

# Pastoral Letter

February 25, 2021

Dear Companions on the Journey,

How shall we keep a Holy Lent this year? It will help to start with where we are right now.

In some ways, it feels as if Lent never ended last year. In March 2020, we entered the wilderness of pandemic. While we have grown accustomed to living with COVID19, we also carry the sorrow of so many lives lost, along with the loss of our way of life. It has been a hard year marked by tragic death, historic conflict, racial killings, economic upheaval, and the never-ending worry about the unknown.

Grief may be one of the most underestimated responses in this year of pandemic. At this writing 502,000 Americans have died of COVID19. So many funerals we could not attend. Countless memorial services waiting to be scheduled post-pandemic. We also grieve who we thought we were, a country of people who could unite and conquer any foe. Our nation's inability to work together created a landscape of unnecessary death. Division has lengthened the time we have spent in the wilderness of pandemic, racial strife, economic distress, and political conflict.

Many of us are working or studying at home. Fortunately, many of us stayed well. We have been generous with ourselves and our resources to make sure others have food, friendship, and our prayers. We have learned how to volunteer from our living rooms. And those who are able, have run errands for those who cannot safely do so themselves. We are getting through this. We have adapted to pandemic and we are grieving.

Grief has become a defining characteristic of this time and we are slow to recognize its presence. We tend to say and believe we are "okay" if our life is safe and our family members are well. Yet, we are the body of Christ. We feel losses in the body because compassion is a defining characteristic of our faith. Compassion makes us wonder how others are doing, brings tears to our eyes when we know of suffering, motivates us to care beyond our tight circle of family and friends. Compassion makes us more like Jesus.

How are we to keep these forty days dedicated to God? We could start by bringing our authentic selves rather than an aspirational self into the presence of God. When Jesus heard of John the Baptist's death, he went to a desolate place to be by himself (Matthew 14:13). Could it be that shock and sadness motivated him to be alone in sorrow and prayer? What happened in the short time that he travelled and arrived in a desolate place to restore his compassion for the crowd that soon followed? While we can imagine the scene, we cannot know for sure what took place in his time alone, but one thing is certain, Jesus was his authentic self.

Every year we are invited to observe a holy Lent. This year, I encourage you to bring your authentic self into Lenten observations. Your grief, gratefulness, sorrow, relief, anger, frustration, hopefulness, and all that is your response to this time are invited to observe Lent with you. The practices of Lent found in the Book of Common Prayer (p. 265) require facing the truths of this challenging time. While this is hard spiritual work, it is also freeing spiritual work. God loves us as we are and will not leave us stranded in wilderness or grief.

I know God is calling us to be a new kind of church for the future. A church that sees the hungry crowd in need of healing and is moved by compassion to respond the way Jesus did. Perhaps Lent in this long wilderness of pandemic is shaping us into authentic followers of Jesus Christ. Our sorrows and sighs may take us to a desolate place on the way to finding the promise of God's healing and restoration.

You have my prayers for a holy and authentic Lent.

Grace and peace, Bishop Hughes