

April 18, 2021 3rd Sunday of Easter
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Acts 3:12-19, Psalm 4
1 John 3:1-7, Luke 24:36b-48

[Quotes from Rev. Dewayne Davis speaking at the Vigil for Daunte Wright on April 12, 2021.
Quotes from Ruby Sales speaking in the Healing Our City Prayer Virtual Tent on April 12, 2021.]

**Let us pray, may the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight,
O God our Savior, our Sustainer. Amen.**

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus.

“You are witnesses of these things.”

That’s how our gospel this morning ends.

It ends with Jesus reminding, confirming, pronouncing that these traumatized disciples
who have been through so very much...
are witnesses to all that they’ve seen and heard,
all that he’s taught them.

Lord, have mercy, these are some heavy days.

Each in our own ways, we, too, have witnessed much.

And, whether we felt it or not, Jesus has stood among us, offering a measure of peace, of mercy.

Today...In the shadow of the killing of Daunte Wright,
as we anticipate the verdict in the killing of George Floyd,
as names like Anthony Thompson, Jr. in Knoxville, and young Adam Toledo in Chicago fill our ears,
our hearts, our minds,
as voices and bodies rise up for change, and emotions are so very high,
as we dare open ourselves to how broken—how painfully broken—our system is, we are,
let us turn for a moment to scripture and the prophets in our midst.

In a bit we’ll take time for prayer and poetry, for lament,
but for now I want to offer a few words of reflection”
what I’ve seen and heard, what I have witnessed these days.

The first reflection I call Witness.

In our gospel, the disciples have spent the better part of the week since Jesus’ death
debriefing every twist and turn:
what they’d seen, what they’d heard,
witnessing to what they’d experienced, what God was and is doing.

I don’t know about you, but this past Monday, the day after Daunte Wright was killed.

was punctuated by news clips and messages,
by anger and sadness and confusion,
by organizing and lament.

Jane and our girls and I joined hundreds, maybe more, in an early evening, pre-curfew, prayer vigil near where Daunte was shot on a quiet, suburban street in Brooklyn Center.

Pastor Dewayne Davis from Plymouth Congregational concluded the vigil with powerful words.

“Easter is about resurrection,” he told us, “And resurrection is about uprising.”

“It’s about getting up out of these places of death.

It’s about standing up against places of empire, and people who will take your life.”

And then he went on,

“You can’t leave here and unknow what you know.

You can’t unsee what you just saw.

You can’t go and get comfortable again.”

The more times black and brown bodied people are killed at the hands of those we expect to protect us,
the more it’s clear that something is desperately wrong.

Some of you have been following all of this very closely,

others are joining in, it’s hard to avoid.

You can’t unsee what you just saw, unknow what you know.

Dear friends in Christ, “You are witnesses of these things.”

Think for a moment, how has your sense of racial justice changed over the last year?

How has what we’re witnessing shifted your thinking, your believing, your acting, your praying?

How has it changed your engagement with the news? Or your conversations with friends and family?

I’m being changed, and I suspect you are, too.

As Pastor Davis says, “You can’t ... unknow what you know.

You can’t unsee what you just saw.” Witnessing.

My second reflection is about solidarity and holding space.

On Thursday evening I went back to Brooklyn Center.

This time it wasn’t to the corner where Daunte Wright died, but rather to Humboldt and 67th,

where the Brooklyn Center police station is ringed by high fencing.

On one side of the tall fence are enforcers, some on the roof, guns drawn, armored equipment at the ready.

On the other side of the fence, in the street, Humboldt Avenue, are protestors. Right behind the protestors, is a large apartment building where families live. In a matter of a moment, that space can move from feeling like a block party, to a war zone. One of my colleagues who has been around these situations for 30 some years noted that this scene has a different feel from other protests, even from George Floyd Square, for emotions on all sides are ratcheted high and the enforcement escalates quickly. I joined an interfaith and interracial group of clergy standing in solidarity, praying, pushing back on the state's preemptive use of force against these protestors. I went because I can't unsee what I've seen, or unknow what I know.

Our Psalm today, Psalm 4, was adapted in the form of Confession.

I was struck this week by how the Psalm begins:

"Answer me when I call, O God of my right!
You gave me room when I was in distress."

You gave me room, you held space for me, God.

When our Black and Brown kin are being executed by the state with their hands up,
when young ones are hurt,
when mothers and grandmothers can't rest,
we must hold a space, a holy space, with room for complex emotions, for justice now.

And we must keep that space until our frayed trust and broken system are rebuilt.

So here our witness means standing in solidarity, holding space. That's my second reflection.

The third reflection is Repentance, truth telling.

It's short but mighty, brief but vital.

Church, we as individuals, and we as community, and we as part of systems, must call for repentance.

In our call for repentance, we must include ourselves.

Yes, "they" should repent, the empire, "The Man," but also, I can repent, you can repent.

Remember. there's freedom in repentance...freedom.

You and I need to hear Christ's forgiveness as much as the next person.

Our systems and institutions are built around a perceived unfailing perfection,
where we can't admit our broken history, our broken present.

Friends, that's messed up.

Our inability to admit our sins, is a sin in itself.

You and I need to bear witness to God's love that is stronger than our pride,

fiercer than our fears, gentle and grace-filled beyond measure.
Repentance, truth telling will take us farther than we may imagine.
And thankfully, this Repentance, this truth telling, is Holy Spirit work.

And finally the reflection is Hope.

In 1st John we read, “Now we are God’s children,

but it has not been revealed what we are to become in the future.”

On Wednesday, at the 8am Healing Our City Virtual Prayer Tent, Ruby Sales spoke.

Ruby Sales has been around.

She is an icon in movement work for justice, she is a public theologian, and a scholar.

Referencing her own ancestors and speaking of southern apartheid,

she said, “If we do not tell the truth, we no longer can be hopeful.

Without truth, there is no hope...only cynicism.

We must use this time that we’re in together as an opportunity to speak the truth.

And we must speak the truth in the spirit ... of pragmatic optimism.”

“To look at life for what it is, but to never give in to despair....

To believe in transformation and change and redemption.”

And then she said, “We all have the possibility to make a new story for ourselves and with each other.”

Possibility. Hope.

Dear ones, in this moment between Daunte’s killing and George’s verdict, at this intersection, on the

 cusp with much anxiety and fear, Jesus stands in our midst pronouncing a word of peace.

Peace be with you.

Deep, just, truth-telling, honest peace be with you.

Times like this can wear us down, and they can call us back to God.

After our hymn, we’ll have a special time of prayer for this moment, this week.

Zach will read a piece of poetry, by Donte Collins, an Augsburg University Graduate. called, What the Dead
 Know By Heart.

This poem will be a base for next week’s Sunday Forum led by the Racial Justice Team.

Today we’ll hear the poem and then we’ll have some space for lament, for song, for prayer,

 with an image to guide us until Pastor Barbara and Zach transition us into the Prayers of the People.

May the God of mercy meet you right where you are..

May the Lord of love accompany you.

And may the Spirit of courage fill you, again and again, always.

You, beloved, are witnesses of these things, all of these things. Amen.