

Daffodils this morning! For one Sunday in the middle of Lent we traditionally have daffodils in the church to give a ray of hope in a dark and in this penitential season. The flowers remind us that Easter is coming and that Jesus will be raised from the dead. He who is the light of the world gives us a glimpse today of His light through the symbol of these bright yellow daffodils.

In the name of God: Creator, Liberator and Sustainer. Amen.

That's how Bishop Barbara Harris often began her sermons. Just imagine, the Episcopal Church ordained a woman as Bishop way back in 1989 (32 years ago.) Today we are marking the occasion of the one year anniversary of Bishop Barbara's death. Of course, in March of 2020 when she died, there could be no formal public funeral for her; it was a start of the pandemic. And now, one year on, the Diocese of Massachusetts is encouraging all Episcopalians to remember her and her pioneering ministry. Let me tell you a little bit about her:

Barbara Clementine Harris was born on June 12, 1930. As a young woman she participated in the freedom rides and marches for civil rights of the 1960s, including the march from Selma to Montgomery. She spent summer vacations registering black voters in Greenville, Mississippi. A longtime Episcopalian, she served as an acolyte for the historic first ordination of women in 1974. And that gave her hope that perhaps she too could be ordained and indeed she was ordained to the priesthood in 1980.

A short nine years after that she was consecrated as Bishop Suffragan of the Diocese of Massachusetts. There were many objections to her election and consecration, unfortunately. She was a Black woman seeking to be elected to be a Bishop at a time when there were no women bishops anywhere else in the entire Anglican Communion.

But she also had many, many supporters. Eight thousand people attended her consecration service. Our own Carol Taylor was there and said it was such a happy and exciting day. Carol and her fellow church members had driven up from New Jersey in order to attend. Carol remarked that Barbara exhibited great humility. Carol said, "God calls who God wants." And Carol said she felt great liberation that day.

Sixty bishops participated in the laying on of hands. There were 1,200 dignitaries and clergy in the opening procession and four choirs sang for the service. Sadly, though, Barbara also received death threats and obscene messages. She was urged to wear a bulletproof vest to her installation service, but she refused. Her comment was merely, "I don't take this in a personal way." God bless her. She was a wise AND strong woman.ⁱ

A number of us were in Hartford in the Fall of 2019 at our Diocesan Convention when Bishop Barbara preached the convention sermon. She was looking and sounding quite frail at that time and I would imagine that we were fortunate in being able to hear her at one of her last sermons given in a large-scale setting.

One Lenten theme that Bp. Barbara addressed in one of her well-known sermons is one that is very apropos of today's Gospel reading. Our human nature is to keep certain things about ourselves in the dark. It's that tendency that we all have, to want to put our best side forward and keep hidden those things that we feel are unflattering, unattractive or uncomfortable. Jesus said in our reading from John today, "and the people loved darkness rather than light." Sometimes we go to great lengths to try to cover up our faults. I certainly have done that.

We keep those failures and faults in a dark corner if we possibly can. If Jesus were to sit us down and point out all the things about ourselves that we have carefully put in in the closet and shut the door, we might say to Jesus, as Bishop Barbara jokingly did, "Now look here Jesus, you done left off preaching and gone to meddling." These comments about our nature of wanting to hide the bad and promote the good about ourselves is found in her sermon entitled, "A Thirst for the Kingdom."ⁱⁱ

Jesus shines a light on each and every one of us, and on the whole world. He is telling us in this passage that if we let our whole selves come into the light then the darkness can hold no power over us. Imagine a light that illuminates the whole house. We know that Jesus sees us with that sort of light and longs to bring us into the light. Because, as the very famous verse says, God loves the whole world, and wants the light to shine on everyone to give us life.

I'm sure Bishop Barbara would have heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preach about this passage. Dr. King preached on John 3:16 in his first week in the pulpit at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He said, "God's love had breadth. It is a big love; it's a broad love...God's love is too big to be limited to a particular race. It is too great to be encompassed by any single nation. God is a universal God," King preached.ⁱⁱⁱ

And that's why light is such a great metaphor used by Jesus. Light shines on everyone and does not discriminate. The only way that you can avoid being illuminated and loved, and given new life, is if you purposely turn away from the light and seek a dark place. God wants us to love the light and live in the light. These bright daffodils are a symbol of how light gives life.

At the end of Bishop Barbara's work as bishop in the Diocese of Massachusetts she addressed the people and said, "And so for these past thirteen-plus years, if there has been one watchword on my lips it has been, 'Please be patient with me, 'cause God isn't through with me yet.' And God **still** is not finished with me. Nor is God through with any of us yet. So I pray that you will continue to go from strength to strength, in God's joyful service as you are reshaped, remolded, reequipped and re-empowered in the days and weeks and months and years ahead."^{iv}

ⁱ Wikipedia, “Barbara Harris (bishop)”

ⁱⁱ This sermon and other resources are found on the Diocese of Massachusetts website; www.diomass.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kerry Hasler-Brooks, “Reflections on the Lectionary” in *Christian Century*, Feb. 24, 2021.

^{iv} Barbara C. Harris, *Parting Words, a Farewell Discourse*, 2003.