

Well, here he is, again, returned from kind of a long journey, during which he met Mr. COVID not once, but twice. He has worked across the long reaches of cyberspace and then face to face with a kind and knowledgeable psychologist to be evaluated as to his psychological fitness for the undertaking to which he has now turned, assured by her of that fitness. He has been examined, not by one but by two fine physicians, to assess his medical well-being, and has been assured that he is, said the first doctor, in very good, and said the second, in excellent health. (He got an upgrade between July and September, COVID notwithstanding.) He has been Zoom interviewed by the good people at St. Martin's charged with selecting an Interim Rector, and he has interviewed them a little too.

He found in that mutual conversation what at least for him was and remains a profound sense of call into the interim work in which St. Martin's itself has been engaged for six months now. He has felt, too, a powerful connection to God's people at, and those touched by, St. Martin's, a connection that began when he first appeared on the campus here to meet with the parish's remarkable Rector's Warden back in May, and that grew steadily into what sure felt like a call, as those late spring and early summer weeks sped by, and that bore up through weeks of absence from those people and this place during which

he prayed often and hard, threaded himself through some deep self-examination, spent hours seeking and receiving the counsel of many of the wise people in his life, attended faithfully to the concerns that accompanied, in some quarters, the idea of this potential summons, and took very seriously the question God threw at him as he was driving along one of the back roads of New England in the late summer listening to the Willie Nelson's Roadhouse channel on Sirius radio when he heard the perky strains of a very old country song by the great country singer, Bill Carlisle, singing out, just to him:

"Too old," Bill sang, "Too old. He's too old to cut the mustard anymore." And then the verse: "When I was young, I had lots of pep./ I could get around, I didn't need no help./ But since I'm old and gettin' grayer/ The people all look at me and say: Too old, too old, he's too old to cut the mustard anymore./ He's gettin' too old, he's done got too old!/ He's too old to cut the mustard anymore." And then came my favorite verse: "I used to could jump like a deer/ But now I need a new landing gear./ I used to could jump a picket fence/ But now I'm lucky if I jump an inch!/ Too old, too old! He's too old to cut the mustard anymore."

Well now, he thought, that's a serious question being posed there, and it deserves a serious answer. And the answer came to him in that journey through summer and

into f i'm all: he believed, and he hoped that, God willing, he still had some mustard cutting left in him. He felt like he could cut that mustard, by the grace of God and with the love and support and help of all of you, right here, doing this joyful and necessary work.

So it was that, with a glad and gladdening heart, he was delighted to accept the call of the Warden and Vestry early this month to join with them and with all of you in this ministry. And he, that now even older-ish (full disclosure:he entered his 80th year during this period of discernment!), gay-ish, occasionally bumbling priest returns to this holy place, to this altar of grace and love, and to this hallowed pulpit on this Advent morning. And let me tell you this: his heart is full to overflowing with joy, tempered by a little bit of trepidation, and seasoned by, well, his many many years of ministry across more than half a century during which he is pretty sure he's learned some things that might be helpful in this ministry, in this liminal time, this in-between time, this Advent time.

I am so glad to be here. Thank you for having me.

And now, the Gospel work begins.

Because we are in a liminal time. That's a good way, I think, of thinking about the apocalyptic vision poured out to

us in the Gospel today. And if you think about it, we really are in that kind of time, not only here at St. Martin's, but on this planet, "our island home."

Advent is a little bit penitential in this way: a former time is passing away; and a new time has not yet quite revealed itself; and our common job is, I think, to ask the harder questions about how we have been, literally, how we have been, in the former times. How have we done? Where have we perhaps wavered, or strayed, or outright screwed up in the ordinary living of our lives as members of the beloved community of God? What can be reconciled? What can be forgiven? Where might it be useful to put away the resentments or anger that we've nursed, maybe for years? Are we able to do the hard hard work of forgiveness?

That is the work of Advent, the work of preparation, and so it's good that we begin that work together, now, on this first Sunday of this very first Advent in this time, in this place, with this community.

This is the oldest, most hallowed work of human kind. Time and time again, we are summoned out of the old and into God's New: a New that we can barely glimpse from here, nor do we need to, right now. Not yet. Not yet.

I love the Great Litany as a way of beginning this season, and I love to chant it too. It's rhythms feel like the heartbeat of God's cosmos writ large, on the one hand, and seen in painful particularity, on the other. I am grateful to the wonderful Tyrone Whiting for indulging this great love of mine and spending the better part of his Saturday redoing the leaflets so we could share that repeated prayer: Savior, deliver us. Hear us, O Christ. Hear us, O Christ. Have mercy on us: give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life.

That means taking stock, praying deeply, forgiving greatly, loving massively, being God's beloved as much as we can be, in every tiny and large thing we do, as individuals, but more important, as God's Holy Community: for that is what we are. We are nothing--nothing!--if we are not One Creature, One Body, inhabiting as best we can the mesmerizing, the broken, the joyful, the dirging, the dancing, the loving Body of Christ. The Gospel today calls us into that Body, which both is and is to come.

While I was journeying to this moment back in the summer and again in the fall, I twice was asked, once directly by my psychologist interlocutor and once indirectly in the questions I am directed to ask all those who are to be received or confirmed into the Episcopal Church by the

Bishop when he comes to visit us on the last Sunday of this Advent: who is Jesus to you, asks the Bishop; and what is the Gospel to you, asked the psychologist. I answered the psychologist, and I testify to you, that the Gospel is this: Loving God whole-heartedly, and loving one another--across all difference--the same way: whole-heartedly. And I added that love is always--always!!--an active verb. It is about, as my namesake saint, James, said, "being doers of the Word and not hearers only." And just this week, in a Facebook post from an old friend of mine (and a onetime member of this parish) Sarah Pevelier, and in the wake of the Colorado Springs shooting and then the Walmart shooting, and then the Overbrook High School shootings--in the wash of bullets and blood that stain our nation and ravage our common life, I found this answer. What is Jesus to you, you ask?

This, I answer, in a poem written by Jay Hulme, in *The Backwater Sermons*. It's called *Jesus at the Gay Bar*.

He's here in the midst of it--
right at the centre of the dance floor,
robes hitched up to His knees
to make it easy to spin

At some point in the evening

a boy will touch the hem of His robe
and beg to be healed, beg to be
anything other than this;

And He will reach his arms out,
sweat-damp, and weary from dance.
He'll cup this boy's face in His hand
and say,

my beautiful child
there is nothing in this heart of yours
that ever needs to be healed.

Well, of course, there is plenty of healing to be done, and yet, in our heart of hearts, and in the heart of this community, is the pure beating Heart of God, calling our hearts to be with that heart. And we want to be ready. We do. We pray we may be about getting ready. And most of all, we pray that our hands may have the strength and grace to reach out and cup the faces and hearts of pain that each of us carries, that all of us carry together, and that we encounter in every moment of human connection in our lives, and to speak that word and to be that work of compassion which is our birthright and our calling.

And yes, I was glad, glad, glad, glad when they said unto me: Let us go unto God's house, unto the house of the Holy One. I was glad!

Amen.