

129TH Annual Council of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia
Address to Council by The Rt. Rev. Susan B. Haynes
February 27, 2021

WE HAVE SURVIVED A GREAT TRAUMA

In recent reading of Biblical commentary, I encountered the following story, originally published by Dr. Abraham Verghese in *The New York Times*. Dr. Verghese had been part of a medical team that cared for victims of Hurricane Katrina. Over the years, the doctor had learned to steel himself against the sight of human suffering, so that he could do his job. Then one night he treated an elderly gentleman whose home had been destroyed by Katrina. For two days, the man had perched on a narrow ledge without food or water. When a boat finally picked him up, he was dropped off on a bridge packed with other refugees. The doctor was deeply moved by the man's story and said the only words he could think of: "I'm sorry, so sorry." The man stood up, shook his hand, and said, "Thank you, Doc. I needed to hear that." Suddenly Dr. Verghese understood that his past attempts to steel himself against human suffering helped no one. He states, "The willingness to be wounded may be all we have to offer." (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2 – Lent Through Eastertide, p. 42*)

This morning, as I gather with you for the 129th Council of the Diocese of Southern Virginia, I feel as if I have nothing to offer you except my willingness to be wounded for you. We have all endured a great trauma. Over the last year, as we have been separated from fellowship, community, and worship, we have all been wounded. In some sense, there is nothing to say except, "I'm sorry, so sorry." When Jesus considered the plight of Jerusalem and the trauma that the city had endured, he lamented about how he longed to gather his people into his protection as a mother hen would gather her chicks under her wing. When I say that I am sorry for what you endured last year, that's exactly how I feel.



JERUSALEM! JERUSALEM!

How I've longed to gather you as a Mother Hen gathers her brood under her wings.

In the pandemic, we had to make difficult decisions – decisions not to worship publicly in our buildings, decisions to remain at home, decisions to be apart from one another. While some of us thought that we should stay in our buildings at all costs, others saw this as the only way to keep one another safe. We didn't all agree about the direction of these decisions, but I am grateful that we all did our best to abide by them. Thank you.

I never dreamed my first year as your bishop would be spent on a Zoom screen. Last year, as you'll recall, I left Diocesan Council with my running shoes on, ready to connect with you all over the diocese. I ran right into the pandemic. I never understood that the majority of my connection over that next year would be virtual only. While we did some good things this last year, it was not ideal; and I am sorry, so sorry. Sadly my running shoes remain mostly unused in the closet.



Holy Spirit Running Shoes

CHAOS PRECEDES GREAT CHANGE/GOD IS WITH US

You'll recall in last Sunday's lectionary reading from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was plunged into a period of chaos following his Baptism. Immediately following his Baptism, He was **driven** into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. Jesus didn't nonchalantly stroll into the wilderness. He wasn't out for an afternoon walk. He didn't stop to get a latte to drink on the way. He was **driven**. We are not told that He had any choice. Surely he submitted to it, didn't resist it, and maybe even allowed it. But he didn't necessarily choose it. It was thrust upon him. There in the wilderness he wrestled – with Satan, and wild beasts were his companions. He had some help from angels, but he wrestled and struggled nevertheless.

It has been said that chaos precedes all great change. This was true for Jesus. He started out as a carpenter from Galilee; but through the chaos of his Baptism and wilderness temptations, He became the Savior of the World. But it didn't happen easily. There was a period of instability and chaos which happened first. When he emerged from the wilderness he didn't emerge to return to carpentry. He emerged to save.

Just about a year ago, we too were thrust into a wilderness. When the danger of the pandemic mandated that we forsake our beloved worship and fellowship customs, we were thrust into a wilderness of wrestling and trying to figure out how to be the Church, how to live our Baptismal

promises, in the desert. And how we have wrestled for the past year – trying to worship on the computer or the telephone, trying to stay connected to each other through phone, email, mail and text, trying to do good to our fellow humans without touching them or even being in their presence! We are ready to emerge from this desert. Hopefully we don't have much longer in this wilderness.

HOPE: PERCENT POSITIVITY AT 8%

Now I'm going to pause for just a moment to give you a pandemic update, and then an announcement. The percent positivity rate for Covid-19 has finally reached 8% within the Commonwealth of Virginia. We hit that milestone on February 24. I have said that when the Commonwealth reaches 8% positivity rate and stays there for two weeks, then churches may re-open their buildings for in-person worship provided local positivity rates are also 8%. This means that if the percent positivity rate remains at 8% or below until March 10, then churches may open their building for in-person worship beginning March 14. All COVID safety protocols that were in place prior to our last shut-down in November would remain in effect, but buildings would be open again. And I need to stress that each church should then make its own decision, paying close attention to the metrics in their individual localities. My beloved family, we are therefore looking at the possibility that we will be worshiping again in person for Holy Week and Easter! (I'm going to pause briefly to allow you to offer your virtual applause).

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? (5 Initiatives inspired by our Baptismal Covenant)

But now back to my Council Address. We now have light at the end of the tunnel and we are about to emerge from darkness.

But I need to warn us about something. When we emerge, we will not be returning to what we knew before. We will not be emerging in order to do business as usual – to conduct Church in the same way as we did before. We will not be embracing the same beloved customs and rituals in quite the same way. We will emerge into the post-pandemic Church, and that church is going to be different.

This morning I offer a brief synopsis of where I hope we will go as we seek to be the church after the pandemic. Before we chart a course along those lines, let's review the charge I gave you at last year's Council. When I asked you to put your own running shoes on, I was inviting you to launch into living your Baptismal Promises as if you really believed them. Let's refresh our memory as to what those promises are:

Will you continue in the Apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Over the past couple of months, the staff of the Diocesan Council and I have been reflecting afresh on these Baptismal promises and how we can live into them in new ways. How can we take the

lessons we have learned from the pandemic and continue to be the Church? As we have reflected, five initiatives have emerged, and we would like to present those initiatives. They are not set in stone and serve today only as a jumping off place. You will be the ones to help us shape them as the future unfolds.

INITIATIVE NO. 1

Christians who follow Christ within the Diocese of Southern Virginia engage in a RULE OF LIFE that includes a commitment to Prayer, Study of Scripture, Acts of Charity, Community and Worship Life.

One reason that Christians come to church is that they want to learn how to lead lives of meaning and purpose. Our Baptismal promises mandate a commitment to worship, prayer and study. Every Christian should have a set of disciplines that supports this commitment. Every church parish or other faith community should embrace a Rule of Life that supports their commitment. The Diocese also should engage in such a rule.

During the pandemic we have been challenged to keep these commitments. We have risen to the challenge. At the beginning of the year last year, the Diocese of Southern Virginia had two parishes offering some sort of virtual worship. Just a few months into the pandemic that number had risen to 65. We learned how to do study and fellowship in online forums. We figured out safe protocols through which we could continue to address basic human needs. We learned how to be the Church even when the building was closed.

As we move forward from this pandemic wilderness, the Diocese stands ready to help you continue to reach out beyond your four walls with grants, technological support, formation, and genuine down-to-earth cheerleading as you embrace your own Rules of Life.

INITIATIVE NO. 2

Every faith community has a unique charism to offer. The Diocese commits to empowering and supporting all communities, large and small, to maintain and model healthy parish life. We will devote energy and resources to healthy congregational development, conflict resolution, and healthy relationships. The goal of this initiative is to establish *healthy, supportive* CONNECTION throughout the Diocese.

Once again the pandemic challenged us to maintain our connections, as parishes and as a diocese. We connected via virtual Open Office Hours, Virtual Book Studies, Virtual Town Hall Meetings, Virtual Bible Studies, Virtual Coffee Hours, Virtual Dinners and other fellowship events, Virtual Vestry Meetings, and Virtual Worship. We learned how to connect parts of the diocese which had never before been connected. And we learned how to reach out and connect with those who otherwise could not have been connected to church. In many instances, we gained new members.

As we emerge from the pandemic, the Diocese plans to continue some of its own virtual connections. Additionally I, as the Bishop, will try once again to connect with every parish in the diocese

over the next year, either through a visitation, a meeting with the vestry or an adult forum or through Open Office Hours.

In the fall, we will be launching the long-awaited Diocesan Congregational Development Institute – a diocesan wide program devoted to the raising up of healthy and vibrant congregations, regardless of size. Even now we are beginning to train those who will help us to implement this program. We have many formational plans as well for the empowerment of Lay Persons, including an exciting initiative to train lay preachers.

No one parish or community exists as an island. We are all connected. We are ALL the Diocese.

INITIATIVE NO. 3

The Diocese will commit to engaging the journey to BECOMING BELOVED COMMUNITY, improving our understanding of what it means to live “racially just lives,” and endeavoring to be agents of truth telling, healing, justice and racial reconciliation.

The pandemic provided the backdrop against which many were able to see in sharp relief the presence of systemic racism in our culture. Members of our diocese began to ask for the creation of Sacred Ground study circles and other opportunities in which to pursue education and take action. In response, I addressed the present Diocesan commission called “Repairers of the Breach” and charged them to widen the scope of their focus on anti-racism efforts. Specifically I asked them for a three-pronged approach of Education, Anti-Racism Training and Action. The focus would become racial justice for all people of color. All lives would matter – black lives, Latino/a/x lives, and the lives of indigenous tribes. This is huge work that we have taken on and the Repairers of the Breach would like to challenge and invite you, if your heart is stirring in this area, to join them in their work. If we are going to address all three areas – education, anti-racism and action, additional help is imperative.

Contact Canon Lynn Farlin at the Diocese

INITIATIVE NO. 4

The Diocese will commit to developing and maintaining a model of CREATION CARE that articulates and implements an action plan advancing our stewardship, not only of Diocesan resources, but of the earth and all its resources.

The desired establishment of a Commission on Care of Creation was delayed last year by the need to address the pandemic. We will continue this year with its establishment for the purposes of education, training, and action for the Care of Creation as well as for the wise stewardship and of our diocesan and parochial resources.

INITIATIVE NO. 5

The Diocese will commit to develop and promote a model of EVANGELISM that enables us to proclaim by word and example the Good News of Jesus Christ, empowering us to tell our faith stories with the kind of ease and conviction that will attract people to our way

Last year we also intended the establishment of a Commission on Evangelism, but the pandemic intervened. The pandemic taught us quite a bit about evangelism. The post-pandemic Church will need evangelistic efforts on all fronts as we re-open and re-build. How fortuitous that our key-note speaker helped us to begin to think about this! The Diocese, through the implementation of the Diocesan Congregational Development Institute, through training and through the availability of grants, hopes to fuel this energy and enthusiasm for proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

As a Diocese, we speak of the Baptismal Promises and these initiatives as a “Living Vision.” We are committed to embracing this Living Vision, and we invite you to join us in this embrace. There is work for every Episcopalian, for every congregation (large or small). We are committed to seeing that our Diocesan life embodies our Baptismal Promises. It is our hope that our collaborative and communal work on these initiatives will point us in that direction. When Jesus sat in the wilderness, he wrestled with Satan and was companioned by wild beasts. In the wilderness of the Pandemic, we too feel we have wrestled and perhaps have sat among wild animals. But Jesus was also attended by angels; and these angels assisted him in his transition. We too can count on the assistance of angels.

While I know that we are tired from the toll that this pandemic has exacted, this is certainly not the time to rest, although we may be tempted.



GET UP! WE HAVE WORK TO DO!

Hebrews 12:1-2 says *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”*



Living the Vision...

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race...

Let us pray:

All praise and thanks to you, most merciful Father, for adopting us as your own children, for incorporating us into your holy Church, and for making us worthy to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. As we go forth into your world, renew in us the covenant you made with us at our Baptism. Send us forth in the power of that Spirit to perform the service you set before us; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.