Epiphany 1B

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St. Dunstan's

The Rev. Patricia Templeton

They Have No Shame;

They Have Forgotten How to Blush

There is a common theme running throughout all three Scripture readings today. Did you notice it? The Holy Spirit appears in each of the lessons.

In Genesis we hear that the Spirit, appearing as wind, was with God at the first moment of creation.

"The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."

In the readings from Mark's Gospel and Acts, the Holy Spirit shows up at baptisms, both of Jesus and later some of his followers, a sign of God's blessing and presence with them.

The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, appears throughout both Old and New Testaments. It is the Spirit who gives God's words to the Old Testament prophets as they call the nation of Israel and its people to account when they stray from the ways of God.

The Spirit gives strength and courage to the followers of Jesus throughout history.

The Holy Spirit, God's spirit, brings light and truth, creativity and courage, justice, generosity and kindness.

This emphasis on the Holy Spirit provides an interesting contrast to the events of the last week in our nation, which has been swept up by a spirit that is anything but holy.

Scripture warns of this -- that there will be false spirits, evil spirits, false prophets who say they speak for God, but who instead are filled with evil.

"Beloved, believe not every spirit," we are warned in 1 John. "But try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets have gone into the world."

"Beware of false prophets," Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew. "They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves . . . Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit."

False prophets may disguise themselves as apostles of Christ, Paul warns in Second Corinthians. "And no wonder!" he says. "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange to see his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds."

For the last five years this country has been held in thrall by a false prophet, filled with a spirit of evil. This false prophet, aided by the bully pulpit of social media, has brought us no light or truth, no courage or justice, no kindness or generosity.

Instead he has promoted a spirit of division and lies, cruelty and intolerance, injustice and darkness.

We will know whether a spirit is of God or not by the fruit it bears, scripture tells us.

This week the fruit borne by the false prophet came to fruition with a vicious, violent, and deadly assault on the United States Capitol, where our lawmakers were carrying out their constitutional duty to certify the results of the presidential election.

This assault was shocking, but it should not have been a surprise. The false prophet and his abettors have been sowing the seeds for this moment for years.

Our president first came to political prominence by questioning the validity of the citizenship of the nation's first African American president.

His campaign rallies were filled with lies and dangerous rhetoric. He encouraged violence against members of the press, who he dubbed "enemies of the people." He called for his political opponents to be locked up. He spoke disparagingly about immigrants, Black Americans, women, the disabled, and Muslims.

There may have been those who thought in 2016 that those campaign rallies were just performances, just entertainment. Surely his tone would change once he was in office and the gravity and responsibilities of the presidency weighed upon him.

Those hopes quickly proved unfounded. Early in his tenure he called some anti-Semitic, white supremacist protesters in Charlottesville "good people." We heard those words echoed this week when he called the seditious mob "special" and told them he loved them.

The president's rhetoric, always lie-filled and dangerous, became even more so after his resounding defeat in November's election. The election was a fraud, he raged. "Stop the steal," he thundered to his followers.

But let's be clear. The president's evil that culminated this week could not have happened without the help of his acolytes, who include many of our elected representatives, and many evangelical Christian leaders, who embraced him from the beginning.

The more we learn about Wednesday's insurrection the more frightening it becomes. The thugs chanted to hang the vice president, who became the target of rage when he refused to declare the election fraudulent.

Rioters had zip ties, which they planned to use as handcuffs for lawmakers they wanted to kidnap. Three bombs were diffused and a bag of Molotov cocktails was found.

One rioter wandered the Capitol waving the Confederate flag, a symbol of an earlier generation of traitors.

Others wore t-shirts emblazoned with the words "Auschwitz Camp" and the phrase 6MWE, a white supremacist slogan that means Six Million Wasn't Enough, a reference to the Holocaust carried out by their heroes in Nazi Germany.

This is the fruit of the followers of the false prophet.

One common refrain I have heard time and again since Wednesday afternoon is that this is not America; this is not who we are.

But, tragically, it is part of our story.

In the early morning hours after the Capitol was overrun by the false prophet's thugs, eight Senators and 139 members of Congress voted not to certify the election results. Many of them repeated his lies in their speeches.

There is so much that is great about this country and its people, many of whom live lives of faithfulness and goodness. But it's time for us to acknowledge that there is a shadow side to our greatness and it runs deep.

Our dark side did not begin with this president and it won't end with him. It has been present from our beginning, a crack in the foundation of our founding. But this president has mined its deep veins, has nurtured and encouraged it until it erupted into insurrection.

I've also heard some say that this president should not be held accountable for Wednesday's insurrection, that he should not be removed from office, that he will be leaving soon anyway.

"It's time to go forward and begin to heal," one of the president's acolytes said.

But our dark side will not go away by ignoring it or trying to paper over the cracks in our foundation.

Scripture has something to say about that.

"They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, crying 'Peace, peace,' where there is no peace," the true prophet Jeremiah says.

"They acted shamefully, they committed abomination, yet they were not ashamed, they did not know how to blush."

Healing comes from acknowledging our shadow side and working to confront it. And that begins with holding accountable those who participated in Wednesday's insurgency and those who incited it.

Many of our nation's religious leaders feel the same way.

On Friday night, the leaders of denominations in the National Council of Churches, including our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, issued a statement which says in part:

"For the good of the nation, so that we might end the current horror and prepare the way for binding up the nation's wounds, we, as leaders of the member communions of the National Council of Churches, believe the time has come for the President of the United States to resign his position immediately.

"If he is unwilling to resign, we urge you to exercise the options provided by our democratic system.

"In addition, we recognize the need to hold responsible not only those who invaded the Capitol, but also those who supported and/or promoted the President's false claims about the election.

"We grieve for our country at this difficult time and continue to pray for the safety and security, and ultimately the healing of our nation. Holding those who have abused their power and participated in these immoral and tragic actions, in particular the President of the United States, is one step toward healing."

Amen.

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