October 22, 2017 – 20th Sunday after Pentecost: A Word to the Church from the House of Bishops

The bishops of The Episcopal Church came to Alaska to listen to the earth and its peoples as an act of prayer, solidarity and witness.

We came because:

- “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers” (Psalm 24:1-2). God is the Lord of all the earth and of all people; we are one family, the family of God.
- “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are ... members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). The residents of interior Alaska whom we met are not strangers; they are members of the same household of faith.
- People have “become hard of hearing, and shut their eyes so that they won’t see with their eyes or hear with their ears or understand with their minds, and change their hearts and lives that I may heal them” (Matthew 13:14-15). We are blind and deaf to the groaning of the earth and its peoples; we are learning the art of prayerful listening.

What does listening to the earth and its people mean? For us bishops, it meant:

- Getting out and walking the land, standing beside the rivers, sitting beside people whose livelihood depends on that land. We had to slow down and live at the pace of the stories we heard. We had to trust that listening is prayer.
- Recognizing that struggles for justice are connected. Racism, the economy, violence of every kind, and the environment are interrelated. We have seen this reality not only in the Arctic, but also at Standing Rock in the Dakotas, in the recent hurricanes, in Flint, Michigan, Charlottesville, Virginia, and in the violence perpetuated against people of color and vulnerable populations anywhere.
- Understanding that listening is deeply connected to healing. In many healing stories in the gospels, Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” That is, he listened first and then acted.

What did we hear?

- “The weather is really different today,” one leader told us. “Now spring comes earlier, and fall lasts longer. This is threatening our lives because the permafrost is melting and destabilizing the rivers. We depend on the rivers.”
- The land in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge where the caribou birth their calves is called the “sacred place where life begins,” so sacred the Gwich’in People do not set foot there. “Drilling here,” people said, “is like digging beneath the National Cathedral.”
- After shopping together, a native Episcopalian told one of us how hard it is to even secure food. “We can’t get good food here. We have to drive to Fairbanks. It is a two-hour trip each way.”

What we bishops saw and heard in Alaska is dramatic, but it is not unique. Stories like these can be heard in each of the nations where The Episcopal Church is present. They can be heard in our own communities. We invite you to join us, your bishops, and those people already engaged in this work, in taking time to listen to people in your dioceses and neighborhoods. Look for the connections among race, violence of every kind, economic disparity, and the environment. Then, after reflecting in prayer and engaging with scripture, partner with people in common commitment to the healing of God’s world.

God calls us to listen to each other with increased attention. It is only with unstopped ears and open eyes that our hearts and lives will be changed. It is through the reconciling love of God in Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit that we and the earth itself will be healed.