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St. Dunstan's

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It's Not Getting Easier

I was doing some web surfing this week when a headline caught my eye. "My Church Doesn't Know What to Do Anymore" it screamed at me.

"Leading a church is harder now, in 2021, than it was in 2020," writes Elizabeth Felicetti, rector of St. David's Episcopal Church. in Richmond, Virginia, in an essay in *The Atlantic*.

"Last year was hard, but at least the answers were straighforward. Now I'm struggling to find a way forward. I don't know how to make this work.

"After a year of trying to assure people that we were still the church even when we weren't in the same room, I don't know how to convince them now of the importance of gathering in person.

"I'm sick of innovating and pivoting and wondering if St. David's is struggling because my faith isn't strong enough. When others tell me that 47 people have joined their church since the beginning of the pandemic, expletives dance in my head."

Felicetti isn't the only one. In a blog post this week by one of my colleagues, Stuart Higgenbotham, the rector of Grace Church in Gainesville, he confesses that he gets butterflies on Sunday morning, worrying about how many people will show up.

"Person after person tells me that we have all just gotten out of the habit of going to church on Sundays," he writes. "I smile and say, 'Of course,' and take a deep breath and walk away."

These two essays were on my mind when I had a two-hour Zoom meeting Thursday with Bishop Wright and the nine other priests who serve as deans of their convocations, the geographical divisions of the diocese.

The bishop began by asking each of us to name something for which are rejoicing, and something that we lament.

The rejoicings were varied -- the achievements of a child, time off, watching the World Series.

The laments were all alike. We all agreed with our sister priest in Richmond -- 2021 is harder than 2020, which was the most difficult year of our ministries.

But 2020 also forced us to be creative and innovative, to come up with new ways of doing just about everything. There was a certain sense of excitement and satisfaction about that. We had been thrown into an uimaginable situation, and for the most part we rose to the occasion.

All through the long season of Coronatide we longed for the day we could come back to church and have everything back to normal. But it hasn't worked out that way. We've been back for six months, and still nothing seems normal.

We did get a glimpse of normal for a few weeks. We took off our masks and sang and hugged and had coffee hour. And attendance rose.

Then the delta variant came along, the masks came back, coffee hour ceased, and attendance plummeted. Not just at St. Dunstan's, but everywhere.

But this is really about more than attendance. What's happening in the church is a reflection of what's happening in other parts of our lives.

Psychologist Adam Grant put a name to it in an essay in *The New York Times*.

"At first, I didn't recognize the symptoms that we all have in common," he wrote. "It wasn't burnout -- we still had energy. It wasn't depression -- we didn't feel hopeless. We just felt somewhat joyless and aimless.

"It turns out there's a name for that: languishing.

"Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness," Grant says. "It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield."

Does that sound familiar?

Grant doesn't say this, but I believe languishing can describe not just how an individual is feeling; it can also describe what is going on in a culture, or organization, or church.

During the first year of the pandemic I often compared what we were going through to the Israelites in the wilderness.

The wilderness is not only a place, it can also be a state of mind, a time where it can be difficult to sort out perceptions and reality, where nothing seems certain

In the wilderness our illusions that we are in control are stripped bare, the structures and routines that form and support our lives are suddenly gone. It's a place of uncertainty and chaos, where anxiety abounds.

That certainly describes much of the year 2020 and the beginning of this year.

What we don't think about too much is that the Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years.

Surely there were long stretches of time when they languished, when they felt like they were aimlessly slogging through the desert, when it was difficult to see what the future held, or imagine life in that long-promised land.

It may look like those were empty years, devoid of purpose. It certainly must have felt that way.

But something important was happening during those long decades. God was shaping the people, preparing them for what was to come.

In those languishing years they let go of their identity as slaves, and took on the identity of God's people. They learned a new way to live -- shaped by the covenant God made with them, and acknowledging their dependence on God.

It took 40 years for the Israelites to get ready for life in the Promised Land.

Now I'm not suggesting that we will be in this situation for 40 years. But we are in a fallow season. On the surface it may look discouraging, like we are languishing, but fallow seasons are also necessary, periods that allow new life and energy to bubble up.

As Bishop Wright said on Thursday, "We can't be who we were, so let's figure out who we are now.

"This is a time for purpose. What do we need to let go of? How do we love like Jesus in this time and place?"

That doesn't mean that we let go of everything. It does mean that we open ourselves to new ways of thinking and acting.

We are going to be doing that in a couple of ways in the coming weeks.

One of the things many of us realized during the pandemic was the importance of community. We missed seeing each other. We missed hugging and talking face to face. That's one reason why attendance rose when we reinstated coffee hour and fell when we stopped it again.

That was the time that we connected, when community was formed. It's an important part of our liturgy, our life together that we need and miss.

In talks with the vestry we have decided it's time to take a look at the life of our community. After so many months apart, how can we strengthen our ties to one another? How can we build back better?

In the coming weeks Elizabeth Wong Mark and Luis Ottley will be asking small groups to come together to dream about ways that we can strengthen the ties of our community, how we can build relationships and care for one another.

We also have an opportunity to give thought to how we serve those beyond our walls. In his stewardship talk last Sunday, Bob Longino detailed all the ways we have helped others during the pandemic.

I won't repeat it all again, but what you have done the last 18 months is truly remarkable. And now we will have the resources to do more.

Our parishioner Joni House, who died last year, has named St. Dunstan's as a beneficiary of what she called the Bird House Trust. Once a year we will receive money from the trust to use for outreach. Joni's hope was that it will allow us to do things we haven't done before, to dream of new ways of serving God's people.

If you're interested in talking about how we may do that please let me know.

And I'm happy to tell you that our life together will slowly move towards normal in a couple of ways.

First, beginning next Sunday we will be allowed to have "communion in two kinds" again, that is we may have both bread and wine. We cannot drink from the common cup yet, but we will be able to intinct the host from a common chalice. I'll give you more details of how that will work. For me, that's an important symbol of our common life in Christ.

And also beginning next week we will resume coffee hour. We still have to wear masks, but we can use what Bishop Wright jokingly called the Delta rule.

The Delta rule, as I learned when I was on a Delta flight last week, means wearing masks, but removing them when taking a bite or sip. For us what it means is that we can gather together after the service for that important time of community.

Small steps toward normal. Small steps toward new ways of thinking and being God's people in the world. We may not be able to see it yet, but God is at work, calling us to new ways of faithfulness and life.

Amen.