

Thank you so much Jill, and thank you all so much for coming! It's a great honor to be asked to speak to the ECW, and more than a little intimidating – some of you have known me since I was very small, in cable-knit tights and Florence Eisenman dresses. As you can see, my style has not progressed very far since then.

Jill and Linnet asked me to speak about growing up at St John's, and a bit about what I've done outside of running amok in the halls of the church as a little girl – that is, what I've done professionally. And at first glance, it's hard to see how those two subjects relate to each other. But the truth is that they are related, and that my experience in the Episcopal tradition has informed my work, in ways that surprise me even now.

As an Episcopalian kid, you grow up steeped in liturgy. You know the creeds and the rites of Holy Eucharist like you know the Pledge of Allegiance – perhaps not profoundly, but instinctively. Language, urgent and beautiful, mysterious language, is all around you:

“Lift up your hearts”

“We humbly beseech thee”

“Light of Light”

“Thy loving-kindness”

“Bounden Duty”

“I will, with God's help.”

And as an Episcopalian kid you also grow up saturated in music – which only amplifies this addiction to the language. “At the lamb's high feast we sing.” “Lamp of our feet.” “All glory, laud and honor.” And of course, Hyfrydol, my father's favorite, the Welsh hymn.

Even as a camper at an Episcopal summer camp, I was rooted in song. We had a hymnal full of John Denver tunes, to be sure, but they sounded holy enough to me when sung in Incarnation Camp's lakeside chapel.

And as I got old enough to pay attention, I made a discovery. I made it first as a Junior chorister cracking wise about the smell of the mimeographed sheets (I'm sorry, Dr. Maki) and then as an acolyte hastily changing out of sneakers into Pappagallos in the sacristy, and simultaneously as a pageant Gabriel with Velcro wings and seriously '80s hair. And my discovery was this: that

the adults around you at church revel in this language, too: that the language, in speech and song, informs and supports their faith. And, sometimes, that they will fight bitterly over the music and the words they cherish. Ask an 8 o'clocker, if you don't know what I'm talking about!

I loved that. It made sense to me. I'll share one memory that might help to illustrate what I'm saying. Most of you know (and some of you remember) that the Christmas Pageant used to be led by grown-ups, the moms and dads of my St. John's friends: Mary, Joseph, the shepherds with speaking parts - and most especially, to my memory, the wise men. Picture our current Three Kings volunteers, but with even more pomp and circumstance. One year, I had the part of a page, in brocade knickers and matching vest. As a page, your only assignment was to gently waft a giant feathered fan behind your King as he proceeded down the aisle, and to make every effort not to bonk him on the head as he sang his solo verse.

Thus unencumbered by lines, I had plenty of time to listen. And be amazed. Despite their nerves, these kings were camping it up. And, to my ten-year-old ears, it sounded like you were supposed to! How could you not have fun, intoning language that sounded just right for Bela Lugosi at a goth convention? "Myhrr is mine, its bitter perfume, breathes a life of gathering gloom..." what could be more evocative, or better remind you that in the midst of Christmas joy, there is the anticipation of great sorrow?

What were these ceremonies without the words? Weren't the words, the right words, essential to the work of the church? As I studied literature in college and grad school and later began to work on books of my own, I was confident that THAT was the most important thing I had taken away from my time at St. John's - - that language, those words, and the liturgy that meant I'd feel at home in any Episcopal church I entered. That language reflected a continuity my mom taught me to appreciate as soon as I was old enough to notice the "Episcopal Church Welcomes You" signs that we saw almost everywhere we traveled as a family, from Harlem to Ohio to San Francisco.

And so, for a long time, I relied on language. I organized author events at the Museum of the City of New York and the New York Public Library where famous writers talked earnestly about their process, while their publicists circled like hungry sharks. I wrote a book of my own, about a word, Knickerbocker, which had been seized upon by generations of New Yorkers to signal their sense of belonging and authenticity. I wrote another book about New York itself, and how a tourist can approximate that same feeling of belonging - how they can unlock the city's secrets. I wrote about how Washington Irving became America's first storyteller, and how his words populated the Hudson River Valley with brand-new ghosts for a brand-new country. I slept over at Washington Irving's house and wrote about it (that was terrifying). I wrote grant proposals, I wrote articles. I got a nifty job overseeing all the interpretive programs at a historic

house trust, Historic Hudson Valley, where people spend all day telling other people about the past. I was a person of the word.

At this point I'm not going to tell you that I'm no longer in love with language, or that I no longer cherish the litanies, or that I don't still – occasionally – thumb through the hymnal in search of an old favorite when I should be attending to the sermon (sorry). But at some point, more recently than I'd like to admit, I also fell in love with the Episcopal community, and with our commitment to each other, and to the progress of social justice in the world. As a child, my parents would take me to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine once in a while, for Easter, or the Blessing of the Animals. It felt like no other church: there were peacocks, for one thing, and monuments to martyrs who were not Episcopalian and banners exhorting peace and art installations urging prison reform. Madeline L'Engle was the artist in residence, for crying out loud! How much farther from Velcro wings can you get? St. John the Divine felt different. It felt FIERCE.

But it isn't any fiercer than the Brooklyn church I attended for several years, where the jazz mass is a point of pride and the Thanksgiving dinner served at the Red Hook Houses is, too. It isn't any fiercer than the Gig Harbor, Washington church I visited one Christmas Day after I was married, which quietly sponsors and staffs a food bank for the Olympic Peninsula region. Or the Robert E. Lee Memorial Church in Richmond, Virginia, where I spent a Palm Sunday more than twenty years ago, never guessing that someday they would courageously vote to change their name to Grace. And it certainly isn't any fiercer than St. John's, where the Midnight Run program has the feeling of a sacrament, and new, responsive initiatives such as Neighbors for Refugees are taken as a given.

I've discovered that each Episcopal church, in its own way, is fiercely committed. To nurturing a community of human beings. To giving them the physical and spiritual tools they need to thrive. And to righting the wrongs of the past. And this brings me to a final story, this one about being an Episcopalian grown-up.

Last summer, over a couple of cups of lemonade after a summer service, I had the chance to tell Reverend Gwyneth about a project we were completing at Historic Hudson Valley. It was a big, federally-funded website to share the story of Northern colonial slavery, which has been the focus of our work at Philipsburg Manor for more than twenty years, with as wide an audience as we could get. I told her that it was important, and that we were proud of it, and that we'd been just waiting for the chance to tell the world the truth about how the trade in African captives and enslaved labor built colonial America – not just the South. The truth about how there were few white allies, and fewer saviors, and much of what you thought you knew about the Underground Railroad is the stuff of myth. What I didn't tell Reverend Gwyneth was that I was scared. Scared that I wasn't up to the task of bringing these painful truths to light,

scared that I lacked the tools needed to tackle this terrible but crucial assignment with, quite frankly, fierceness. How do you describe the conditions on board a slave ship in the Middle Passage? Or compassionately recount the life of Joan Jackson, one enslaved mother among many hundreds of thousands of mothers whose children were taken from her as soon as they were weaned, and sold to enslavers across the East Coast? How do you show the dignity of an enslaved man who is only valued by society for his free labor? How do you break it to an audience that the North was not the “good guy?” For once, I felt I didn’t have the words.

I don’t know if Reverend G. was reading minds that day, or simply making conversation. It doesn’t matter, because the result was the same. She started to speak to me about the Diocese of New York’s Year of Lamentation, marking a formal acknowledgment of the New York Church’s connection to the slave trade and about the activities and resolutions that had come about as a result of that year of introspection and atonement. It was hard work, she was saying, and not everyone wanted to hear about it. It was too much for some people to bear, but it was the truth, and the church had to grapple with it as a community. They - meaning we - had to commit to this challenge. And so, I thought to myself, did I.

I went home and Googled “Year of Lamentation” and I found a letter from the Reparations Committee of the Diocese on the eve of the 2017 convention. The internet is a miraculous thing. And in the first paragraph of that letter, I found the Episcopal Church I knew by heart, all over again. It said:

The power and the necessity of this resolution is actually not in the resolution, but in how we live into it.

How we live into it. This is what marks us as Episcopalians. I will never relinquish my love of our liturgy and our hymns, but it’s this commitment to “live into” the Christian message that I am most proud of. It has sustained me this past year, as I developed the language and the confidence to advocate for these voiceless individuals from our shared past. It nourishes me as I try to build my daughter’s spiritual foundation. I know it informs the work of my fellow Vestry members, whose dedication to communication and consensus-building leaves me awestruck. And I see it in our parish every day, in the ministries we each take up, in public or in private. I am grateful for the chance to take a small part in this commitment to “live into it,” and I hope my daughter will take her own small part someday, too – after she finishes her own stint of running amok in the halls of St. John’s.

Thank you!

