

Homily Title: Healing and Hope in Life and Death [8 min. total] Deb Olenyik

Scripture: Psalm 126

Given: RMC Annual Conference 6-9-16 Memorial, Baptism, Communion Service [23 lives honored, Bryson Lillie's daughter baptized]

Opening: Person singing verse one of Harvest Time [2 min]

What a privilege to worship together as followers and apostles of Christ. I welcome those of you with us who are family and friends of the lives we are memorializing tonight. I also welcome those gathered for the baptism of Evangeline Lillie. And I welcome, you, the body of Christ, of the Rocky Mtn. Annual Conference, as we join together for this sacred time and as we join together the sacrament of Holy Communion. God is with us and blesses our gathering. We come as a people proclaiming healing and hope in life and in death.

To those gathered who have seen loved ones depart this earth in the past year, our love and prayers are with you. We thank you for allowing them to be the servants of Christ they were, with all that meant for your families – the joys and the challenges. Their lives had meaning and purpose. They sowed seeds of grace, courage, commitment and faith. You, also, in a variety of ways, were a part of that journey as well. Thank you. For whatever needs you have for grieving and moving forward, may you know the comforting strength of Christ in your lives, and may you know what a blessing you each are.

We also lift up those church congregations who have closed since last we gathered. Those whose members exhibited extraordinary faith and commitment for this final chapter of ministry in those places. A chapter just as important as the first chapter in those congregations. I also honor all those gathered who may have been a part of ministry in some way in those congregations over the years. As Christ's presence is always with us, that legacy and spirit now moves on into other ministries in other places.

Because we are the Easter people, we know that endings move forward into beginnings. This is why we recommit ourselves to be the hands and feet of Christ as we come together each time to receive communion. This is why this is also a service of joy as we join in a baptism and a naming of new ministry launches.

Our scripture, Psalm 126 captures this movement, this mingling, past, present and future, in a poignant way. Our Psalm is one in the section of Psalms called "Songs of Ascents, of going up to Jerusalem". They were sung by the pilgrims who were traveling to Jerusalem to keep the various feast days on the religious calendar of Israel. There were stations along the way where the pilgrims could stop for rest and refreshment. While they were there, they would sing one of these Psalms in worship

to the Lord. The words of Psalm 126 when sung reminded them of the Lord's past works in the life of their nation and of God's promise to carry on that work into the future.

Those who go out, were the ones exiled to Babylon. Those who come home, are the later generations who returned to Israel. And yes, for those coming home there was laughter and joy. There was proclaiming of the great things the Lord has done.

Their story, though, not only began in the past, but is intermingled with the past. Intermingled with those who sowed seeds, and may or may not have seen the harvest themselves. As we look to the sowers, we look to those lives we memorialize today. Those who ministered to and lifted up new generations of Jesus followers. As well as those who were helpmates to the one who was the designated pastor or who joined in ministry in these churches. We acknowledge the hard work, not without challenges and disappointments along the way. Hopefully, there were many times of joy and seeing the fruit of their labors as well.

I asked for the first verse of the hymn Harvest Time to be sung at the beginning of this time. Thank you to the music team. This hymn from the late 1800s captures the birthing pangs of churches and the faithful in the movement West. It captures the fortitude and understanding that they were planting for that which was to come. Some of you may have heard this hymn if you have visited Yellowstone Conference gatherings.

That which comes before is not the full story. That which is now is not the full story. They are intertwined. We are truly a connected people. It is one of the key faith points as Christ shares the Holy Spirit and the ongoing nature of His work.

We acknowledge our losses and the endings. We know we have been touched by them in the deepest part of our souls. We reflect on how we have been shaped and influenced by the lives and churches well lived.

We know that we can still be influenced by those relationships and those values. We can take up what is needed for this day and time to be a living, fruitful witness to the power of being a community of Christ called United Methodists. To the power of each of us truly being Christ's light bearers. We can be part of the harvest, and we can be part of the sowing moving forward. It is a call to each of us to see how faithful, how committed we are in what we say and do. This is our tribute to the lives of the past and to the lives moving forward. Amen.