

PEOPLES PRESS

JOYFULLY DEFIANT FOR THE SAKE OF A JUST WORLD

a congregation of the United Church of Christ, the Alliance of Baptists, and the American Baptist Churches

FROM THE PASTOR

With thanks for your expressions of compassion since Mother's accident and death, I offer these post-tragedy thoughts on baptism and being people of faith.

Baptism was on my mind before, but more and different since I have kept vigil following a terrible accident left us waiting for my Mother to die. I actually wrote about baptism shortly before the terribleness (you can read that [here](#)).

Our Thursday book group had just finished reading Walter Brueggemann's *Tenacious Solidarity: biblical provocations on race, religion, climate and the economy*, (Fortress Press, 2018), a collection of essays and lectures originally delivered or published from 2015-2018 or so, essays gathered under a theme of covenantal fidelity, *hesed* in Hebrew, often translated *steadfast love*, or what Brueggemann calls "tenacious solidarity." The collection is a compelling invitation to rethink faith in a damaged world.

In chapter 19, late in the book, he begins to tie it all together with a call for "recovery of baptism as a world-changing sacrament."

Have I ever once imagined that baptism is world-changing? I wondered. Can I imagine that my own baptism was even my-world-changing? And why do we baptize?

We talked about it in our book group, folks from a bunch of traditions, folks with our own understandings, or our self-professed lack of understanding. Why do we baptize?

Tradition? Membership ritual? Guarantee of afterlife?

When we talked, I tried, as I always do, to keep us rooted in this world, this place of calling and need. We are people of Jesus, after all, invited to see something else and make a better world.

But what if we can see baptism as initiation into a worldview? I asked in that prior essay. *Baptism back then was an overtly political act. Can it be again?*

This week, I'm leaning into baptism as more than one thing.

Fifteen years ago, my Mother had a brain tumor, which, though benign, left her with substantial recovery work to do. In the before-surgery and the rehab post-surgery, she said exactly what she'd said so many times in my life — "it's in God's hands."

In the immediate aftermath of that earlier event, as various folks were working very hard to remove the last stubborn staples from her head prior to discharge, I sat with her, holding her hand and fighting back the tears for the pain I knew she was experiencing. She asked me to sing. I asked what I should sing and she chose a familiar song my young niece had sung recently with the children's choir at their church:

*Our God is an awesome god
who reigns from heaven above
with wisdom, power and love;
our God is an awesome god.*

I sang, but you know my voice cracked and it was hard to get through it. For my Mother, though, it was a sure statement of her uncomplicated faith. She had been baptized in her Baptist church when she was 12, and had never wavered in her belief that she was in God's hands.

February 21, then, last month, just four days after a fall, as my family faced the excruciating task of instructing that her breathing tube be removed, I thought of that conviction, that song, that moment — and all the moments of her life of uncomplicated faith.

That night, among the songs and psalms and favorite scriptures I knew she loved, I read aloud to my unconscious Mother part of Jan Richardson's blessing for winter solstice:

*This blessing
does not mean
to take the night away
but it knows
its hidden roads,
knows the resting spots
along the path,
knows what it means
to travel
in the company
of a friend.*

*So when
this blessing comes,
take its hand.
Get up.
Set out on the road
you cannot see.*

*This is the night
when you can trust
that any direction
you go,
you will be walking
toward the dawn.*

As the next three days passed and Mother continued to breathe despite expectations, we reminded her of what she already knew, even if she wasn't conscious to know anything at all: that she could, with the same certainty she'd known all her life, fall into the arms of a loving God.

I don't know what all baptism means. But I know it is more than one thing.

I still believe it is a commitment to a particular kind of resistance to the powers of this world. I believe it is a call to a task of creating the world Jesus imagined. But, for my Mother and her grieving family, it was also the grace to face the worst moment with just a little less despair.

I'm not saying baptism is a requirement for God's mercy; that's not how I know God. I'm not saying it is about saving a seat in some far-away heaven; I'm still not sure what I believe about that, and, as you've heard me say before, the ending of the television show *The Good Place* makes as much sense to me as anything else. My faith isn't nearly as uncomplicated as my Mother's.

But for a few days in the worst time of our life, there was, for us who would remain, the comfort of knowing that a baptized faith in the *hesed* of God was making my Mother's journey a little less disorienting for her.

God's tenacious solidarity. A gift in the hardest of times.

— pastor deb

Jan Richardson, *The Cure for Sorrow: a book of blessings for times of grief*. Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press. 2016, 2020.

TRANSITION NOTES

Jamie Schmidt is Moderator of Peoples Church, and will keep us updated on transition things in this space.

Five years ago, when my family first visited then-Woodside Church, we were wounded. We thought we had made good choices for our little family, but the time in our former church had hurt us. We hobbled into the doors of Woodside, on the advice of a friend who said, "Jamie, I think I've found the church for the rest of us." "The rest of us", as I understood it then and still do, are those striving for something more than feeling good on Sunday. Those looking for something other than memorized Bible verses and ladies' brunches. Those seeking out something other than judgment and meanness that can come with church.

So we found seats in the old building, in the small chapel. Now a friend, but then a kind stranger, Dee gave us a bulletin and a gentle welcome. A very stylish woman greeted us, as we entered the room. Linda Angus still has a way that makes me feel welcomed.

I don't remember each detail of the sermon on our first Sunday, but I remember hearing a wonderful laugh (at the appropriate time!) during the sermon. I still find Karen's laughter at Deb's jokes a highlight of my Sunday. Our questions of a children's area led us to Laura, who, with a broken arm and a calmness about her, was with the children but took time to share with us.

We came back, week after week. The sermons kept us focused. They are passionate, hard, beautiful, inspiring. But we also came back because we found a home with Dee and Karen, Linda and Laura, Jim and Kat. With Jay and Leslie, with Joe and Clif. We found a home for wounds to start to heal. We found a home to learn from Tom, from Linda Lee. From Carla and Dale. We learned from and prayed with the not-named-but-loved countless others who have a great impact on our family's life.

It is dangerous to mention people because it's not possible to mention everyone. But my point is this: Peoples Church is the people. We are Peoples Church! We are moving, without hesitation, into a new era. The Garland Declaration isn't wavering and neither are we!

As the moderator, I am listening to the voices that know the history of this church as well as the voices of those that will be the future. Pastor Deb will spend the Easter season with us and will preach her last sermon here May 1st. After that, an interim pastor will be with us as the Search Committee works to find our next pastor. (*That Search Committee is listed elsewhere in this edition. - ed.*) This process will take 6-12 months. During that time we will keep you informed of our process through email and text. Please be sure that you are signed up to receive these.

We are not alone. We have our partners, the United Church of Christ, the American Baptist Churches, and the Alliance of Baptists, sources of encouragement and of candidates when the time comes.

Please know, if you are a member of Peoples Church, you may be called upon to help in some capacity. Please keep an open mind and an open heart. We will have many needs as we navigate this together.

Please reach out to me or other leaders with questions and thoughts. Know we will not always have the answers or be able to share the answers, but we can listen and absorb. Let's keep our eyes on the future. Let's stay positive through this experience and be gentle with each other. Someday, when we are on the other side of this, let's be able to look back and marvel at proving how strong we really are!

Blessings,



- Jamie

PEOPLES' PASTORAL SEARCH COMMITTEE

Last month, Pastor Deb announced her resignation, as she has accepted a call to a congregation in Colorado. (You can read her resignation letter and leadership response here: t.ly/P3jZ.) Her last Sunday is May 1. Since then, your leaders have been laying the groundwork for a successful transition.

Here are the folks guiding the pastoral search: **Carla Pierik, chair; Linda Angus, Dee Johnson, Harvey, Adam Schmidt, Carol Higgins.** Please hold these folks in a spirit of grace, and trust they will do what is righteous for this congregation — even when they can't tell you what's happening!

OUTREACH & SOCIAL ACTION (OSA)

We have received thanks for our support in 2021:

- **Youth Arts: Unlocked** received \$250.00 in their 10th year of bringing the arts to court-involved youth. With such gifts they bring expression, learning and discovery to youth in the juvenile justice system through weekly visual arts, dance, theatre, poetry and yoga workshops.
- **Motherly Intercession:** \$250.00 for serving children of parents currently or previously incarcerated. MI works to strengthen families by breaking the cycle of intergenerational incarceration. Some 45,000 children in Genesee County have a parent who is or has been incarcerated. A prison sentence for a parent punishes the children, who lose stability in their lives and often have no means of visitations. Motherly Intercession provides tailored support both during and following incarceration.
- **Michigan Council for Youth Justice (MCYJ):** \$500 to work through policy, practice and legislation to reform an unjust system. This was the core group that passed "Raise the Age" requiring children be 18 years old before they can be imprisoned as adults. MCTJ works to reduce confinement and supports trauma-informed, racially equitable, socio-economically and culturally responsive, community-based solutions for Michigan's justice-involved children, youth and young adults. It offers information and organizes actions. At its annual gala May 5 (at the Weber Center, Ann Arbor) it will announce plans for the 2022. *We hope to have representatives there!*

Finally, OSA will gather friends and members to attend the June 18 Poor People's Campaign March on Washington DC. Watch for more info or contact [Carla Pierik](#) or [Jay Cummings](#).

CREATION JUSTICE

Woodside is a member of the Michigan chapter of Interfaith Power and Light that envisions "a stable climate where humans live in right and just relationship, interconnected with a healthy, thriving, natural world". We support their mission to "inspire and mobilize people of faith and conscience to take bold and just action on climate change."

One of IPL's top four critical climate policies in 2022 is Federal Rights Protection, specifically the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act. "The John Lewis Voting Rights Act would protect voters against discriminatory changes to voting rules that target communities on the basis of race or background. The Freedom to Vote Act would protect and expand voting rights, take steps to remove dark money from political campaigns, and limit partisan gerrymandering — all steps that help us tackle the climate crisis."

Woodside's Creation Justice team members have already sent our letters to our Senators and President Biden to move quickly to pass the Freedom to Vote, the John R. Lewis Act. Won't you join us?

Go here to read more: t.ly/Z2Im. Or here to share your views: t.ly/S0Mj.

IN THE CONGREGATION

Zoom links are on the church calendar [here](#). Need more info? [Just ask!](#)

ADULT FORUM, 9:30 am Sundays, is beginning Mariama Kaba's [We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice](#). Join in by zoom or in person at church. And let us know if you need a book.

THURSDAY EVENING STUDY GROUP, Thursdays 7-8:30 pm by Zoom only, is just getting started on John Dominic Crossan's [Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision](#). Need a book? We got you.

VIGIL FOR RACIAL JUSTICE is still gathering 1-2 pm Thurs, on the Genesee Courthouse lawn. But only if the temp is above 20°.

THINKING ABOUT HOLY WEEK & EASTER WORSHIP. There are several special services in April that we're planning for right now! If you want to read, pray, light a candle or participate in some other way, email [Karen!](#)

WORSHIPPING IN A COVID TIME. Our stellar Covid Advisory Team has lifted the moratorium! If you're vaccinated, masked and willing to distance, join us in person Sundays at 11 am. Not feeling it? Find us live on Facebook and YouTube.

FACEBOOK GREETERS NEEDED! These are folks who welcome folks to worship on behalf of Woodside each week. You can serve from the comfort of home or in the sanctuary. Let us know and we'll train/orient you to the task. Willingness to jump in? Willing to try? Talk to [Jamie](#).

NEW TEXT ALERT SYSTEM. We are shifting to a less expensive messaging service in the next two weeks. If you're in our church directory, you're all set. If you're not, watch for a new link on our website to sign up!

ALLIANCE OF BAPTISTS is our next arena for agitation. Peoples Church is creating a short video compilation to introduce our plant-based resolution to the Alliance. We need several 30-90 second videos of individuals or families telling where they are in this journey toward plants, why it matters or how they began. Willing? We can help you record! If you're willing, please email [Pastor Deb](#) ASAP!

MINISTERS DISCRETIONARY FUND. This is the fund through which we help folks keep lights on, avoid eviction, pay for needed medical care or other emergencies. Jay Cummings administers this fund, and says it's getting a little low. If you can make a special gift, please do. All the regular ways, just mark it "discretionary fund."

NEW MEMBER INFO SESSIONS convene this Sunday, March 13 for a series of 3 meetings. If you're wondering if Peoples Church is right for you or whether this is the time to formally join, log on for these zoom meetings to find out more. We'll welcome new members on Easter Sunday.

NAME CHANGE UPDATE. We are quickly becoming Peoples Church in the public and congregational imagination! These things take a little time, however. You'll see changes in our website, our social media, our email addresses, our banners and signs. Watch for it! And after a couple of weeks, let us know if you find the Woodside name lingering someplace.

FLINT POET LAUREATE SEMAJ BROWN has invited Peoples Church to read for the Virtual Poetry Gallery/Flint Reads Poetry, an exhibition of era poems read by groups. The recordings will be part of the permanent archives of the Academy of American Poets. (*Readings are all pre-recorded, so no worries about needing multiple takes.*) If you could imagine reading a poem for posterity, email [Linda Angus](#). This is going to be so good!

WHAT OUR DENOMINATIONS TEACH — GENDER EQUITY IN HEALTH CARE.

Peoples Church "What Our Denominations Teach" series continued in January with a look at the Alliance of Baptists' statement regarding Women, Transgender, and Gender Non-Conforming Health and Reproductive Justice. The document can be found [here](#). [t.ly/Wlou](#). Reflections here are from Mary Ellen Fox.

In our discussion, three major questions were considered:

1. What do these statements accomplish?
2. What did this document say, and what would we have liked for this statement to have said?
3. What are we being called/asked to do, if anything?

The statements of our denominations obviously do little if general membership is unaware of them. Having a statement that is unseen is ineffective and unproductive.

Our initial reaction was that it was good to have a statement from the Alliance of Baptists promoting the importance of health and reproductive justice. The wording is earnest (*recognize, affirm, value, committed*) and asserts trusting people's ability and moral capacity to make decisions in their lives.

Further examination, however, led to the conclusion that what is left unsaid is far more important than what is written. There is no mention of what, exactly, any of the problems or barriers are that are in place. (*There is a footnote link to an article from the National Center for Transgender Equality dated April 1, 2012 titled Transgender Sexual and Reproductive Health: Unmet Needs and Barriers to Care.*) There is no mention of the vital role of the Supreme Court (SCOTUS) in the issue. The role of racial injustice in particular is given nothing more than a passing mention. The final paragraph ends "*In addition to prayer, we pledge to work to protect and advance healthcare, human rights, and justice for all.*"

So, thoughts and prayers are covered but not one actionable suggestion or idea. However, in time-tested Peoples Church fashion, we came up with several ideas about what actions might be taken.

- First, pressure your national legislators on health care and reproductive rights. As with every other issue, they need to hear from constituents.
- Write to the SCOTUS justices, as they are human and care about popular opinion (that may be open for debate, but you get the idea — apply pressure.). [t.ly/C6UW](#).
- Collect signatures for the ballot proposal to make abortion legal in Michigan (it currently is illegal here, but superseded federally by Roe v Wade). This ballot measure would make it legal regardless if Roe v Wade is overturned or further weakened. [t.ly/u7GM](#).
- Look into the potential to forgive medical debt related to gender health care issues. Work to influence companies we (congregationally or individually) are invested in to participate or begin such an action.
- Read related material, possibly including Handbook for a Post-Roe America by Robin Marty. I also saw an Amazon link for *The Care We Dream Of: Liberatory and Transformative Approaches to LGBTQ+ Health* (Zena Sharman, 2021), but have no personal knowledge of this book.

Our affiliated church documents are only as good as we, the members of said denominations, make them.

Our next conversation, 7 pm Tuesday, Mar 22 via Zoom, We will discuss 2 more statements from the Alliance of Baptists. Hope to see you there.

We'll read:

- Joint Statement on Racism in the US (2020) [t.ly/ruNV](#).
- Ahmad Arbery: A Call to Outraged Love (2020) [t.ly/xD3V](#).