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Essay #1: What image or story from the Bible enlivens and enriches your own faith? What is the good news found within this story that we are called to share with the world?

In the first chapter of the book of Genesis, we read that God created human beings as the final act of creation, that God put us in the very middle of that creation, and that we were made in God's image and likeness. I love this story because it tells us something important, something crucial, about being a human being.

In the Ancient Near East, temples were believed to be the places where the gods lived, the places where the gods and the created world met. In many cases, there would be a statue or some other representation of the god in the temple—an image of the god meant to reflect that god's likeness into the world. The ancient Israelites had a temple, of course—the Temple in Jerusalem. But there was no statue in their Temple, no graven image of Israel's God. Instead, human beings bear the divine image and thus reflect God's true likeness into the world. But unlike those statues, human beings are called to work with God, to be the stewards of God's good creation, to actually embody God's justice, mercy, righteousness, steadfast faithfulness in the world. We are created to embody God's love, God's wise stewardship of creation. And since creation itself is a reflection, an outpouring, of God's love, we are created to reflect that love back to God. This is why we are here.

The biblical story shows how, at each turn, God calls his human image bearers back into relationship, back to this calling. It is the story of Abraham and his family who were blessed to be a blessing. It is the story of Ancient Israel, the people called to be a royal priesthood. We know, of course, that from the beginning, the people God had called to be a blessing—to bear the divine image—became as much a part of the problem as everyone else. Instead of reflecting God's love, human beings seek domination, make idols of wealth and power, and become enslaved to sin and death. (And, of course, this has also been true of the Church from time to time.)

The good news is that Jesus—the true human being, the true image-bearer—frees us from the grip of sin and death and shows us the true nature of God's love. As he told his closest followers, if we abide in his love, if we follow his commandment to love as he has loved, we will be the tangible sign of God's justice, mercy, righteousness, and steadfast faithfulness—of God's love—in the world. Again, this is why we are here.

Essay #2: Why do you think there are declining numbers in the Episcopal Church and what is your vision for supporting Episcopal communities to find new vitality? What are some examples of how you addressed this in other settings?

At St. John's, our vestry recently worked through a new book by Andrew Root focusing on the church's decline. He argues persuasively that we are now living in a secular age, that our lives, communities, and institutions are no longer guided by mystery, sacred time, or sacred space. The result is that the Church's stories and practice do not make sense in our contemporary world. We are not human beings created in the image and likeness of a loving creator; for instance, we are atomized individuals, subject only to the laws of nature and market forces. And while modern life has meant an incredible increase in our standard of living, productivity, and human health, we have also lost all sense of mystery, awe, and meaning. This affects not only the Episcopal Church, but all of Christianity and even other faiths. It doesn't help that the Episcopal Church is a deeply traditional institution that doesn't "get with the times" in some ways but is also deeply embedded in culture in other important ways. All the normal stuff applies, too. Stereotypically, Episcopalians are notoriously reticent to share their faith. This isn't always true, of course. But the stereotype has its roots in something real.

The shift to a secular age is beyond most of the normal strategies and programs we typically employ to grow the Church. But that doesn't mean there is no hope. After all, our hope is founded in Christ and in the Spirit's work in the world. To my mind, congregational vitality is about connecting to the local community, showing up, building relationships, and reflecting God's love into the world in those places. The Church's sacramental life makes mystery, sacred time, sacred place tangible and real, it helps embody the Christian life and vows by which we live. I am reminded of the monastic communities that kept Christian faith and practice alive during times of conflict and upheaval. By being embedded in their communities, by working alongside the people around them, by study, and by prayer, they embodied holy lives shot through with mystery, awe, and meaning. They were the hands and heart of Christ in their communities.

I see the Episcopal Church of the future returning to those deep roots, not by retreating, but by embedding more deeply in our communities. After all, congregational vitality is not primarily about increasing average Sunday attendance or giving or about relevance (although these might sometimes be signs of vitality). Congregational vitality is about helping people find mystery, awe, and meaning in community with God and one another. It also means finding ways to partner and collaborate for the good of our neighbors in our local communities and beyond.

We have been trying to model this in our local community of greater Lafayette. Recently, after decades of competition and mistrust between the two, St. John's began partnering with our neighbor parish. We changed the way we talk about one another and our ministries. We began saying "we" a lot more frequently, building new relationships, while strengthening the ones that already existed. It has allowed us to begin worshiping together, praying together, studying together, doing outreach together, and sharing our resources. The partnership we have built has given new life to the Episcopal Church in greater Lafayette. Since the pandemic, we are both growing and attracting new people who are looking for opportunities to make our wider community better.

Essay #3: The Diocese of West Missouri is full of diversity from our politics to our geographic setting, from our congregations' sizes and financial resources to the people who compose those communities. How will you engage in relationship building as you work across those differences and get to know the diocese?

I was immediately drawn to the profile's characterization of the Diocese as being "in the Middle". I continue to be challenged, energized, and inspired by the tradition and practice of the Episcopal Church. But what I have always found most compelling is that middle way, that dynamic tension that holds us together as the Body Christ even when we disagree, even when we are divided by politics or geography, by race or class, even when things get complicated and hard. After all, following Jesus, the life of faith, is complicated and hard. It means going to the places where the world's need and our calling meets. You described yourself in the Diocese of West Missouri as being "in the middle", and you are—especially right in the middle of all the things that threaten to divide us. You are also right in the middle where community and healing and transformation are so desperately needed.

The good news is that you are right in the middle of what God is doing in the world, right in the places where Jesus is showing up, right where the Spirit's power is drawing and sending the Church. I have read and heard stories of the local churches and ministries in your Diocese showing up to be the thin places where people are celebrating and hurting, where people are lost and finding healing, where people are looking for connection, and discerning their vocation and purpose. You are there, right in the middle. This is not safe or easy work. But if we follow Jesus, this cruciform life is our path as well as the hope of the world.

The ways our divisions play out and the reasons for them are legion, but the Church has also become more and more divided. The Episcopal Church's progressive stands on racial justice and human sexuality, for instance, have led more conservative members to leave for churches that agree with their politics or their stands on social issues. This threatens to divide the Body of Christ. I believe Diocesan leadership must begin by listening deeply to all voices, by helping to develop our shared spiritual and emotional intelligence, and by always using clear and direct communication. At the same time, we must remain grounded in the Baptismal Covenant, in truth-telling, and our commitments to justice and inclusion. This is difficult work and requires a willingness to listen and have difficult conversations. It means that Diocesan leadership must model grace and openness. It means building relationship for that shared vision.

On a practical level, if I were called to be your next Bishop, I would begin by getting to know you, by learning about your local ministries and communities, by seeing what it means to be "in the middle" with you where you are. I would prioritize using Diocesan resources to support local congregations and ministries throughout the Diocese. After all, that is where community and healing and transformation are happening. I would work to create a Diocesan staff that is mobile, on the go, showing up, and serving alongside local congregational leaders and ministries as often as possible. After all, the Diocese exists to hold us together in the dynamic tension of our Christian faith and life, loving God and one another as we work toward God's just and peaceful beloved community.