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## **The *Hineini* of God**

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 1-10-21  
The Baptism of Jesus, Mark 1:4-11; Gen. 1:1-5; Isaiah 52:3-6*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. Amen.

When St. John's called me to become its next Rector two years ago, I was so delighted and moved and daunted. I had been a priest for just two years, and an Episcopalian for only nine years. Luckily for me, St. John's has often called first-time Rectors, including Mariann Budde and Susan Barnes. You're sort of like a teaching hospital, but for priests. And as soon as I arrived, a series of increasingly complex crises began occurring. By the time the pandemic arrived I thought I had learned not to say "things will calm down now." But I'm afraid that when the wheel of the year turned from 2020 to 2021, and all the legal challenges to the election had run their course, we had developed a vaccine, St. John's had made the incredibly courageous decision to center the work of racial justice and healing as a primary expression of following the Way of Jesus, and we even have a new Bishop who is justice oriented and who preaches robust sermons about following the Way of Jesus, I thought, we are in the clear.

And then the Feast of the Epiphany happened on January 6,

that day when we celebrate the revelation of the light of Christ to the magi, to the least likely people. And on Epiphany, we had a truly frightening day in the life of our country. We witnessed a violent mob disrupt the actual operation of our democracy in the Capitol Building of Washington, D.C., directly and unmistakably incited by the words of our President.

And on that same day, my friends, two Democratic Senators were elected in Georgia, that right-leaning state in the heart of the South. The first black Senator from Georgia in history, the Rev. Raphael Warnock from Dr. King's Ebenezer Baptist Church, was elected. This was no accident. This was the result of the hard, consistent, patient work of Stacey Abrams and people of color over the past decade in Georgia, who registered 800,000 new voters this year, many of them young people of color.<sup>1</sup> And they had no way to know this would have such a dramatic impact, that this work would end up flipping the Senate. But it did.

And so on Thursday I sat down to write this sermon, needing to start from scratch. And as I sat down, praying to see the world with new eyes and ask what God had for us as a St. John's community at this point in our history and in my life as a Rector, I turned to the daily office lectionary and read this from Isaiah 52:4-6: "For thus says the Lord God: Long ago, my people went down into Egypt to reside there as aliens; the Assyrian,

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<sup>1</sup> See Maya King, "How Stacey Abrams and her Band of Believers Turned Georgia Blue," in *Politico*, November 8, 2020, accessed January 7, 2021 at <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/08/stacey-abrams-believers-georgia-blue-434985>.

too, has oppressed them without cause. Now therefore, what am I doing here, says the Lord, seeing that my people are taken away without cause? Their rulers howl, says the Lord, and continually, all day long, my name is despised. Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore on that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I.”

In this reading it is God who is speaking. God talks about the rulers howling and God’s name being despised. That sounds like a perfect description of what happened this week. These words sound like something God could have been texting yesterday to the angels or to those in despair or unsuspecting preachers like myself. The rulers howl, they repeat lies and inflame dangerous beliefs that lead to violence in the Capitol building. God’s name is despised, the rule of decency and honor and truth-telling and justice is openly held in contempt by those who lead, with the support and complicity of many. But what is God’s response to this? My people shall know my name. On that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I.

Some of you might remember that last fall I preached about those words in Hebrew, those words “here am I,” *hineini*. Those are the words usually spoken by a prophet or shepherd or regular person going about their business when God calls them and they have to decide how to answer. God calls to the boy Samuel in his dreams in the night, and Samuel says, “here am I.” God calls to Moses out of the bush and Moses responds, “here am I.” Mary, the young teenager who said “Here am I” to the angel Gabriel, became the Mother of Christ, the God-

bearer. But in this reading it isn't people saying Here am I. It is GOD. The peoples' cry comes to God. And God responds.

They shall know my name, says God. They shall know that it is I who speak, says God. Here am I, says the Lord.

On the Epiphany, the light of Christ shines in the darkness and cannot be extinguished. This light is not our light. We do not originate this light. Even though we are called to follow Jesus' Way of Love with every fiber of our being, we did not invent that way and we are not leading, we are following. The light is always that which enables us to see clearly. It's what helps us to see and tell the truth. In the reading from Genesis from this morning, the light is the very first thing the Spirit creates by speaking it into being: let there be light, and there was light.

These days trust is profoundly broken. We are devastated that the sacred symbols of our very democracy have been violated at the instigation of our highest leader. But God is here. The Spirit is here, speaking the truth. Here am I, says the Lord.

Rev. Raphael Warnock, the Senator-Elect from Georgia, spoke about the insurrection at the Capitol on Wednesday. He quoted the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King when he said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." The presence of God is a presence for a saving justice, a healing justice, a justice that reveals the whole truth, and then insists on dignity and healing and repair and boundaries and honor. When the prophet Isaiah imagines a God who says in response to the leaders howling and the

desecration of the holy, *here am I*, God is choosing this moment of profound darkness as a moment of revelation. God wants to be known. When God called Moses from the burning bush in the depths of the despair of Israel's slavery, Moses asked God's name. When Jacob wrestled all night with the angel, just before he finally encountered the brother he betrayed years before, he asked the angel's name. Who are you, God, they asked. What kind of a God are you, we need to know. If things are really just up to us, let us know and let's quit this religious charade and get to work. But if you, God, are really here, then reveal yourself to us, help us, let us know how we are to go on. We see the work ahead of us. We feel called to engage in it. But whether we are on our own, or enlightened and transformed and led by the presence of God, makes all the difference.

The God of Isaiah is the same God who said to Jesus at his baptism, You are my Son, the Beloved. The River Jordan where Jesus was baptized was the boundary between the wilderness and the Promised Land. The baptism of John was about repentance and transformation and change, and Jesus went to commit to that. But what he received was an assurance of blessing and belovedness from the very being of God. And we need that too, to move past the wilderness. We don't just need the baptism of John, like the disciples in the reading from Acts today. We need the baptism of the Spirit. We need a power greater than ourselves to make the journey of healing justice, to follow Jesus' Way of Love. We need the light of Christ. We need the presence of the God who says, *hineini*, here I am.

If we answer to God first and foremost, then we can have courage to tell the truth and still insist that love is the way. We can have the humility to see that just as people have been deceived into committing a hateful and outrageous violence, so is every one of us capable of this, no one is exempt from the temptations of the human condition. I will admit to you that I struggle a lot. I have great anger and at times even bitterness in my heart, toward people who knew better who nevertheless supported a President with this kind of character. As outrageous and unprecedented as Wednesday's actions were, they were also the logical conclusion and absolutely consistent with the actions he has displayed throughout his Presidency and before. I tell myself that things did not have to come to this place. He should have been stopped long ago. But I sometimes wonder if this might be how our black and indigenous brothers and sisters have felt about me and others in the white community for centuries, for failing to uproot the racism that still claims so many lives and still prevents thriving for so many. The light of Christ reveals not only what exists out there, but also in us.

And in the midst of all this, God says, *hineini*. Hate and bitterness will never heal our condition. Arrogance will never repair the broken trust in our nation. Being right is not enough. Perhaps only God is capable of the kind of healing justice that is needed at times like this. But this God is our God, and this God has said, *hineini*. Here I am.

This week, and every week, and every day of the new era that is

before us, let us seek to humbly open ourselves to the presence and power of God. Let's be faithful to the healing and compassionate justice of God. Let us seek to see with the light of Christ, the light of creation, the light that brings instinctive joy because we can finally see truly. God has said, I am here. Amen.