

Diocesan Convention Address
Bishop Jeffrey Lee
October 9, 2021

I arrived there ... met with the monk ... poured out my heart ...

“Jeffrey, I don’t think this retreat is going to be so much about *you*.”

It is amazing how almost anything can be turned into a gigantic ego project. Even legitimate anxieties and worries and fears. When we become transfixed by those things, they tend to multiply. Truly, what we focus on grows. The ego thrives on my deep-seated suspicion that it is really all up to me ... to win, to get it right, to be successful, to save the church, you name it.

We’re in good company. Consider those first disciples, the original biblical keystone cops, the first friends of Jesus, always walking around in the “duh” zone and a friend of mine puts it. In that reading from Mark we heard at Morning Prayer, I imagine them, led by the professional fishermen in the group, pulling against the storm, Jesus, apparently oblivious to it all, asleep in the stern. The disciples’ fear is one most of us know from our own high-functioning egos - “We’re gonna sink! We’re gonna lose. We’re gonna fail. We’re not going to make the budget. The world we knew so well, and had some sense of mastering - who knows what it will be like, or if it will be there at all when this pandemic ends.” The ego is a good thing you know; it keeps us safe from walking out into traffic. But it does want to convince us that it is the only real thing about us and that it really is all about us. But we know better ...

It’s a pretty stormy world, isn’t it? Global pandemic. Our blustery, fractured, violent political life (talk about ego projects!), economic uncertainties, social changes to make our heads spin. Church attendance numbers in a tailspin. Crystal balls fail us. Did you know that at several prominent universities you can now get a Ph.D. in Futurist Studies? Folks in that field base their work on the observation that we live now in a VUCA world - VUCA stands for Volatile, Unpredictable, Complex, and Ambiguous. The church, this diocese, our congregations — all of us have entered a time of increasing uncertainty. As someone put it at our recent meeting of representatives from the three dioceses in Wisconsin, “Whether we want change or not, change is upon us.” Constantly.

Well, into all of this steps Jesus. The church stands rightfully in the midst of life, just as Jesus did and Jesus did not promise us an escape hatch from the real world. He promised something much more than that – not an escape, not magic, not anesthetic – he promised us peace. His kind of peace. The kind that can still the waves. “Why are you afraid?” He asks. “Have you still so little faith?” That storm on the sea of Galilee was real - those storms still come up fast, and on that relatively shallow lake, they can be dangerous. It’s not that there aren’t very real dangers in this world, God knows. But it is not up to us to save ourselves - we can’t. The promise of Jesus is that if we will walk by faith (faith makes a much better verb than a noun, you know)— if we will walk, live, breathe by trusting not in ourselves, but ultimately in the power of God, there is nothing in this world to be afraid of.

That’s the good news. The best news there could ever be. It is the faith of the church, the faith that gathers us here today, it’s why we have to be together, even online. Our trust in the power of the living God is the only excuse for this beloved church, with its budgets and buildings, and clergy and committees and all the rest. I believe it’s the only real justification for considering the possibility of a reunited Diocese of Wisconsin ... which, by the way, is all we have agreed to do at this point, to consider, ponder, discern the possibility of reuniting - I’m enthusiastic about that

possibility, but there's a lot to do before diocesan conventions could make such a move. And the question at the heart of our discernment must be this: How would such a decision enlarge our capacity to live the good news of Jesus in this broken, beautiful world? How would it enhance our mission of making real the mighty good news of God's endless love and mercy and power, good news for a world that seems so captive to chaos and anger and fear?

It is certainly what our baptismal promises are all about. It's why we recite them again and again throughout the church year. They are not complicated theological statements, they are not nuanced political platforms. They are straightforward promises about the choices we make in our day-to-day lives. Promises to turn away from our endless and deadly self-absorption. Promises to choose to live more and more like the Lord we follow, to live not for ourselves alone but more and more like Jesus. To make the peace of God real in this world - that's how the winds are made to cease and the waves brought to calm. When we determine to practice the peace of Jesus. To respect the dignity of every human person, to seek and serve Christ in all people. To work for a world of justice and peace for everyone. To share the good news of God's unfathomable love for all, that God will not rest until every man, woman and child who lives has a place at the table of his love, a place at the table of God's delight.

So let us commit ourselves to shape the life of our congregations — the life of this diocese — to be a church that does not run away from the pain and confusion and chaos of our lives. Sometimes it takes a storm for peace to come. Remember, Jesus is in the boat with us and that makes all the difference. I ask you to join me in sharing the good news of Jesus' unconditional love with the world. Tell your friends. Invite them to join us in following Christ. Jesus is with us and there is nothing to fear.