

“In the face of this news of violence and insurrection at the United State Capitol, when we have to determine what to do next, do the next loving thing.”

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St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Pastor Adrienne’s greeting and prayer at the start of the service:

Beloved,

Today’s violence at the United States Capitol must be condemned in the strongest possible words. We have created a government founded on giving voice to the people through elections and representation in our capital. Our system of government is not without its flaws, but the attempt by a few to use violence and threats to prevent the functioning of our government is wrong. Tonight we will hear about how the incarnation - the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem - unites all people. We will also hear about how threatening the Good News is to power. Tonight we will be reminded that, as Christians, though our baptisms, we are called to be signs of wholeness and healing and peace. In the midst of today’s news, I call on you, my siblings in Christ, to pray and to bear witness to God’s message of peace and mercy, of grace and justice that is not just for some but for all. I call on you to condemn this violence and to be numbered among those who work for peace - real, lasting peace for each and every citizen of this nation and of our world - that God’s kingdom come, and God’s will be done. Let us pray.

O God of justice,
God of peace and safety,
God who is our refugee and strength, a very present help in times of trouble,
your dream - your kin-dom - is one where lion and lamb lie down together,
where the adder is of no threat to the curious toddler.

We pray, Gracious God, we pray.

We pray to condemn violence.

We pray that you would end the enmity among us.

We turn to you - you who reign about the heavens - and plead for help.

We pray that you would strengthen those who work for peace.

We pray that you would give resolve to those who desire equality
in our nation and around the world.

We pray for renewed trust in our electoral process.

We pray for the peaceful transition of power.

We pray for safety in the United States tonight,
for in you alone do we dwell in safety,
and you are the source of unity,

you who are Father, and +Son, and Holy Spirit,
and in whose name we pray.

Amen.

The Most Loving Thing

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage. 'When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel."*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage. 'When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Let us begin by admitting how complicated this beloved story is. We can celebrate the idea of bringing gifts to the baby Jesus, of giving of time and treasure and talent. We can also celebrate that this story begins the smudging and erasing of the lines that we draw between insider and outsider, between Us and Them. But [as Prof. Richard Swanson points out in *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*] it seems the Magi go home unconverted. And their arrival brings danger and their departure, death. Their stop in Jerusalem alerted Herod to a threat, but their absence sent him into a murderous rampage, killing every toddler in Bethlehem. This is a complex story. Even deciding to cheer for the little baby Jesus - to set our sights on him only - seems in some way counter to the gospel that promises light and life to all people, when so many will be harmed. Our world is complex, today's events are merely the latest evidence. Our grasping after power that we might lord over one another breaks us all. But it is into this world that Christ was born and for this world that he died. It is into this reality that we, too, have been born and to this world that we are called through our baptisms. This reflects what the mystic and teacher Henri Nouwen says is our "privileged vocation." He says, "In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a

love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.” We have the privilege of looking at the enmity in our world, of looking at a myriad of false choices, of looking at Us/Them, of looking at death and destruction, and saying NO. MORE. In the end, we do not know how Love has come nor how it will eventually accomplish all it has yet to do, but our privileged, baptismal vocation is rooted deeply in the hope that it will yet accomplish all it has to do.

What we know about the magi can be counted on the fingers of a single hand. They were astronomers from the East who had some knowledge of Israel and brought three gifts. We don’t know how many there were, nor their names - all this is given to us by tradition, not Scripture. We don’t know anything more about their motivation than that they come to pay homage to what they believed was a newborn king. And homage, by the way, is a pledge of service. When I encounter this story, I wonder, what, exactly, would make them take such a risky trip? Which then tumbles into a question about me, what would make me take this kind of risk?

And the truth is, beloved, we are asked to take this kind of risk for the sake of the Gospel. We are called to take this kind of risk in the face of the kind of news we received today. It isn’t a call to anger. It is not a call to retribution. It is a call to wake up. It is a call to journey as far as our own community and, yes, beyond, not for selfish gain, not to get our way, not to get even but to be the sign that Love has come to our world. To say, “Our God reigns.” We are asked to acknowledge the complexities of life on earth and then to love anyway. And, beloved, there is really just one thing to do. It is a riff on something I learned from Lovett Weems, a noted Wesleyan church leadership scholar and professor emeritus at Wesley Seminary in DC. He said that, when deciding what congregations should do to live out their mission, they should “Take the next faithful step.” In the face of this news of violence and insurrection at the United State Capitol, when we have to determine what to do next, do the next loving thing.

Beloved, embrace your privileged vocation with passion and do the next loving thing. I beg you to not wait. Tonight, most of us will be riveted to each headline, but as you sit vigil, beloved, let your heart be opened so you can do the next loving thing. The poet Henry David Thoreau once said, the only remedy to love is to love more. Love more. May our every decision not begin by asking not can? should? or how? but, what is the most loving thing I can do right now?
Amen.