

June 9, 2024
The Third Sunday after Pentecost
Graduation Sunday
Mark 3:20-35
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Come, Holy Spirit, Come

I come before you fresh from my 21st New England Synod Assembly. Well, fresh overstating it a bit. More accurately, I actually come to you physically drained, but spiritually inspired from my 21st New England Synod Assembly. It would have been my 22nd, Synod Assembly, but I didn't attend Assembly in 2022 the year I was on sabbatical when Synod Assembly occurred. I was ordained at Synod Assembly 22 years ago, on June 7th, at Trinity Lutheran Church in Worcester, by Bishop Margaret Payne.

At this year's Synod Assembly, the primary business before the Assembly was electing a new Bishop for our Synod, as our current Bishop, Jim Hazelwood, in order to get us plenty of time to prepare, announced about a year ago, that he would be retiring at the end of this six-year term as Bishop.

A Bishop in the ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, serves for an unlimited number of six-year terms, but has to be elected every six years, so it's possible that he or she will not get reelected and only serve for six years. Also, a Bishop could choose not to stand for reelection after his or her first six-year term. But the two Bishops that I've served under, Bishop Payne and Bishop Hazelwood, have both served for two terms and have both chosen to retire from being Bishop after twelve years in the role.

This Bishop's election was the fourth Bishop's election that I've attended.

The first was Bishop Payne's reelection, during which she was reelected on the first ballot by an overwhelming majority. The second was Bishop Hazelwood's

election, when he was elected on the fifth ballot, and the third was Bishop Hazelwood's reelection when he was reelected on the fourth ballot.

I have to say, I didn't see that coming, I kind of expected that he would be reelected on the first ballot as Bishop Payne had been, but he ended up having to "run" for bishop again, giving an opening statement after the second ballot, reintroducing himself to the synod that he had been serving for six years and making the case for his continued ministry as Bishop and then participating in a Q&A panel with two other candidates for Bishop after the third ballot.

The election of a Bishop is a strange thing. It a combination of a spiritual call process and a democratic process, where the gathered assembly of pastors and deacons and lay people have to cast ballots and select among a slate of pastors, most of whom they do not know, who would best serve as our Bishop.

This year, things were handled a little differently than they have been in years past. In the past, we knew nothing about who might be nominated for Bishop prior to the assembly and only got to learn anything about the nominees as the assembly unfolded. This year, there was a pre-assembly nomination process, when anyone in the Synod could nominate any pastor in the ELCA to run for bishop and those were nominated and who accepted the nomination had to prepare biographies and answer some questions that were made available to the entire Synod prior to the Assembly. You might remember hearing me talk about the PiPs, the "Pre-identified Persons" prior to the Assembly. They were called "Pre-identified Persons" or PiPs because couldn't be called candidates until they were officially nominated by ecclesiastical ballot at the beginning of the election process at the Assembly.

Prior to the Assembly, the Assembly staff and the Bishop search team, worked hard to make sure that we were ready to vote. It's the 21st century, it's the 2020s, so, of course we weren't going to anything as last century or last decade, as have paper ballots. We were going to use an email-based voting system called, "Simply Voting".

There were online sessions to introduce the voting system and test votes prior to the Assembly to make sure that everyone was ready for this new voting method. Prior to the Assembly, prior to everyone, all 400+ of us, being gathered together in one room, everything worked perfectly.

As I said, electing a Bishop is not just a democratic process, it's a spiritual process. So, when, shortly after the Assembly was called to order on Thursday and we were about to cast our first ballots for Bishop, we were informed of the process that we would use for the casting of ballots. We would sing a hymn, *Gracious Spirit, Heed Our Pleading* and then we would be led in prayer, both the hymn and the prayer invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit on the balloting process, then the emails would be delivered to our inboxes, and then we would vote, all at the same time. Simple, right? That's why it was called "Simply Voting".

So, we sang the song. We were led in prayer. And the person running the elections said, "Did everyone get the ballot in your email." And about 75% of the people attending the Assembly shouted, "No!" And then you'd hear people mumbling "Got it, got it, got it." Sometimes people applauded and cheered when it came through. After a few minutes of this the person running the election said again, "Did everyone get the ballot? Raise your red cards if you didn't get the ballot." All around the room red cards were lifted high. Maybe 50 out of about 450. "There will be people coming around the room to help you."

Minutes ticked by. Some people tried stay in the spirit of the moment, tried to sit and pray quietly while we waited. Others started talking and laughing. We sang a hymn. The same hymn we had sung before, *Come, Come, come, Holy Spirit, come.*

"Did everyone get the email? Raise your red cards if you didn't get your email."

Maybe ten red cards went up. More waiting, more time ticked by. “Is everyone ready? Did everyone get it?” Finally, no red cards. “We should pray again.” So, we prayed again. “And now, everyone, vote!”

There were five ballots for Bishop, which is pretty normal when a new Bishop is being elected. There were also elections for Synod Council, Churchwide Assembly, and the Synod Discipline Committee and runoff elections for each of those categories. And with every ballot, the same process happened. It took about 45 minutes for every ballot. *Come, come, come Holy Spirit, come.*

Raise your hand if you’re on the Summer Hymn Selection Team? If you are and if you love me, or even if you just like me a little bit, please, can we not choose to sing *Gracious Spirit, Heed Our Pleading* this summer? It’s a nice hymn, but at this point it’s haunting my dreams. *Come, come, come holy email, come!*

As I said, electing a Bishop is a strange process. But on the other hand, in between red cards and emails and a hymn we sang way too many times, we heard from seven and then three faithful and inspired pastors who were willing to do what I would never want to do, serve the church in the challenging role of Bishop.

We heard about partnerships with the Episcopal church and other ecumenical partners that serve the gospel and improve the capacity of our churches to be in mission to the world.

We heard a strong call to prayer and to be confident in the presence of God in the world, in our churches, and in our lives doing signs and wonders.

We were reminded that we can do hard things; that we are equipped and strengthened for the hard work of the gospel, and that we do not work alone.

We told the truth about the challenges that we face in our congregations today, and we talked about being a church becoming.

We were reminded to tell the story of Jesus, to sing the songs of Jesus, with our voices and our actions, in such a way that people are drawn to the beauty of Jesus story, like the crowd gathered around Jesus in our gospel reading for today.

We were reminded that we are a house united, and not divided. A house united, not just with each other, and our fellow Lutherans, but with all who claim the name of Jesus, all who have been claimed by Jesus and sent into the world to love and heal, to bring life and hope in Jesus' name.

And we had plenty of time, while we were waiting for balloting emails to come, to talk with each other, to get to know others at our table, people from other churches, who have some of the same joys and challenges as we do, and some different joys and challenges.

And at the end of it all, we had a new Bishop, Bishop Nathan Pipho. Well, technically, he's a Bishop-elect, until August 1st, as he and Bishop Hazelwood work together through a time of transition until Bishop Pipho takes over. In spite of the technical difficulties, "Did you get your email? Raise your red card if you didn't get the email," it felt like a Spirit-led process. After the number of times we sang, *Come, come, come Holy Spirit come*" one would hope it would have been. It felt like a hopeful process, affirming that God is at work through our congregations and ministries, and in the world that God so loves.

So, I invite you to join me in prayer, for our retiring Bishop and for Bishop-elect Pipho, as we celebrate that God is with us, guiding us, inspiring us, for our journey. Let us pray.

Lord of the church, we give thanks for the ministry of our retiring Bishop, Jim Hazelwood, and for calling our Bishop-Elect, Nathan Pipho, to serve the New England Synod for the next six years. Bless Bishop Hazelwood in his retirement and Bishop-Elect Pipho in his ministry. We pray for Trinity Lutheran Church in Worcester as they begin their search for a new pastor and we give thanks for all of the candidates for Bishop who stood ready to serve in response to the church's call. Bless and sustain the ministry of our synod and our wider church as we seek to share the message of Jesus with our communities and world. Amen.