

The Consecration of Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner as XI Bishop of Nevada
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
Christ Episcopal Church, Las Vegas, NV
March 5, 2022
Isaiah 61:1-8
Psalm 100
Hebrews 5:1-10
Luke 24:44-49a

According to the Order of Melchizedek

Gracia y paz a todos y todas en el nombre de nuestro Salvador Jesu Cristo. Con mi obispo, Peter Eaton, quien también esta aquí hoy día, traigo saludos y bendiciones de los clérigos y la gente de la Diócesis de Florida Sureste. Y saludos especiales de la gente del puesto avanzado mas al sur en los estados contiguos de la rama Episcopal del movimiento de Jesús se llama San Pablo en Cayo Hueso.

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ. With my bishop, Peter Eaton, who is also here today, I bring you greetings from the clergy and people of the Diocese of Southeast Florida and special greetings from the people of the southernmost Episcopal outpost of the contiguous US, St Paul's, Key West.

Presiding Bishop Michael, Bishop Katherine, Bishop Dan, Bishop Gretchen, Bishop Peter, all other bishops present, friends and loved ones of the bishop-elect, clergy and people of the Diocese of Nevada, and Bishop-elect Elizabeth, it is a great pleasure and a profound honor to be with you in person today and to be here in the role of preacher.

Es un gran placer y una bendición profunda estar aquí en persona hoy día y estar aquí en la capacidad de predicadora.

Almost exactly a year ago while driving an hour or so to an appointment I was listening to an episode of "The Bible Project" podcast, an episode which had been recommended to me by Elizabeth.

The podcasters were doing a series on understanding priesthood from the scriptures. The topic of this particular episode was the priesthood of Melchizedek to whom Jesus the Christ is compared in today's reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Melchizedek: priest and king of a city called Salem. We find his story in Genesis 14. He is the first person in our scriptures who is referred to as a royal priest and called a priest of God Most High. And though he is both priest and sovereign of

that city, he does not wait seated upon a throne for Abraham and all his great company who are returning from battle to come into the city and pay him homage or kiss his ring. No. Melchizedek goes out to meet Abraham (who is still Abram at this point) while he is still outside the city; and he goes out to meet him with blessings and bread and wine, that is, with good news and a great feast, with affirmation and provisions.

I was listening to this podcast on Melchizedek because Elizabeth had recommended it during our CREDO small group monthly check in. Perhaps you don't know what a CREDO small group is. It is, in fact, the reason I am here. Elizabeth and I are in the same small group.

Why should it matter to the rest of you that Elizabeth is part of a small group of clergy that has monthly check ins? Allow me to explain.

In 2015 about thirty priests of the church, all ordained five years or fewer, accepted the invitation of the Church Pension Group to participate in an iteration of CREDO, our total wellness and renewal program for clergy. The weeklong program was held at Roslyn Conference Center in Virginia in June.

Some might say randomly but we would say providentially, Elizabeth, Sam, Michael, and I wound up together in the first small group meeting of that week in what would be the first of an uncountable number of conversations. We jelled from the beginning.

We met each day that week. And as the week ended, we covenanted together to check in by phone once a month until we met together in person again the following year in June. And after that week in person, we kept checking in monthly by phone. Since we first met in June 2015, we haven't missed a month. That's 81 months and counting, y'all.

We decided to keep meeting in person for a group retreat each year. So far we have stayed in the guest houses of three different Episcopal monastic orders. In 2020 and 2021, we couldn't gather in person, but we continued with monthly check ins. We will resume our annual retreat in May of this year. And this weekend we are all together in person for the first time in three years here in Las Vegas.

We have seen each other through all kinds of changes, chances, and life transitions. We have accompanied one another through health crises and deaths of parents, births and achievements of children, new calls, hard times, recurring challenges,

frustrations, joys—all of it. Our presence in each other's lives is a means of grace for us and a sign of God's faithfulness to us, faithfulness embodied to and with one another.

We are honest with each other and honest with God in the presence of one another. We pray together. And we pray for one another and each other's ministries and families in between monthly check ins.

Why should it matter to the rest of you that Elizabeth is part of this small group? Because all the virtues and capacities incarnated by Elizabeth as part of this group that has been lifegiving and lifechanging for her, for me, for Michael, for Sam are the same ones she brings to this new ministry as the eleventh bishop of Nevada.

What virtues and capacities in particular? Faithfulness, constancy, compassion, analysis, understanding, empathy, curiosity, courage, vulnerability, humility, humor, honesty, wisdom, persistence in prayer, openness to the experiences of others, active imagining of what the Church is and can be, and clear headedness concerning God's mission for God's Church.

Elizabeth is a trusted partner in assessing how the mission stays the same and how the movement inaugurated by Jesus continues in this Episcopal branch of it, *and* how the models and methods through which we continue as the movement and carry out the mission must change.

For what is before us, my siblings in the faith in all orders of ministry, lay people, bishops, priests, and deacons, is not a return to a pre-pandemic world and how things used to be. No. The pre-pandemic world and how we did some things for a very long time in the Episcopal Church are among the myriad things that lie behind us now. What lies ahead of us is God's promised and unfolding future. God is beckoning to us: come on; walk together; imagine something new.

+++

There is no going back. Christ will come again; the 1950s will not. The mission has not changed; the movement inaugurated by Jesus continues. And some of our most beloved models and methods no longer connect with, no longer reach the world and the cultures in which we live and the people who share them with us.

And so, we have a decision to make. We must decide if we love God Most High whom Melchizedek served and whom Jesus the Christ brought near in human form

more than we love our familiar models and methods. And if we do, we must take actions that are in alignment with that love and live into the world that is as well as the world that is to come.

There is no going back; there is only going forward. And, especially when we are going forward, we need reliable partners and trustworthy companions traveling beside us as we find our way.

The eleventh Bishop of Nevada will be such a partner. You can trust her. She will come out to meet you where you are as Melchizedek did. She will go to the strip on Ash Wednesday. She will come to you with blessings and with bread and wine, with good news and a great feast set at the table of God Most High. She will bring you encouragement and resources, gifts that will refresh you, sustain you, and remind you to rely on God and remind you that you are beloved by God.

And as she takes up the sacred duties of bishop, she will need all of you in Nevada, all of you in the House of Bishops, and all of us who live elsewhere to be faithful in meeting her where she is as well. She will also need affirmation, refreshment, sustenance. She and her family will need us to follow the example of Melchizedek as well, to bring them blessings and a banquet, good news and provisions, encouragement and resources.

There are many reasons why Jesus the Christ is compared to Melchizedek. Many of them are lofty and important theological claims but among the most practical of those reasons which we should not miss is this: Jesus did not hang about in synagogues or high places waiting for people to come to him. It's true that people, all kinds of people, went to him wherever he was. And it's also true that he was in synagogue on the sabbath as was his custom. *And* in between sabbaths, the rest of the week every week he was out mixing it up with folks, folks of all kinds, interacting with them where he met them, as they were.

This old, old model followed by Melchizedek and Jesus is the new model we are all called to embrace once more. Go where the people are. Stop being angry or resentful or judgmental or all three that they just don't come to our beautiful spaces like they used to. Connect and disciple in new ways. Measure different things. Go out to meet people where they are.

This old, old model become new once more is a model that Elizabeth will follow as bishop because it is the model that Elizabeth as priest already follows. And it is the model she follows as friend and colleague and sibling and parent and child.

+++

Scholars disagree on whether the city that Melchizedek was ruler and priest of, called Salem in Genesis 14, is the city that later became Jerusalem. Regardless, the model of Melchizedek remains a compelling one: meet people where they are.

The Salem of Genesis 14 may or may not have been Jerusalem. But Jerusalem *is* the city in today's gospel in which Jesus the Christ instructed the apostles to remain until they were clothed with power from on high.

Today in this city we are gathered bodily and connected virtually awaiting an infusion of that same power, a fresh arrival of the Holy Spirit that Jesus the Christ promised that God his Father our Creator would send.

Only one of us will be consecrated a bishop this day, but all of us will go forth from this liturgy empowered, activated, and on mission together. And as we go, following the example of Melchizedek, of Jesus, and the apostles, we bring blessings and a banquet, good news and provisions, encouragement and resources to the world that God so loves.

We entreat this day God Most High whom Melchizedek served, God who, as the reading from Isaiah says, desires good news preached and whose will is healing, liberty, and release.

We entreat the Holy One, the Ancient of Days, to give the Holy Spirit to Elizabeth and make her a bishop, to empower and guide her in leading the clergy and people of the Diocese of Nevada. To God our Creator, Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Sustainer be honor and glory for ever and ever.