers were women and outcasts. Yet still, we are the products of those early church people.

A friend of mine, the newly consecrated Bishop of Maryland, was asked what her take was on the declining numbers in the parishes in Maryland. And Carrie Schoefield-Broadbent said,

“Yes its true that our numbers are down, but I wonder, if we think back to the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s when we had so many people and our churches were packed to capacity, what issues of social justice did we actually address?...or when we had all of those people were we more interested in ourselves?”

She went on to say, *“I wonder what we might get done with fewer people who may in fact be more committed, more inclined to look beyond our church walls?”*

Like my colleague Carrie, I’m not so sure it’s about our numbers or our average age, but rather, whether or not our communities of faith are filling our souls. In our world, as it was in Jesus’ time, and the time of the early church, communities of faith, congregations are

essential. Congregations are key. Everything we do stems from and goes back to our Communities of Faith. Our ability to live out Christ's hope for the world is dependent upon our faith in Jesus and the grounding of our lives in scripture and prayer: Word and sacrament, weekly nourishment for our souls.

If we are fed weekly in our worshipping communities, then I have great hope that we can make a difference in the fragile world of ours.

Fed in worship we may do as:

St. David's, Southfield and **St. Michael's in Lansing**, offering gun buy back events.

Partnering with local officials and creating a place for people to get rid of guns they do not want, guns they do not need. And paying people for those guns. Then turning those guns over to the police so that they may be traced and properly destroyed. It's not like these congregations have extra money to buy these guns—they are actively raising it, living out their congregation's hopes, in the public square. I'm struck by the people of Church of the Messiah, who have been fighting to end gun violence in Detroit and our state for years and years. Their indefatigable witness, to "Silence the Violence" gives me the determination to continue our work toward **Ending Gun Violence in Michigan**.

St. Paul's in Brighton, clergy and parishioners regularly attend local library meetings, to protest and contest, when books are being challenged and attempts are being made to ban them. As a result of St. Paul's work, the Livingston County Diversity Council is putting together a coalition faith groups to fight book banning in all their local libraries.

Christ Church, Cranbrook has an [Interfaith Dental Program](#). A joint project of the Muslim Unity Center, Christ Church Cranbrook and the Delta Dental Foundation — this program provides 100 refugees with critical dental care throughout Eastern and Western Michigan offering care that is not covered by Medicaid and insurance.

Christ Church Cranbrook isn't our only community of faith reaching out to immigrants and refugees. Just a few weeks ago, the people of **St. John's, Plymouth** welcomed their first refugee family in their newly converted rectory. During an interim period, lead by a senior parishioner, Betsy Sole, and lots and lots of parishioners, St. John's has begun a new vital ministry with multiple secular partners, creating a home and a gentle landing for people new to America! I could not be more impressed!

I envision congregations doing as **St. Michael's and All Angels has in the City of Lincoln Park**. After five years of work in their community, securing grants, employing social work interns, seminarians and offering countless volunteer hours they created partnerships with elected officials, the school district, local service organizations, not for profits and other faith leaders. Then they facilitated deep listening sessions and resident surveys and found that the quality of life for Lincoln Park residents could be vastly improved if the city integrated the Lincoln Park Social Development Coalition (the coalition they created) into the official operations of the City of Lincoln Park. They are bringing their proposal to the City Council soon.

I'm in awe of what they have done and what they are proposing the city of Lincoln Park do.

I'm struck by **All Saints', East Lansing** and their work on racial reconciliation and reparations including a gift for \$130,000 to Justice League of Greater Lansing, MI. This endowment will support African-American homeownership, scholarships and money for entrepreneurial start-ups in the Lansing Area. Again, a congregation living out Gospel values in our greater communities.

I'm comforted by the ongoing feeding ministries we have in our dioceses such as the Open Hands Ministry sponsored by **St. John's in Royal Oak**, and the weekly breakfast programs at **All Saints', Pontiac, The Cathedral Church of St. Paul, St. Peter's, Hillsdale, and the many weekly feeding programs at Grace, Mt. Clemens**. And of course, **St. Andrew's in Ann Arbor**, who day in and day out for more than forty years have been giving their neighbors in need breakfast.

Nurtured and challenged by our communities of faith, individuals and groups then tangibly live out Christ's hope in our precarious and precious world.

These are just a few examples of the amazing ministries we have here in the Diocese of Michigan. And I long for many, many more.

I envision our communities of faith returning to our history and tradition, again and again for inspiration and solace, gathering regularly for communal worship, receiving sacraments and grounding all of our gatherings in prayer and study of our scriptures. Then going forth living out God's hope. Making a public witness of our Gospel values. We pray together, so that we may go out and serve and change our world.

Going forward in this difficult, yet promising time I hear the words read by Jesus, from the prophet Isaiah,

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring Good news to the Poor,

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,

And recovery of sight to the blind.

To let the oppressed go free.

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to them and sat down."

Friends, we are the ones,

needed by the world

and chosen by God, to fulfill these words.

It's us. You and me.

And I cannot imagine a group better suited to answer this Holy Call.

Amen.

I love being your Bishop.