

# In His Holy Name A Collection of Sermons

## The Reverend Peter L. Ingeman

## Edited by

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All the sermons included in this book, color photographs of Father Peter and Happy Ingeman as well as six audio files of him delivering sermons from the pulpit at Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta, Georgia, are also available on the website.

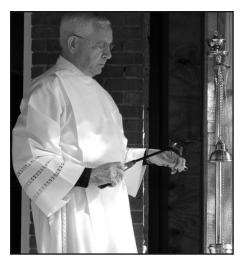
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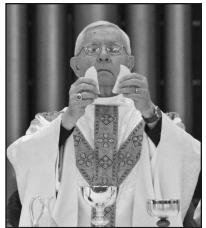


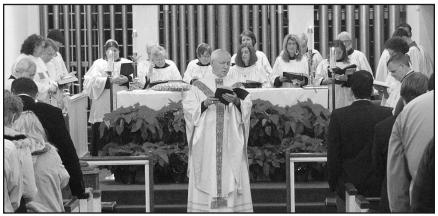




























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#### A Wonderful Adventure

# By The Reverend Deacon Patricia Marks February 2016

"A wonderful adventure" – that is how Fr. Peter Ingeman describes his life's path, a path of creativity, generosity, and leadership, one that allowed him to exercise his artistic talents as well as his empathy and organizational skills. In a career that has taken him to many countries, he has acquired a wealth of experience and formed many warm friendships. The knowledge, wisdom, and skill involved in those life adventures, along with his generous nature, droll sense of humor, and deep spirituality, culminated in a call to the priesthood. Those qualities are embodied in his sermons, all of which invite the listener into a deeper understanding of the readings and to a profound sense of God's presence.

A second-generation Norwegian-American, Fr. Ingeman was born on July 22, 1939, and grew up in Chicago and in the Washington, D.C.-Virginia area. Since his father, Milton Ingeman, was a colonel in the U.S. Army, the family moved frequently. He has many stories about his first college year in Munich, where, as a seventeen-year-old, he skied in Germany and Austria, travelled to Paris, and visited Denmark and Switzerland.

He received his Bachelor of Arts with a major in Fine Arts at Rutgers University in 1960. There he met his wife, Happy, who was majoring in psychology at Douglass College, the women's coordinate of Rutgers. Married on June 17, 1961, in her hometown of Gloucester City, New Jersey, they have been happily together for fifty-five years and twenty-six moves, settling at home in Valdosta, Georgia.

Intelligent and warm-hearted, Happy creates both for him and for those who know her a welcoming space; she is known for her willingness to listen closely, her unfailing hospitality, and her desire to reach out and help others, whoever they are.

Fr. Ingeman's varied background and breadth of understanding, along with Happy's loving support, were important factors in his path to the priesthood. Shortly after graduation he became a member of the Army Reserves and an art therapist at Dorothea Dix State Hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina. He moved several times between the Reserves and active duty as he was stationed at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, Fort Lee, Virginia, and Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where son Bill was born in 1962. Three years later, while Fr. Ingeman was studying at the University of Pennsylvania for a graduate degree in occupational therapy, a second son, Steven, was born.

Transferred to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio from 1965-1967, he interned in the burn unit and treated patients with peripheral nerve injuries, and then was stationed at Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco for another two and a half years. His skill was evidenced by the gratefulness of the many patients he later met who were able to regain movement. In 1970 the family moved to the Army base at Landstuhl, Germany, where at 2nd General Hospital he treated patients with psychiatric disabilities and children with cerebral palsy, a career that proved both difficult and rewarding. In a very real sense, those experiences signaled his eventual calling to the ministry.

Three and a half years later, the family found themselves again at Fort Sam Houston. There at Baylor University Fr. Ingeman earned an M.A. in Hospital Administration and went on to intern at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. "We never made a conscious decision to stay in the Army, but they kept offering wonderful assignments and training," said Fr. Ingeman. Perhaps the pivotal assignment was in Washington, D.C., in the Army Medical Department Personnel Support Agency. There, as he tells it, his office in the Forrestal Building had a glass wall behind his desk; he could see down the Potomac River to Virginia

Theological Seminary. It was irresistible: he called the seminary for information about enrolling, asking them to send everything to his office so as not to upset his wife!

That was not quite the time for seminary, because shortly after that, he was accepted at Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, training that prepared him for his next position: Chief of Occupational Therapy at Eisenhower Medical Center and consultant to the Surgeon General for the Southeastern United States and Central America.

It was the move to Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia, that signaled a major change of life. He had been Captain in 1967, Major in 1975, and Lt. Colonel in 1981. He had earned the prestigious Legion of Merit and the Meritorious Service Medal. He had plenty to keep him occupied: while working for his doctorate at the University of Georgia in Augusta, he was also on the faculty at the Medical College of Georgia, where he taught upper extremity anatomy. As he tells the story, he walked innocently into St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, and his life was transfigured.

Under the spiritual guidance of Fr. Neal Phelps, he was ordained a deacon on July 22, 1982, and then, while offering a Deacon's Mass at a church in Harlem, Georgia, he was called to become a priest. That decision led him to retire from the Army in 1984 and to enter seminary at Nashotah House in Wisconsin, where he served as Deacon and also as Chaplain at St. John's Military Academy. While at seminary, he published *The Role of the Episcopal Church and of Nashotah House in the Establishment of St. John's Military Academy* (1986); during his earlier professional career, he had also published an article on psychiatric occupational therapy in 1971 and a master's thesis analyzing factors pertaining to referral of social service patients in 1975.

He was ordained a priest at Christ Episcopal Church in Valdosta, Georgia, on June 6, 1987, where he became assistant to Henry I.

Louttit (Bishop of the Diocese of Georgia, 1995-2009) and Chaplain to Valdosta State College (now University). Many at Christ Church remember Fr. Peter's tenure during those years, from his very successful college ministry group that met regularly with lively music and avid discussions, to his ability to fill in and preach at a moment's notice. In 1989 he became Rector at St. Francis of the Islands, Savannah, Georgia, and then was warmly welcomed back to Christ Church as Rector in 2000.

Retirement in 2012 meant more time for other activities, including membership on the Board of the Turner Center for the Arts in Valdosta. Fr. Ingeman is an accomplished iconographer and artist, and he continues to serve at the altar at the Thursday morning service and to preach at Vespers. Whatever his occupation, he is an inspiring model for both lay and clergy, helping countless others to walk the path of Christ and discern calls both to the diaconate and the priesthood. Over the years his sermons have touched us deeply in many ways; but most importantly, they have moved us to follow the great commandments of loving God and loving our neighbor, and they have motivated us to show that love by our work in church and community.

This collection of many of his sermons during his years at Christ Church exemplify the wisdom he gained through years of study and life experience as well as his generous and loving heart. They are also excellent examples for those who would like to learn to write sermons. As his advice in "On Writing a Sermon" shows, he learned from experience and from talented mentors, as well as from focused reading of the Bible. He is known for his appeal to a wide variety of listeners and for weaving in his personal experiences so that the sermons are grounded in recognizable, real-life events.

I invite you not only to read this collection, but to listen, as St. Benedict says, with the ear of your heart.

## The Hope That is Within You

## By The Reverend Leslie Hiers Chadwick February 2016

"... but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you...." 1 Peter 3:15

In June 2002, I shadowed Fr. Peter Ingeman for a week to learn how to be a priest. I admired then the elegance, simplicity, and clarity of Fr. Peter's liturgical and pastoral theology. After a funeral we had done for a family visiting from out of town, Fr. Ingeman urged me to return to the car after leading the committal in the brutal South Georgia heat, noting, "We have done them a service that they could not do for themselves; now let them do for each other what we cannot do for them." He likes liturgy to be clean, purposeful and crisp—no wasted motions, no fussiness.¹ Every motion he makes is intentional and connects to the whole. I learned much that week from Fr. Ingeman, but the one area I missed asking him about was preaching. I left my sermon preparation that week until the last minute, didn't sleep the night before, and fainted at the 8 a.m. service in the middle of the second paragraph. When I came to (an acolyte had caught me after I hit my head on the pulpit), Boots Tudor was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> He broke down the Eucharist prayer into four simple motions: elevating the bread when saying "This is my body; " the wine for "This is my blood;" the sign of the cross and hands crossed over the elements during the epiclesis (asking the Holy Spirit to come down on the gifts and on God's people); and the final elevation of the consecrated elements leading up to the great AMEN. Any time you're not doing these motions, you should have your hands in the orans position (out) or together (when saying words with the people).

standing over me assuring me, "Honey, it was so good! We loved it!" Thanks to the wonderful people of Christ Church and Fr. Ingeman's calm response and encouragement, I got back up and gave the sermon at 11:30 a.m. and preached regularly for the next 13 years without incident.

I did not think to ask Fr. Ingeman to share with me his sermon-writing process until December 2015. A few months earlier, I had started a position at Virginia Theological Seminary as Program Coordinator for *Deep Calls to Deep: A Program to Strengthen Episcopal Preaching*. Taking on this new role has given me the chance to step back from preaching weekly and reflect on my own sermon process and what practices are most life-giving for others in sermon preparation. The point of the program is to help people reconnect with the passion and "hope that is in them," the core experience of God that brought them to ministry in the first place.

In talking with Fr. Ingeman about his sermon-writing process, I realized how helpful it would be for me and others to reflect on his sermons as a model of sustained "preaching passion" and hope. This conversation led to our project of collecting his sermons. In the first sermon in this collection, Fr. Ingeman articulates the core experience and theology that brought him to the Episcopal Church and reconnected him to God. Fr. Ingeman writes, "If I were to answer the question, 'What brought me to the Episcopal Church?' I would say the Sacraments and the sense of participation, actually being engaged in worship, actually participating in the Holy Eucharist. The Episcopal Church is a Sacramental church; what binds us together is what we do, not just what we say we believe." He then describes how "contact, presence, or personal touch" is present in both the sacraments (laying on of hands, etc.) and in the healing miracles of Jesus: "Jesus touches the eyes of a man born blind, the tongue of a mute, the ears of one who is deaf. Jesus lays His hands upon the lame, the leper, the demoniac and they are healed. It isn't verbal or theoretical, it's real and physical and wonderful . . . . In the presence of Jesus they found actual, physical contact with the divine. God was

that close." Fr. Ingeman continues, "Personally, I stayed because of that closeness, that presence of God in the sacraments that I felt in that chapel, a presence I had never felt before, never experienced in all those years of being preached at." The theme of that close and constant presence recurs season after season and year after year in Fr. Ingeman's sermons. You can hear it in his theophany of God's reassuring voice on an icy road in South Georgia and you can hear it in his joyful proclamation that for all of us, "Jesus is the presence of God" (3/17/13).

Fr. Ingeman preaches with the same elegance, clarity, and simplicity with which he presides over the sacraments. When I asked him about his process in December, Fr. Ingeman said that he never worried too much about the sermon because, as someone with a high church theology, he believes that both he and the people come to church to receive the Sacraments. That takes pressure off him as the preacher. And yet, far from causing him to neglect his preaching preparation, that belief frees Fr. Ingeman to enter the text imaginatively, to review the Greek if he's preaching on the Gospel, and to see how the text resonates and informs the hope that is within him. His opening line in his Vespers homily from March 15, 2015, "A man born blind in a world grown dark..." makes the listener want to hear more. Without fail, Fr. Ingeman links the gospel story to our participation in the liturgy. On Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010, he notes, "On this day we retrace that baptismal mark, not in Holy Oil but in ashes. It is the same cross, the same mark of our identity. The ashes make it visible to all; the ashes tell the world first of our identity as the children of God, then that we make that proclamation in profound humility, penitent of all that we may have done to separate ourselves from Him."

He preaches within the context and cycle of the liturgical year, so that the sermon process never grows old or stale, but is alive with the wonder and mystery of the story that cycle brings to life. In his Christmas 2008 sermon, Fr. Ingeman writes, "On crisp, clear nights there is a deep blackness to the sky; stars shine in their thousands, a myriad of points of light. The dazzling Milky Way splits the sky, and

the stars are so many and so bright that they seem close, so close that they press down upon us. Then you are under the real night sky, the ancient sky of the night not compromised by the lights we have created. That is the sky of the shepherds in tonight's Gospel .... "He invites the reader to enter the story imaginatively with him and to marvel at the wonder that we, too, are invited to participate in this story as God's children.

Fr. Ingeman writes his sermons as if he's talking to you. As you read them, you can hear him delivering them in a calm, voice, sparkling with intellectual curiosity, and see a smile playing at his lips and a twinkling in his eye. He delivers lines deadpan, injecting wry humor into his preaching. In his Vespers homily from August 23, 2015, Fr. Peter describes a high church priest who did not suffer fools lightly. Fr. Peter writes, "From 1908 to 1934, All Saints' rector was Father Henry Falconer Barclay Mackay. His parishioners affectionately addressed him as Father Henry Falconer Barclay Mackay." This style of delivery resonated with me even as a teenager. When I was in high school, I heard Fr. Ingeman preach a sermon on Amos and the plumb line. Fr. Ingeman showed me that the plumb line was a metaphor for our being in right relationship with God and felt instantly relevant to my life. As a priest now mid-career myself, I have an even greater appreciation for Fr. Ingeman's ability to craft a tight sermon with storytelling, teaching, humor, and an elegant, compact theology with no wasted words. There is a seamlessness, a consistency of theology and liturgy informed by the theology of the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In his homily from March 1, 2015, he summarizes, "Lifted up upon the Cross of His crucifixion, lifted up from the tomb in His Resurrection, lifted up to the throne of God in His Ascension, Jesus is the way and the symbol of change and salvation for Nicodemus, for Israel and for us all." Fr. Ingeman explores that story of Jesus' saving grace within its original context and without pretense or apology. His tone is understated yet his sermons have a piercing clarity. He has humility and insight into human nature, a realistic understanding of sin, but always putting sin in its context of the Good News.

Fr. Ingeman sees the lectionary as an arc of storytelling that fits into a larger whole and mirrors the liturgical year. A musician becomes a master when he or she stops playing individual notes in succession and begins to hear how the notes fit into a large arc, both within a phrase and within a larger piece. Fr. Ingeman sees that arc and not just as 52 weeks of sermons plus feast days as individual times for which he'll have to struggle to find something worth saying or a fresh way to say it. Fr. Ingeman preaches with the calm assurance that why we have gathered is worthwhile and what we've been given is worth saying. Fr. Ingeman's 2012 sermon on Ascension Day is particularly skillful and powerful. It can be hard to preach on the Ascension - an event that can seem like an afterthought in the Nicene Creed, Fr. Ingeman dives right in, confident in its liturgical and theological significance. He connects this Day's significance to that of Easter and Christmas, as one of three feasts in which Jesus himself is present: "In the Incarnation we speak of birth. In the Resurrection we speak of vanguishing death, two poles between which we all live our lives. In the Ascension we speak of the promise of eternal life."

Fr. Ingeman never tires of preaching "the hope that is within him" because this hope is one that reassures us at every stage of our journey, "God is present with us always. We are always in God's presence and protection."

In His Holy Name.

## On Writing a Sermon

# The Reverend Peter L. Ingeman January 2016

My first ordained position was as chaplain to a military academy. The chapel was a large, stone building with slate floors and large stained glass windows, copied in the 1920's from the chapel at the United States Military Academy at West Point. On my first Sunday I climbed up into the pulpit, a carved stone pulpit projecting over a congregation of several hundred teenaged boys with access to weapons. I had paraphrased the morning's gospel reading and made several illustrations when the first wooden kneeler crashed to the slate floor making a noise much like gunfire. "How embarrassing for the cadet" I thought. Then three or four more fell. The message was clear: focus.

At that time I was fortunate to have the friendship and guidance of two mentors, Bishop Stanley Atkins and Professor Reginald Fuller, Englishmen with an extraordinary command of the language, great academic backgrounds and years of experience in the pulpit. Their sermons were clear and to the point, never exceeding ten minutes. Their illustrations were brief, limited to one, reflecting matters of which they could speak with personal experience. Observing and listening to them shaped the way I write a sermon.

In my experience the Old Testament reading, Epistle, and Psalm have usually been selected because they make one point in support of the Gospel; finding that point is first. To do so I find it helpful to read the texts in several English translations but, most important, in the original Greek, noting that Greek words may have several definitions and meanings depending upon context; the definitions may be central to

the point to be made. Multiple points dilute the sermon. I limit my sermons to one point.

I do not repeat or paraphrase the texts in a sermon. The congregation has already heard them. If you find and present the point to be made, the congregation can make the connection with the texts.

One illustration is enough if it truly addresses and speaks to the point. The illustration is from my personal experience, not from other sources. The congregation can tell when what I say does not ring true.

My process in writing a sermon is to first identify the point made by the readings and relate that point to the Gospel and to a common experience, using one illustration. A full sermon may be delivered in ten minutes. It has been said that anything worth saying can be said in ten minutes; the Gospel is well worth saying.

## **Vespers Homily**

Last Sunday of Epiphany February 7, 2016

> Psalm 50: 1-6 Mark 1: 29-39

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let us begin with a question or two:

First question: Are you a "cradle Episcopalian?"

Second question: If not, what brought you to the Episcopal Church?

Third question: In both instances, what has kept you here?

Personally, I am a convert. My first memory of any church was the First Methodist Church of Irving Park in Chicago; it seemed to be an enormous church to a very little boy.

My father was in Europe defeating the Nazis, so my mother and I sat on sort of a padded bench in the very back of the church. In retrospect, I realize that was to make a quick exit in case I lost interest in proceedings I could hear but could not see.

Hearing was the key to the service; it was highly verbal. The minister was Dr. Minion who, when met at the back door of the church following the service, looked to my memory remarkably like Woodrow Wilson. I supposed that was Dr. Minion whose voice I heard during the service.

I suppose the service lasted an hour; most of the service consisted of the invisible Dr. Minion preaching, then a few rousing hymns, a prayer and freedom. I don't remember having to stand or otherwise move during the service; I don't remember anybody having to stand or move. This was my introduction to worship.

My father's return from the war meant moving to Arlington, Virginia, in the Washington, D.C., area. There we attended something called General Protestant Services at the chapel on Fort Myer. According to United States Army regulations all persons except Roman Catholics and Jews are General Protestants. The chapel was small but not too small, historic and quite beautiful; it provided a good visual distraction from the Protestant ministers who, even to a young boy, lacked enthusiasm for the service. I suppose they were all Methodists and Presbyterians and Lutherans filled with nostalgia for their own prayer books and hymnals. I'm sure no Episcopal priest would behave so.

The service was much like that of the First Methodist Church of Irving Park, word-oriented, highly verbal, focused on the minister and his long, and often very long, sermon. It was theatrical. The congregation, rooted to their seats, played no part in it. It might easily have been presented to an empty theater. Consequently, when old enough to make such an assertion, I faded away from church for a few years. My parents did not seem to mind.

I had a friend in high school named Darwin Terry. This was at Fort Sheridan, a beautiful old army post on Lake Michigan about twenty miles north of Chicago.

Darwin was the son of the Post Chaplain who happened to be an Episcopalian. His father conducted all those General Protestant services, but, in addition, early each Sunday morning he celebrated an Episcopal Eucharist. Darwin invited me to attend one, just to see what happened.

If you, too, are a convert, you may remember your first Episcopal service. It was a revelation. It wasn't simply that there was actual color in the little chapel, hangings, and vestments, but there was a joyful sense to the service. The sermon was relatively brief and was actually

interesting. The minister, the chaplain, the priest, appeared fully engaged in celebrating. The focus was not on him or on his sermon but on the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Most amazing of all, the congregation, a very small congregation, was engaged and participating in the service. They actually knelt for the prayers even though there were no kneelers. They said the responses, and prayed out loud. It was church, real church.

If I were to answer the question, "What brought me to the Episcopal Church," I would say the Sacraments and the sense of participation, actually being engaged in worship, actually participating in the Holy Eucharist. I had grown weary of being preached at for one hour, or more, once a week, while doing nothing. I realized that I was no longer, and perhaps had never been, a General Protestant.

The Episcopal Church is a sacramental church; what binds us together is what we do, not just what we say we believe. We certainly read the scriptures, four readings at every Eucharist, and we hear a sermon, hopefully based on one or more of those lessons, but the heart of our worship is the Sacraments, "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace."

If I were to ask you, "What are those outward and visible signs," you might say baptismal water, holy oil, a wedding ring, all of which are true. However, over the years I came to realize that there really is one more universal sign that is present in every sacramental act. It's the sign of "touching."

When Episcopalians are baptized, a priest touches them with water and with holy oil; when they are married, a priest places his hand upon the bride and groom's heads in blessing; when they are very sick, a priest touches them, making the sign of the cross on their foreheads in holy oil--it's called Unction. When they die, a priest will make the same sign in Extreme Unction. When they are confirmed, a Bishop lays his or her hands on their heads, touching them. When an Episcopalian is ordained, the Bishop, and all priests present, do the same. At the Eucharist the priest lays his or her hands on the bread and the wine, invoking the Holy Spirit and God's blessing.

What do you suppose brought all those people to Jesus in this reading from Mark? Mark would have us believe that it was Jesus' preaching, speaking with authority. Jesus was a good preacher. I'm sure it's true that people were attracted to hear Him; that's why they came. Actually, there must have been many good preachers in Israel then. John the Baptist is but one example of ones who deplored the failure of the Jews to serve God and called the people to repentance. There is a reference in Amos to groups called the "Prophets' Sons" who traveled the country, much like a revival. Like a revival, they were the entertainment of country people and villagers.

What made them stay? We might call it contact or presence or touch. Unlike any other, Jesus takes the hand of Simon's mother-in-law, raises her up, and she is healed. Jesus touches the eyes of a man born blind, the tongue of a mute, the ears of one who is deaf. Jesus lays His hands upon the lame, the leper, the demoniac, and they are healed. It isn't verbal or theoretical. It's real and physical and wonderful. Of course they stayed with Him, and the following grew with each moment of His healing presence. In the presence of Jesus they found actual, physical contact with the divine. God was that close.

Personally, I stayed because of that closeness, that presence of God in the sacraments that I felt in that chapel, a presence I had never felt before, never experienced in all those years of being preached at. I was confirmed an Episcopalian at the Fort Sheridan chapel by the Bishop of Chicago.

The Army takes photos of everything, and a few days later I received a black and white, eight-by-ten glossy of me kneeling before the bishop, his hands laid upon my head. Many years later my mother, the General Protestant Methodist, gave the photo to Happy, saying "This is the day he lost his religion." How true.

In His Holy Name.

## **Independence Day**

July 4, 2005

Deuteronomy 10:17-21 Psalm 145 or 145:1-9 Hebrews 11:8-16 Matthew 5:43-48

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I recently heard from my cousin Bill in California. Actually, he now calls himself Chuck, which is fine by me.

He wanted to tell us that his son, Roger, has just entered a Russian Orthodox seminary in Pennsylvania. It's not that any of us are Russian – Roger has been teaching in Northern California for years, and there's a very strong Russian presence there – I guess. I must tell you that Bill/Chuck's other child is his daughter, Hillary, who is 6 feet 5 and gorgeous and is a dancer in Las Vegas – she was actually at the Folies Bergère in Paris for some years. We have a picture of my Aunt Irma, now in her nineties – not tall – clutching her purse – standing beside tall Hillary – mostly feathers – beaming like any proud Grandma.

Now when I say that none of us are Russian, I must tell you that Bill/Chuck discovered his Scottish heritage rather late in life and took to wearing kilts. All things are possible in California. Bill/Chuck is himself 6 feet 5 and skinny, so you have a picture of bony knees sticking out of a kilt.

I have a vision of their family reunion.

I mention all this because you may remember Bill – in those days – as the cousin I grew up with – spent every summer with. We were usually at my Grandfather's summer home on a lake in Wisconsin. My grandfather had emigrated from Norway – the dream of all Norwegians is to have land. The first thing they do is to build a cottage and put up a flagpole, all of which he had done.

Bill was the creative one – a would-be inventor. He really did perfect invisible ink one time – something to do with milk, as I recall.

At any rate, the most memorable 4th of July in my childhood was the year that Bill thought to invent his own fireworks, actually just one firework as a big surprise to all adults present. So he took a brown paper bag and filled it with confetti. Into that he inserted strings of little firecrackers — called ladyfingers — with all the entwined fuses sticking out of the bag. His plan was to wait until dark when the adults present were sitting outside conversing. He would then throw this firework into their midst. They would, of course, be surprised and delighted.

As predicted, darkness fell, and the adults were seated in lawn chairs enjoying the evening. It was so peaceful; all the stars – a gentle breeze – all the fireflies. Bill came stealthily across the lawn, bag and match in hand. He lit the fuses and lobbed his invention right over their heads.

It had been an exceptionally dry summer that year. The confetti, ignited by the firecrackers came down in a hundred individual flames onto the dry, dry lawn. The adults were indeed surprised. They all ran around stamping out fires on the lawn. My grandfather said words in Norwegian I had never heard before, and never since. Bill was nowhere to be found.

Now, so that you don't think this tale has no theological significance, it seems to me that it's all a fair description of just how Jesus can come into our lives. We do like our calm and our comfort, but

sometimes, as we are relaxing in our personal metaphoric lawn chair, Jesus lobs his own fireworks into our midst, and we are called to action – perhaps even stamping out fires. That's my experience. It can be scary but never dull.

And what happened to Bill? Actually, Bill/Chuck moved to California and cofounded a company from which he recently retired. It's called "Explosive Technology, Inc."

In His Holy Name.

## **Nineteenth Sunday of Pentecost**

**September 25, 2005** 

Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32 Psalm 25; 3-9 Philippians 2: 1-13 Matthew 21: 28-32

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Wrong! Our salvation is God's business. Our Lord Jesus Christ accomplished our salvation long ago in His sacrifice for us on the cross. As a sign of that, God is at work in us for his "good pleasure."

What pleases God? That is an ancient question indeed. I think Ezekiel answered it many, many years ago. Ezekiel tells us, "Turn and live."

To live is to turn away from wickedness and to do what is lawful and right. Otherwise, you do not please God; in fact you reject God, separate yourself from Him, and that is spiritual death.

God asks, and it is not a rhetorical question, given that choice: "Why will you die?"

There are many, many answers to that question, all of which can be summed up in the words "selfishness" and "conceit." They are what kill us. That's Paul's message to the Christians at Philippi.

Such is that little story about the two brothers working in the field. The first brother says, when his father asks him to work, "I will not." He

has better things to do, more important things to do, and besides it's too hot, and the work is too hard, and he doesn't have the right clothes, and his father should hire some less important people to do such menial tasks. That's selfish. That's conceited.

But then he knows that his father needs him. And then, happily, he "turns and lives." He manages to go beyond his own selfish wants and actually serves his father.

Number two son never gets that far. He knows from the first that he's not going anywhere near that field. Why argue? Why make a scene. It's just too much trouble to get into a discussion of work ethics, so he says "yes" and means "no." He stays self-centered. He stays conceited. He never does the work that his father needs him to do. He never turns.

The point of it all is this. Humility is good!

Who is the perfect model of humility? If ever a son labored in his father's field, it would be Jesus. If ever one demonstrated humility, actually taking on the nature of one of us – our very fragile humanity – and moreover the nature of a servant – a servant of all; you and me – it would be Jesus.

We really must remember that, in his humanity Jesus was as subject to the pressure of selfishness and conceit as we are but did not succumb. He lived His life and went to His death for others.

Jesus is a son who said, "I go, sir," and actually goes.

The question then is, "what kind of son or daughter are we?" My guess is that most of us, perhaps all of us, fall somewhere between brother one and brother two. We have a good idea of what God would have us do, what pleases God. We know what is "lawful and right." We cannot claim ignorance of what it means to be a Christian. In short

we know perfectly well how we should be and what we should do, and, occasionally, we emulate Christ and actually do it.

Is it to "work out our own salvation?" In all honesty, you and I do know people who think so. They really think they are buying their way into heaven. They're wrong.

We emulate Our Lord not for our sake but His. We do the will of God because it is God's will and simply that. In doing the will of God we turn, and in turning we live.

In that I dare say, God takes great pleasure.

In His Holy Name.

## **Twenty-First Sunday of Pentecost**

October 9, 2005

Isaiah 25: 1-9 Psalm 23 Philippians 4:4-13 Matthew 22:1-14

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I received an invitation some time ago. It came in a very fine envelope, obviously first class; it looked expensive – best quality. The invitation said: "It's a party; you're invited!" Now that is exciting. Reading on, I found the details. I was very enthusiastic until I read down to the part that said, "The menu will be fat things full of marrow and wine on the lees." That brought to mind a vision of my doctor solemnly intoning the word "cholesterol." Then I had the vision of finishing a glass of red wine and finding a sort of sediment. That would be the dregs or "lees." This is not a "feast" that appeals to me. This is not a feast in our terms.

But I suppose it was so for Isaiah. I suppose if we sent him a note inviting him to join us here today and said, "We'll be having bread and wine," he might be a little put off.

The point is that the feast that Isaiah and you and I are invited to is not a feast in our terms. Our tastes are far too fickle. The terms are of God. God sets the table. No matter what the menu, the real sustenance and nourishment we receive is His love and His grace. The bread and wine at our feast – the presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ in His Body and His Blood – tells us of a love and a grace so great that He would sacrifice Himself for us.

Everyone is invited. The doors are open to all. But our host asks one thing of us. He asks for a "penitent and contrite" heart. That's why we make our Confession before coming to His table.

But a "penitent and contrite" heart isn't a matter of words said each Sunday. It's a lifestyle. Paul, who had some impressive experience with repentance, told the Philippians to live out their faith by holding to what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, worthy of praise. What an admirable lifestyle and how very, very difficult! They and we live in a world that would contradict those things or make them irrelevant to our daily life.

But clearly, those things are of God, and we are to learn to live here, in all conditions, without losing sight of them.

Have you met Christians who truly met that condition? Different, aren't they? There is a sense of calm and focus that surrounds them wherever they are. It's like a garment of faith in God's grace that carries them through every moment of every day. If it's not too great a stretch, I suggest that is the "wedding garment" of a Christian.

What is that about wedding garments in the Gospel? The custom was for a host to provide a sort of beautiful robe for his guests for several reasons. It was hospitable. It made the guests look a lot better. Most important, it was a very good way to tell who was supposed to be at the table and who was not.

For a Christian, then, contrition, penitence, living out our faith – all those things are the sign of who should be at the feast. God has no trouble with the guest list.

Our feast is bread and wine at God's table; the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ; by it we are strengthened and nourished and sustained; in it we know that "The Lord is at hand." Through it we receive the absolute assurance that for those who attend this feast there is an end to death and tears and a life eternal with Christ in the presence of God.

In His Holy Name.

## **Twenty-Third Sunday of Pentecost**

October 23, 2005

Exodus 22:21-27
Psalm 1
Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-36

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"You were strangers in Egypt" – sojourners in a strange land. That thought was central in the minds and lives of God's people.

They knew well what it meant to be a stranger – to be different; to be other.

Who has never been a stranger? Every one of us has, at some point in life been in the midst of new people, a new job, a new place – the unfamiliar.

Some of us have parents or grandparents – all of us have ancestors – who were strangers in this land. They were at some time immigrants. At some time they left everything familiar to set out to a new life and a new world. They were filled with a mixture of excitement, expectation, and fear.

Were they accepted by those they met in this new world – some better than others? Some slipped easily into that new life. But some were shunted off to the poorest land and the worst jobs, no matter who or what they actually might be – just strangers.

Let's reduce the scale of that story and make it personal. Do you remember your first day at school? Do you remember your first day at a new job or in a new neighborhood? Do you remember being new – being other – the feeling that they all knew each other and nobody knew you?

How did you feel? What did you need then? You needed a kind word, an outstretched hand. You needed to be acknowledged and recognized. You needed "compassion."

Compassion is "seeing the needs of others and doing something about it."

A compassionate God saw the plight of His people – perpetual strangers in Egypt. They were always the new people, never accepted, always marginalized. A compassionate God acted – saw their situation and reached down and lifted them out.

It was never forgotten; it must never be forgotten! We must always remember that we are the children of God, and that we depend on His compassion every bit as much as did ancient Israel, and that as we depend upon the compassion of God, so the stranger depends upon our compassion.

Many years later a young Pharisee approached a Rabbi from Galilee and asked him "Rabbi, what is the great commandment in the Law?" The Rabbi answered "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it; you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the prophets."

The very life – the very culture – of the people of God rests upon these two traditions: Torah, the Law – the story of God's relationship with His people – and the interpretation of that relationship by the

prophets. In turn all that is in the Law and the prophets rests upon the great foundation of God's compassion for His people.

That includes us – you and me. Our Lord Jesus Christ, that Rabbi – is the perfect model of the love of God, the perfect model of compassion. He assures us, "I did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it."

# All Saints Day

November 1, 2005

Ecclesiasticus 44: 1-10,13-14 Psalm 149 Revelation 7:2-4,9-17 Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Faces – many, many faces – young and old, smooth and wrinkled, male and female – all looking up in expectation – eyes fixed on Jesus, ears straining to hear His words.

Jesus sits apart – not far – on a hillside, and He looks out upon those faces, and, perhaps, He sighs.

He sighs because He knows them so very well – not by their names but by their hearts. His eyes see to their very souls. It's all so very plain to Him – their hopes and dreams; their pains and sorrows; their moments of happiness.

Those faces might well be ours tonight. We all bring our innermost selves to His presence, and we all strain to hear His words of guidance and comfort.

He speaks. He speaks straight to their hearts and to ours – your heart and mine. He speaks to all people for all time, all who have striven and still strive to live in God's Kingdom here and now. He speaks to the righteous and the merciful – to those who make peace in a most unrighteous, unforgiving and dangerous world. He speaks to the

meek and to the persecuted. He speaks to the mighty and to the meek – the great and famous and the nameless and faceless. And this is what He says:

There is a place – there will be a time – when all your pains and sorrows – your discomforts and cares – will be no more. Hold fast to your faith – live as you know God would have you live – and that time and that place are yours. No one is nameless and faceless in the presence of God.

What, or who, is a saint? Thomas Merton, in a tiny book called *The Seeds of Contemplation* wrote, ". . . even the small yellow flowers by the roadside, lifting their faces to God, are one with the saints." Saints are those men and women, known and unknown, whose faces are ever turned upward to the throne of God, whose eyes see Him, whose ears hear Him, and whose lives reflect Him. Some have suffered for that; some suffer now. Some have been exalted; many, many have not.

The promise is to them all. The reward is great in heaven. "The lamb in the midst of the throne will be your shepherd to guide you to springs of living water; and God Himself will wipe away every tear from your eyes."

# Twenty-Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

November 6, 2005

Amos 5:18-24
Psalm 70
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"How long, O Lord, how long?" That's a plaintive cry from what we know as the Old Testament – a cry of the Jewish people awaiting the Messiah – awaiting the Day of the Lord. That will be the day, in their eyes, when everything will be made right – all will be perfect.

But not for everyone – not if you believe Amos. Amos says that will be a day of gloom and darkness. It will be a day of judgment. Judgment is not a popular word – not a popular idea – but it's with us and always has been. Somewhere in the back of our minds there is always the idea that someone – God – sees our thoughts and actions and sort of weighs us in a balance. That, of course, is why we are so good at making excuses. I sincerely doubt that God believes most of our excuses, but we can hope.

In the back of our minds is the idea that ultimately we are going to be answerable for our lives. Amos tells us that God will make that judgment on how we have practiced justice and mercy. That's another way of saying, "love God and love your neighbor as yourself." If we can honestly say that we have tried to live that way, we will be judged righteous and have admission to His Kingdom. If not, here we are.

Paul makes it more graphic, more picturesque. Of course in Paul's day that "How long, O Lord" had stretched on for years and years, and whole generations of Christians that really expected the Messiah – Jesus – to return right away were dying. The question in Paul's day was what about them. What if they are in the earth and cannot be present to answer for themselves?

Paul assures them. First, God knows the hearts and minds of all, living and dead, and second, those who have been righteous and practiced justice and mercy in this life will be raised to that new life with Jesus to meet Him in the clouds. Raised first – then those who are living at that moment will join them, and all will find eternal life with Jesus. Those that are left, are left.

Of course the temptation in the age of Amos, and in the time of Paul, was to procrastinate. Thank heaven we no longer do that.

The idea was and is, that there will always be time in the days to come when we can change our lives. If we have not been righteous, there will be time to mend our ways. We can practice justice and mercy in time for the Big Day and thereby join the saints in the clouds. It really is a comforting thought, isn't it? However it doesn't quite seem to be what Jesus is saying in our Gospel.

Those foolish maidens just know that there's no hurry – they can buy that oil later – right now they are busy. Then, when the time comes – and it comes suddenly and completely without warning – the oil store is closed: it's too late.

What is Jesus really talking about? Obviously, it's not oil and lamps. He's talking about commitment – commitment to a life in which justice and mercy will be the center. The oil is commitment. It's not to be taken lightly. It can't run out and be replaced. It can't be borrowed. Commitment is that which prepares us – you and me – to receive Our Lord Jesus Christ and to take our place by Him in His Kingdom.

Without that commitment we might well say "How long, O Lord" with fear and trembling. With it, we say that with joyful expectation.

## **Second Sunday of Advent**

December 4, 2005

Isaiah 40:1-11 Psalm 85 or 85:7-13 2 Peter 3:8-15a,18 Mark 1:1-8

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Second Sunday of the season of Advent: we turn to John the Baptist, colorful and charismatic, a mysterious figure on the fringe of society. He has appeared suddenly, on the banks of the Jordan, calling the people to repent – turn their lives around – and live lives worthy of the children of God.

Scripture tells us that the people came to John there in the wilderness – many, many people – including Our Lord Jesus Christ. Why? What brought them out to him? I have heard all sorts of answers to that question.

Was John really the prophet Elijah? He dressed like Elijah, the great prophet of the Book of Kings. Elijah wore camel hair and a leather belt. Elijah was a man of the wilderness. Elijah had disappeared, taken up in a fiery chariot. The Book of Malachi – the final book of the Old Testament – states that Elijah will reappear immediately before the Messiah. Of course, people came to John – says the theory – they would not want to miss that!

John is at the Jordan – the great historic boundary of Israel – close to the point at which, centuries before, the people had entered their

Promised Land. His call to repentance is a call to leave that land – to go out and enter it again. It was a call to clean the slate – a new beginning in the relationship of Israel to God. Perhaps so.

Still, to go out to see John was a difficult and dangerous journey. It was not far, but the road was steep and dusty, waterless with no place to rest. To follow that road required a real commitment from them all. To go out to John reflected a deep, deep need in the hearts of the people.

Isaiah speaks of a road – a road in the wilderness – and of hills and valleys. Well, perhaps that road is life itself; perhaps we all travel though our own personal wilderness, a wilderness filled with peaks and valleys, highs and lows. Perhaps it is the road on which you and I will meet our Messiah. Will we know Him?

We do have our moments of being "up" do we not? Moments when we are totally absorbed in the demands of the lives we lead – fulfilling, exciting, important demands – and we are distracted, and we just might be far too busy to see Him. Those are our personal peaks. Then we have those "low" times – times when things simply are not right and good, and life is just wrong, and we are far too self-absorbed to see anything outside ourselves. Those are our valleys.

Our road in life is all peaks and valleys – ups and downs. If we would greet Our Lord when He comes, we need to do something about that – we need to "make smooth the road." That means recognizing those distractions – the external highs and the internal lows – for what they are, distractions, and put them aside.

That means going into our own personal wilderness to meet our own personal John the Baptist. You need not go to the Jordan. He's right here, within us, if we will hear and see him.

I think that the real reason the crowds went out to John was that they were disillusioned and dissatisfied with the state of things – with their lives. They knew that things must change.

I think that John was a symbol, an agent, a focal point – the embodiment of the change taking place within them. I think John cried, "Repent" to a repentant crowd.

I think that John is still crying repent and that you and I come to him – encounter him – within us. We come to him standing there in our wilderness; we come to him by a bumpy, rutted, twisting, messy road; we come to him because, like that crowd of long ago, we know that our lives must change – and we make that repentance.

This wilderness is still a wilderness – our wilderness. This road, life, is still the road, but now it is a smooth road and a straight road – a road on which you and I may meet our Messiah.

## The Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2005

2 Samuel 7:4,8-16 Psalm 132 or 132:8-15 Romans 16:25-27 Luke 1:26-38

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A few days ago Public Radio aired a story about "honor killing" in Afghanistan. Honor killing.

It had to do with abduction – kidnapping – in the tribal areas of that country. Apparently, kidnapping for ransom is an old and common tradition among those fine people. If a man is kidnapped, ransomed and freed, he is greeted with a great celebration by his family. If a woman is kidnapped and somehow freed (women are rarely ransomed), she is killed – killed by a member of her family on the assumption, without any investigation, that she has been dishonored, and thereby she has dishonored her family.

That happens today. It sort of brings a new dimension to the sweet story of the Annunciation, doesn't it?

Who is this Mary who can say to an angel, "Let it be to me according to your word?" She is not the serene woman of the icons, tenderly holding the baby Jesus – calm and composed. She is not the heartbroken mother weeping at the foot of the cross as that baby, grown to manhood, is crucified. She is not even the distraught mother looking for her wayward son in the streets of Jerusalem and finally finding Him in the Temple.

Mary is a young girl – a teenage girl – betrothed, which really means "single" in a small town – Nazareth – finding herself suddenly "favored of God" and pregnant.

Mary says, "Let it be to me according to your word," knowing full well that the village will gossip; that people won't believe a word of it; that Joseph would have every right to abandon her, and that probably, she would die.

Could Mary have said "no?" Could she have denied herself to God? Could she have refused to do His will? That's not so strange an idea; people deny God all the time. We call that sort of behavior sin. Mary is for us the symbol of the very antithesis of sin. Mary is the symbol of absolute, unqualified faith. She knows that if it is of God – no matter how unlikely and inexplicable – it must be right and good. In a few words she commits herself to all that is right and good.

In those few words a teenage girl in a tiny village opens the world – our world – to the presence of the living God, the Creator becoming one with His creation. In those few words the world is changed forever.

You know, we could use a hero or a heroine in this complex, relativistic age of ours. We could use one who can see and hear angels delivering the message of God to His children. We could use a double dose of faith and commitment. What greater and more perfect model might we have than Mary?

#### Christmas Eve

December 24, 2005

Isaiah 9:2-7 Psalm 96 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

How dependent we are on light! Darkness is alien – frightening. We have become so accustomed to having light at our command; we are lost without it. We have become so used to the glare of light – the artificial lights of our age – blotting out the darkness, blotting out the night sky.

It was not so on the night of Our Lord's birth – on that first great moment of the Incarnation. Our Lord was born in darkness – broken at most by a flickering candle. Our Lord was born in a place of deep shadows. Can we even begin to comprehend that world?

Place yourself there for a moment. Place yourself on a hillside above a sleeping village. Look down upon those tiny candles that light those humble homes – light the place where the baby Jesus lies.

Then look up. See the darkness pierced by the light of a million stars, endless stars sweeping across that night sky, driving away the darkness.

Look up at the glory of God filling the heavens and hear the angels sing.

Up there, in that night sky, one star shines more brightly than all the rest this night. Down here, in our earthly world, in that sleeping village at our feet, one star shines – the morning star of a new world – the first and brightest star of a new age for a world grown dark and cold – light and warmth in the form of the infant Jesus.

Those stars shine tonight for us all if we will see them; those angels sing tonight for you and for me if we will hear them. The light of the world shines still.

# Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

January 29, 2006

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 Psalm 111 1 Corinthians 8:1b-13 Mark 1:21-28

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Happy and I came to Georgia years ago on an assignment at Fort Gordon in Augusta. Our sons Bill and Steve were still with us. We bought a very nice, four-bedroom home in Evans, Georgia, a suburb of Augusta. Actually, we thought it might be our retirement home. We have had several retirement homes since then.

It was a brand new home. We had to do all the landscaping – trees, shrubs and lawn. We splurged on the lawn; we strip-sodded it with zoysia – a quick solution but expensive. So, having made that commitment, it seemed very right to take good care of the lawn, which we did. We trimmed and mowed and aerated and watered; it looked really good!

One day I was out in the front yard. It sloped gently to the street. I must explain that it was on a cul-de-sac. There was no reason for anyone to drive by. However, this old car pulled up in front of the house, and two women got out and approached me across the lawn. They said good morning, and then one of them said "Do you know that zoysia doesn't do well in this climate?" Really. Before I could reply – and I surely would have – the other one said, "Have you met Jesus?" I do not remember what I said in reply, which is probably good.

To this day I am not sure what she meant. Was she implying that I must have a personal encounter with Jesus to be a Christian? Do you have to be thrown from your horse on your personal road to Damascus? I know that some people will tell you such things have happened to them. I know that some people will tell of the driving out of their own personal demons – there are a lot of demons in this world – like the man in the Gospel – because of the presence of Christ. Those stories are so real, so personal. I hear them with a bit of awe. Theirs is an experienced faith. Theirs is the "new teaching" of the Gospel.

But what about all those people who don't have such stories? Are they somehow second-class Christians? Call theirs a "learned" faith. That's where we all start, isn't it? We all begin with stories about Jesus – Bible stories – picture books filled with illustrations. Ours was an old blue book of Bible stories in my grandfather's summer cottage. It had old Doré engravings of Bible stories – usually pretty violent scenes – over which my cousin Bill and I would pore on rainy days. The stories impressed themselves on my mind: very basic.

And there was Sunday school – later – to tell those stories again, much clearer but less exciting. That's where I learned about Jesus. They were good teachers, very dedicated to our learning – not at all like those scribes in the Gospel who teach for prestige. They were not "puffed up." Frankly, they were much like the people of this parish that give their time to teach our children about Jesus.

That is all learning about Jesus: the essential start – the foundation. You know, the truth is that for many of us – perhaps most of us – that's it. That's all right. That's enough. But that doesn't mean that such learning ever ends. He is a never-ending source of wisdom and wonder, ever new and ever fresh. There is always more to be learned about Him.

Knowing about Him opens in us the possibility that at any time we may encounter Him – may know His presence – and recognize Him.

What we know about Him brings Him closer. Paul knew a lot about Jesus before he met Him on the road to Damascus.

In retrospect, I wish I had said all this to those two women in my front yard in Evans, Georgia, so very long ago.

# Wednesday Homily

First Week of Lent March 8, 2006

> Jonah 3:1-10 Luke 11:29-32

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Poor Jonah! He's just barely recovered from his shipwreck and the big-fish episode, and here he is in Nineveh – a huge, noisy, dusty city, proclaiming God's judgment upon the people – a singularly unpleasant way to meet the population.

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown," he shouts over the noise of the streets. It's not a warning. He isn't giving them options. There is no clause that says, "unless you straighten up and repent."

He's telling them what is going to happen.

They listen. They believe. They repent. Why? There's no promise of mercy – no promise of forgiveness. They do so in hope – hope that God will relent and spare them.

Jonah is the sign. Jonah is the sign of impending judgment – the last chance. Jonah is the sign of God's presence – God's attention to their words and actions. Jonah triggers a series of events – the warning, the belief, the repentance, and the mercy.

That, of course, is what Our Lord is saying to the Jews of His day. He knows why they demand some sort of sign. "What is this man's authority? What is his message's validity?"

Jonah is the sign to the people of Nineveh; Our Lord is the sign to the Jews, a sign greater than Jonah. He is greater because to the warning of judgment Our Lord adds the possibility of mercy – the promise of God's readiness to forgive those who repent. Jesus is a sign for that generation.

He is a sign for this generation – for every generation. He tells us all that we can, like the people of Nineveh, choose to repent, not to somehow buy His mercy but simply to do as we should, and that God can, if He wills, choose to relent.

## Third Sunday of Lent

March 19, 2006

Exodus 20:1-17 Psalm 19:7-14 Romans 7:13-25 John 2:13-22

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I received what I took to be a bit of a compliment the other day. A person commented on the neatness of my desk. I suppose it's true; there isn't much on the surface of the desk. There is a reason for that. Years ago I was stationed in Washington with an office on the Mall. In that assignment everything had to be off your desk at the end of the day. Security people swept the building at night and confiscated anything not put away securely. Better simply to not put stuff out in the first place – keep everything neat. That sort of thing becomes a habit that has stuck with me over the years. So the top of the desk is clear. Please do not open the desk drawers. Actually, you might not be able to open the desk drawers. Messy! It's paper, lots and lots of paper. What do you do with all that paper, some of which is important? For a society with computers and the Internet we still send an awful lot of paper around. We – or at least I – become overwhelmed by it all.

So, I was really pleased to see that I am not alone in being submerged by clutter. Perhaps you've had occasion to watch a channel called HGTV. It's sort of an oasis of practicality in the midst of "reality" programs and Bowflex ads. It's filled with home decoration and gardening programs – and there's one about organizing things.

ORGANIZING THINGS! There are people who actually make a profession of going around organizing peoples' homes – people's incredibly messy homes. The homeowners seem to be unable to deal with the mess – the mess they have made, I might add – so they need someone to come in and force them to make hard decisions about what is valuable and what should be thrown away. They are ruthless! They override all sorts of excuses and rationalizations and objections and all sorts of trash is hauled away. The mess is cleared up. The homeowners are organized and happy. What has really been organized? Their lives. For perhaps the first time they are making the right decisions about what's important. For the first time they can see what has value – and the organizer rides off into the sunset.

Now – lest you think there is no point to this sermon at all – I was reading this morning's Gospel and had a strange thought. Of course I have no doubt that it's a real story – a real event in Our Lord's life. I have no doubt that Jesus did encounter a mess in the courtyards of the temple and that He did react to it all with righteous anger and direct action. The Gospels agree on that. That's significant.

However, what if we read that story seeing that the Temple is us – our earthly lives? Remember that no one set out to build a temple with space reserved for moneychangers and pigeon sellers. When it was built, the Temple was clear and clean and totally dedicated to the worship of God. It was holy space.

People's lives begin that way, I think. I think lives begin with good intentions. Small children do know right from wrong – justice from injustice – what's fair and what is not. They expect the world – they expect us – to live up to a pretty high standard of behavior. Life and the world have the potential for being clear and clean as that shiny new temple.

And then – little by little – the salesmen and the moneychangers move in and set up shop. There's a little distraction in this corner, a little compromise over there. There are a few temptations and little

white lies; a few big fat lies. There are a few tables full of greed, pride, anger, lust. It's all so subtle. It all happens so slowly that we never notice how full and how noisy our personal temple is becoming.

We never really meant it to be that way. We know how it's supposed to be. We can read Exodus. We know that those are Commandments, not suggestions or items for discussion with God. We find ourselves prisoners of a life we never intended, doing what we do not want to do because the temple is so crowded that we can no longer see a clear path.

Sometimes we delude ourselves that we can make it all right again; all we need is a little spiritual house cleaning. Of course, we can't! We need an organizer – a spiritual organizer. When the spiritual clutter and the mess reach the point that we are submerged, we need to call Him in. But, if we do call Him in – let Him into our little temple – watch out! Our most cherished shortcomings and compromises and sins are going out – just like the moneychangers and the pigeon salesmen.

What was left in the Temple – what is left in you and me – when Jesus is finished is a House of Worship, a place of prayer. What is left is God's Temple as He designed it to be – God's people as He intends us to be – stripped of all those things that have kept His people from being close to God, being one with God.

#### Third Week of Lent

Wednesday, March 22, 2006

2 Timothy 2:10-15, 19 Psalm 103:1-4, 13-18 or Psalm 84:7-12 Matthew 13:47-52

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Mountaintops – physical or spiritual – are not easily reached; it demands commitment to climb up out of the valley – physical or spiritual – to a new height. The path is steep.

No wonder Peter and James and John are exhausted and slow-witted after that climb, following Jesus. No wonder they are so slow to grasp the scene before them. Their friend, companion, and teacher, Jesus, in the company of Moses and Elijah – equal to Moses and Elijah. We are told that at last Peter grasps the significance of the moment; perhaps, but I doubt it – I think that's hindsight.

Moses and Elijah – Law and Prophecy. God had entrusted His creation to Law and Prophecy – to them – until this moment. The great Creator God – the cloud or the *Shekinah* – is the presence of God, and when the cloud lifts, only Jesus remains.

In that moment Jesus is the fulfillment of all that has gone before. In that moment Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. He fulfills the Law. The Law, the Torah, is no longer a dry set of rules and penalties given by a remote God for the governance of His people. Now the Law lives and breathes. Now the Law is not just stated; it is

demonstrated by every word and deed of Jesus. Jesus is a demonstration of the love and will of God. Now the world can really ask, "Who has a God so close?"

He fulfills prophecy. Through the centuries the prophets had chronicled our stormy relationship to God. The endlessly repeated pattern of obedience and sin, repentance and reconciliation is broken. God and man are reconciled in Jesus. The cycle is ended – the future is linear – mankind and God are one.

Perhaps it's the moment when you and I should stand on our mountaintops with those three befuddled disciples and look on in wonder and awe at this Jesus – this Jesus in whom the world is transformed and all humanity is forever transfigured.

## Fifth Sunday of Lent

April 2, 2006

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Psalm 51 or 51:11-16 Hebrews 5:(1-4) 5-10 John 12:20-33

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus is a man without illusions. He knows He's going to die – die a brutal, humiliating death. At this point I think Jesus knows why He is to die. He accepts it.

I think Jesus has some intimation – some understanding that His death is not simply martyrdom for a cause. His death actually signifies the end of all that has gone before – the beginning of a new world. His death signals a totally new covenant between the creator God and His creation, a new covenant in which, Jeremiah tells us, "iniquity is forgiven and sins are forgotten" - all sins for all humanity. It's a new page, a clean slate, a fresh start.

The scale of it all! You see, my making a sacrifice for you is not the same – does not approach – the power of Jesus giving everything – giving His life – for persons He will never see or know – you and me. Jesus will be "lifted up," first on a crude wooden cross, then in His Ascension to the Father. Jesus will suffer the first that all – all – may participate in the second. A first person singular sacrifice leads to a third person plural salvation. His sacrifice shows perfect obedience – obedience to the will of the Father.

Jesus' perfect obedience – obedience even to death - brings salvation. What is obedience? My mother would have said, "If you don't know, I'm certainly not going to tell you." Simply put, obedience means putting the will of another before our own wishes – putting someone else in the center of our lives. That center for Jesus, and for you and for me, should and must be God.

So the obedience and sacrifice of one man – Jesus – brings salvation to us all. We all inherit this New Covenant. The question arises, "Is that new covenant individual or corporate?"

Corporate salvation is the idea of the old covenant – the Old Testament. Everybody – all of Israel – every single person – had to be obedient for the covenant to be fulfilled – for salvation. Obviously, that never happened. They never even came close. Do we expect to do better? If so, we are in big trouble.

But we are not in trouble. One man's obedience and sacrifice has taken that burden from us. Salvation is ours – for each of us and all of us – because of His obedience and death on that cross.

# Good Friday

April 14, 2006

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 Psalm 22:1-21 Hebrews 10:1-25 John (18:1-40) 19:1-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Ecce Homo. Behold the man. Who is this who stands before Pilate? Who is this battered man who stands before the symbol of all the powers of force and coercion, this personification of might? Who stands in judgment?

Is this a simple Galilean Rabbi, a man of flesh and blood whose teachings of peace and compassion and whose healings of the pains of the world have caused Him to fall afoul of the establishment? So it would appear. There is nothing remarkable about him at first glance.

We know His history. We know about His preaching and His teaching – so powerful, so persuasive. We know about His apparently inexplicable ability to heal the sick and raise the dead; everyone knows about that. He's famous, He has a huge crowd following Him, not just a ragtag twelve from Galilee. That is worrisome.

But there is something strange about Him. Even now, mocked and exhausted, He is unbowed. There is a composure about Him, a calmness when any other man should be groveling in fear. "What does He know? What does He see that we do not?" thinks Pilate?

Does He really claim to be the King of the Jews? Those Jewish officials claim that He does. Preposterous, yet there is a quality that makes one uneasy. It's that composure. It's as though this poor, wretched prisoner were the one who is truly free, free to choose life or death. It's as though roles were reversed, and Pilate stands in judgment, not simply the judgment of humanity or history but eternal judgment – God's judgment – and that simply cannot be.

What should this "Passion Gospel" tell us? It should tell us that love and compassion and charity are deeply threatening to those in this world who rely on power and intimidation to maintain themselves. It should tell us that humility is anathema to the proud and the haughty. It has always been so; Pilate speaks for them all.

Pilate tells us that love and compassion and charity must be negated – eliminated – by the only means such persons understand. Pilate tells us that men such as he have an overwhelming fear that such things – things they cannot comprehend – might become the way of the world.

So the very perfect symbol of all that is good goes to His death on a barbarous cross, a light to the world extinguished by those who would live only in darkness. He is blameless; He is innocent of all crimes except one – the crime of challenging those who will not allow themselves to be challenged, assailing the unassailable – and raw force strikes Him down.

It is unjust; it is outrageous. It is all too common in this world of ours; all too common because even those who could and should cry out remain mute. We can be a fear-filled lot. We can be disciples of the truth who fold at the first assault of falsehood and seek convenient refuge from making a personal commitment – holes in which to hide – leaving it to others to stand at the foot of the cross.

It takes courage to stand at the foot of the cross and to be seen by a world that neither understands or practices love and compassion –

no more today than then – but that courage is as nothing compared to the courage of that man who calmly stood false trial to be unjustly condemned – the man on the cross dying for all – the strong and the weak, the brave and the cowardly, the proud and the humble, those with faith and those without – even the Pilates of this world.

Ecce Homo. Behold the man.

# Easter April 16, 2006

Isaiah 50:4-9a Psalm 31:9-16 Philippians 2:5-11 Luke 24:1-12

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Alleluia, He is Risen!

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

"He is not here, He is Risen."

In a moment – in six terse words – everything, everything is changed.

God has broken the cycle – the seemingly inevitable progression of life and death. Death is no longer an end; it is a passage, a transformation to eternal life in the presence of God.

The most momentous proclamation is made to whom? To whom is this great Good News entrusted? Not to kings or high priests – not to scribes or theologians – not to philosophers. It is made to a few faithful women in the light of dawn at an empty tomb.

Go back just a little while – a few minutes – to the journey of those women to that tomb. They are wrapped in the black garments of mourning. They are wrapped in the blackness of the night – the darkness of their own grief. They are silent, lost in thought.

Hear their soft footsteps on cobblestones and dirt paths, small sounds in a dark, just waking city. Hear the muffled, distant barking of a dog, the crow of a cock, the dull thud of a distant axe cutting the wood for the day. A small world; an intimate world.

Then, the shattering of that familiar world at an empty tomb and an angel of brightness.

What do those six words proclaim? What do they proclaim this morning? What is the message given not simply to those women but to all humanity for all time?

They proclaim God's love. They proclaim a love so great, so allencompassing, so universal, that no sacrifice is too great for us. His Son, Our Lord's life and death have been for us, for our salvation, personally and individually. They proclaim that we are never abandoned, never alone, even in the darkest and deepest moments of grief and loss and depression.

In darkest night we have the promise of dawn.

In deepest despair we have the promise of comfort.

In a world, in a life, that has grown cold is the promise of the warmth of the sunrise.

All this the angel proclaims, now, this morning;

"Alleluia, Christ is Risen!"

#### **Feast of Saint Mark**

Wednesday, April 26, 2006

Isaiah 52:7-10 Psalm 2 or 2:7-10 Ephesians 4:7-8,11-16 Mark 16:15-20

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yesterday, April 25, is observed as the Feast of St. Mark. Who is St. Mark? What do we know about him? Remarkably little.

We can speculate. Is Mark a young man in a linen garment who avoids arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane by slipping away, fleeing naked? Some think so. Is Mark of the Gospel the same Mark who accompanies Paul on his first missionary journey, then parts from him? Some think so. Did Mark actually write this Gospel?

The question of course is, "Does it really matter who Mark was?" Does it not matter rather what the author of this Gospel has given us. He has given us a short, concise statement about Jesus, about His Disciples and, actually, about the earliest days of the Christian community, the church.

Many, if not most, scholars agree that this Gospel of Mark should be accepted as being the first written, the earliest. It does seem to be written in haste, approaching a staccato journalism. The Greek is terse: short sentences, fast paced as though the writer was in a hurry.

He was. A generation that had known Jesus was dying out. The actual witness was in danger of being lost or at least terribly distorted and

misinterpreted. Those memories had to be captured for the future of the church.

And so the pace: the recurrent Greek is *kai euthus*. It means "and immediately." The Gospel begins abruptly with Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, proceeds rapidly through His earthly ministry to His Passion and death, and ends just as abruptly at the empty tomb and the proclamation, "He is Risen."

But is that all? Is that enough? What was the earliest church to make of that story? What does it mean to them and to us? And so, at some time, someone saw fit to add a postscript, and the postscript is a commission to them and to us: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." They were empowered as we are empowered by the Resurrection: supported, sustained, protected, uplifted. His work becomes their work and ours.

### **Funeral Service for Jamie Carroll**

November 1, 1913 - May 23, 2006

May 25, 2006

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We need an anchor in this world, don't we? We need someone who can hear our ideas and plans – someone who has the wisdom to tell us what cannot be and, more important, what can.

Such people are rare. How blessed we are to have such a man among our friends. Jamie was an anchor for me – an anchor for so many of us.

I knew that I could share my ideas with Jamie; he would draw upon a lifetime of experience with the world, with business, with people and give me guidance. It wasn't always what I wanted to hear. It was what I needed to hear.

Most often Jamie's guidance was not "you can't do that" but "here's how you can," always delivered in a soft, quiet voice.

I have often wondered how often that soft, quiet voice has made things possible – caused things to be – in this church, in this city of Valdosta – in your lives and in mine – saying, "here's how you can."

Two things never perish: wisdom and memories. His wisdom and his memory will live always in our hearts.

## **Seventh Sunday of Easter**

May 28, 2006

Acts 1:15-26 Psalm 68:1-20 1 John 5:9-15 John 17:11b-19

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Doors and windows: it has been said that when God closes a door, He opens a window – and we go on.

We lost a friend this past week, a member of our church family, a good Christian. His life ended far too abruptly. His funeral was a great tribute to a good man. We could say that a chapter, an era, ended, that a door closed.

Today, we have the great joy of celebrating a Baptism. Maddie Yarbrough will become the newest Christian in the world. A new life in Christ will begin; a window will open.

You might remember the phrase, "The torch is passed." The torch is the light, the light of Christ. It will be passed here this morning.

That light, that torch, is passed in our Epistle from The Acts of the Apostles this morning. Judas Iscariot is no more; another must be chosen. The light that shone in Judas is dark; another light grows bright. It's one light, and it is never extinguished.

Who makes that selection? Who fans that light into brightness? It's not the eleven Disciples. They pray, and they cast lots, but the Holy Spirit acts; God chooses. His hand rests on Matthias.

That's how it is. That's what will happen here today. It happens at every Baptism. It happened at your Baptism and at mine. God reaches out into our lives and our world and says, "This is the one. This is my beloved child." We may not see a dove fluttering down from Heaven or hear a mighty voice, but I assure you it has happened and it will happen.

What will be changed? What is changed when God's hand rests on us? Paul tells us that in that moment of becoming one with Our Lord you and I and all the Baptized receive the precious, priceless gift of eternal life.

We receive the promise that the new life we receive in Baptism never ends. The death of our mortal bodies is a transition to eternal life with Our Lord Jesus Christ. We witnessed that final transition this week. We will witness a new transition today. We will greet a new child of God.

And we have the assurance that God will hear the prayers of His new child. We have the assurance that God will be a constant, attentive presence in her life just as He was present in the life of our departed friend.

We have that assurance in our Gospel, in the prayers of Our Lord Jesus Christ who prays to the Father for us all: for you, for me, for Jamie, and for Maddie.

## The First Book of Common Prayer

Wednesday, June 7, 2006

Acts 2:38-42 Psalm 96:1-9 or Psalm 33:1-5,20-21 John 4:21-24

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This evening we observe a feast day for *The First Book of Common Prayer*. Actually, we can observe this day on any weekday following Pentecost. We don't observe it every year because other Feast Days fall on Wednesday, so it might not be really familiar to you.

I discovered that some years ago in a parish far, far away. I mentioned that we would be honoring *The First Book of Common Prayer* and had more turn out than was usual on a Wednesday. As the service went on, I noted some puzzled faces out there. It dawned on me that some people thought – and expected – that the first Book of Common Prayer was the 1928 book, and it didn't sound right. No doubt they also thought the last Book of Common Prayer was the 1928 book. But that's long ago, of course.

Actually, the first book came into use on Pentecost, June 9, 1549, in the second year of the reign of Edward the Sixth. It was the foundation for all the subsequent prayer books in the churches of the Anglican Communion. The language may differ, but the basic principle and pattern is the same.

The book was primarily the work of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1533 to 1556. His genius was to gather the material

from many traditions into one universal book for worship for the English people. He used books of Medieval Latin worship with enrichments from Greek liturgies; ancient Gallican rites as found in the French churches; the vernacular German forms prepared by Luther; a revised Latin liturgy then used in Cologne, Germany. Cranmer took the Psalms from *The Great Bible* authorized by Henry the Eighth in 1539, and the Great Litany issued in English in 1544.

Cranmer simplified it all. He made it possible for our common worship and our personal devotions to be found in one book, and that is the red book you hold in your hands this evening.

### Third Sunday of Pentecost

June 25, 2006

Job 38:1-11, 16-18 Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 Mark 4:35-41:(5:1-20)

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

At one point we owned a sailboat. It wasn't a big sailboat; actually it was very small. It was a gift to our two young sons by a friend – a colonel who had retired and bought a house on a cove off the Chesapeake Bay in the Northern Neck – the land between the Potomac and the Rappahannock rivers in Northern Virginia. She had lots of room to keep a really big boat for sailing out on the bay.

We lived on a small lake in Burke, Virginia, a suburb of Washington. The little sailboat was perfect.

This is what we learned very quickly. Shallow water – like that lake – can go from calm and pleasant to tumultuous in seconds. It doesn't take much to stir it up. Waves can come out of nowhere and very quickly carry you across the lake and leave you stranded, and you really can't do much about it.

Shallow lives are like that too. Consider Job. He has a really good life. He has a nice family, a big estate, plenty of everything. Do you suppose he has ever questioned his life – ever thought about how very blessed he is? He really is quite pious. He's faithful in a sort of knee-jerk way. The truth is he has never had to consider the source

of it all. Job is Mister Shallow, or so says Satan, the Advocate. So piece-by-piece Job's life is dismantled to see if there is any limit to his faith – to plumb its depth. Job is in a storm – a hurricane – of sudden change. It turns out that there is a bottom, a limit, to it all. Job finally demands to know what's going on – why he is being treated so. He questions God.

God's response is crushing in a way. "Where were you?" God asks. He firmly puts Job in his place. But there's more. God reveals to Job the true depth of faith – far deeper than anything Job has ever known. Job sees the full, true majesty and power of the creator of all things, and he emerges restored. But he emerges changed. "The old has passed away; the new has come" in Job's life.

In the Gospel Jesus and His disciples are on a shallow lake – large, but shallow water. Storms still come up without warning as the winds sweep down from the hills around the Sea of Galilee. Their boat was bigger than ours but not by much.

It was all so familiar. They had sailed on that lake day after day all their lives. It was routine. It was, in reality, their life. They had been caught up in storms but none like this. All their skills are not enough for them to even begin to control the situation – to save themselves.

There is a phenomenon with a small boat and shallow water that sailors dread. It's being caught between wind and water. When you approach the shore, the waves take over and just carry the boat toward the beach. You have to turn and tack and gradually draw away. But if the wind is coming straight at you – really blowing – the sail just swings back and forth, and you are trapped. Lots of little boats end up on the beach.

You can see those disciples realizing that they were in just that situation, giving up and holding on for dear life. You can see them realizing that the only thing that can save them is depth – depth of water under their hull. You can see them realizing that there was

absolutely nothing they could do to attain that depth but finally, belatedly, calling upon the only power that could save them.

We've all been there, haven't we? We've all been caught in situations where we simply cannot help ourselves, and I dare say we've all had that reassuring, powerful presence of Jesus to calm our own personal storms and draw us to new depths of faith.

Our task, yours and mine, is to tell the world that in the midst of the most ferocious storms and tempestuous seas of life, Jesus is there.

### **Fourth Sunday of Pentecost**

July 2, 2006

Deuteronomy 15:7-11 Psalm 112 2 Corinthians 8:1-9,13-15 Mark 5:22-24,35b-43

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The English writer C.S. Lewis wrote a book entitled *The Screwtape Letters*, correspondence between the Devil and his nephew, Wormwood. Wormwood needs advice on how best to draw us mortals away from "The Enemy," Jesus. The Devil's advice is, "Distract them with issues."

We have a job, you and I-a real job, a tough job. We have just heard the job description in the readings this morning. Now for years I have understood those readings, full of the words "poor" and "needy" to be about poverty -a lack of money or things.

Of late, however, another idea has crept in. It occurs to me that it is possible that they are talking about faith.

"There will never cease to be someone in need – of faith – on the earth." It sounds different, doesn't it? That's Deuteronomy – The Old Testament – talking to and about ancient Israel. It's as true today as it was then, 3,000 years ago.

Why should that be true, that continuing need for faith? You know that we Christians – Episcopalians – are often chided for not being more evangelistic, for not being out in the streets going door-to-door. Hear what that Deuteronomist is saying: "Open your hand to the poor and

needy." Hear that as, "those poor in faith and in need of faith." "Do not be hard-hearted or tight fisted." He's chiding ancient Israel. Nothing is new. There was a problem then, and there is a problem now.

Our job is that we are called to share what we have experienced, what we know about God in Jesus Christ. It really is that simple. Does that necessarily mean door-to-door evangelism? Not really. It actually might be easier to spend a few hours ringing doorbells than to commit ourselves to living every hour of every day as a demonstration, in both our words and our actions. We are called to a very high standard indeed: that we pattern our lives on that of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Believe me, if we do, people will notice.

How rich in faith we are! Have you ever considered how much Jesus gave up to be with us? The divine chose to live a human life. What more powerful demonstration could we have? The richness of our faith is that we know – we have seen – what God will do for His creation.

Now the temptation is to hang on to that rich faith. Actually, I'm being unfair. Maybe we are shy and retiring, afraid that others might ridicule us or, worse, ignore us if we try to share our faith. Maybe we don't feel qualified.

Or maybe the world we live in, and that includes a lot of good Christians, has really grown "distracted" by those issues. Maybe Wormwood is doing a really good job. Issues can drown out our words. Our good actions may not be seen through a fog of rhetoric. It would be so easy to give up, to just shrug our shoulders and guit.

We can't do that! The job is still a job; it's still our job. If you and I don't challenge Wormwood, who will? We have all we need to accomplish God's will. We have an abundance to share with those in spiritual need. We just have to get on with it. Jesus said to Jairus, and Jesus says to you and to me right now, "Do not fear; only believe."

### **Independence Day**

July 4, 2006

Deuteronomy 10:17-21 Psalm 145 or 145:1-9 Hebrews 11:8-16 Matthew 5:43-48

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My mother had a big old-fashioned cedar chest. It took us several years to be ready to open it when she died. I suppose we expected to find very personal reminders of her. We did.

It was filled with her personal treasures – things she had kept with her through all those moves and dislocations. Opening it was very much like looking back upon the layers of the years of a life. The most recent treasures were on top, placed there quite recently. Then, deeper, were photos of my father as a young officer – photos from North Africa and Italy – photos of a cavalry lieutenant with boots and saber.

Deeper yet, we found her wedding dress and a set of photos of their wedding in 1936, braving all the fears of the Great Depression to begin a life together.

And then, there were the mementos of her mother and father. A baptismal certificate issued in Christiana, Norway, the city we now call Oslo. There was a wedding certificate – very elaborately drawn – with spidery writing saying that she had married in the city of Winnipeg.

She was Inga Emily Ingebrettsen, a young woman of Norway come to Canada to marry her fiancé, Sven Olav Christensen, and start a new life together in a new land. This land – this United States – was their goal, but the quota for Norwegians to enter was small, so they waited until the doors were opened for them.

Why did they come? They had no real, pressing reason to. They didn't come from poverty. We have met our family that remains in Norway – just nice, plain people leading good lives. They weren't part of the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Norway was an enlightened, progressive country.

No. They came because of faith, just as Abraham's faith carried him forward, leaving all that was familiar to go to a new land. Faith in what? Faith in a land that held limitless opportunities and that stood ready to welcome the sojourner, the stranger to its shores: a big land to match big talents and big ambitions – a land of justice in which the last to arrive could share the rights and benefits of its first citizens.

My grandmother had two heroes in this land: Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She actually bought a plaster bust of Lincoln. She wept bitterly when Roosevelt died. She saw them both as champions of the common man – as men who fought for the dignity of every human being. That was her faith in this country and the faith of millions like her.

Inga Emily Ingebrettsen Christensen never lost her faith that this is indeed the best of all places. Nor, dear hearts, must we.

### Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

July 9, 2006

Ezekiel 2:1-5 Psalm 123 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 Mark 6:1-13

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have a thought about grace. We talk about God's grace a lot. I suppose in the past I have tended to see grace as something very individual and specific, and perhaps it is. But I can also see grace as a universal, something that is always there everywhere, and we live in the midst of it. Perhaps we just don't recognize it until something remarkable, something wonderful happens. Then we say, "Aha! Grace."

But if that's so, why on earth don't we know it? How can we miss it? The answer to that, I suppose, is we simply need someone to point it out and focus our minds on the presence of God. So we need two things: we need a speaker totally committed to expressing God's grace, and we need hearers with open and receptive ears.

What messes it all up? Just so, speakers and hearers. There are, and this may shock you, those who are prideful in their role; glib persons whose personal opinions and agendas intrude on and filter their expression of God's grace. It's not new. Paul obviously knows a few of them. Paul is actually grateful that something prevents him from becoming too comfortable, too polished in his preaching and teaching.

Some "thorn" keeps Paul uncomfortable. What is it? He never explains. All sorts of things have been suggested through the years. So, I'll add my theory to the list. I think Paul was subject to crises of confidence and, perhaps, some sort of panic attacks in confronting people. I think that's why Paul is so assertive and rigid in his writing as opposed to his speaking. We really don't know what sort of speaker Paul was; no one really tells us. Although, perhaps the story of the young man falling asleep and falling out a window while listening to Paul might give us a clue.

That's just my theory, but, if it's correct, it tells us that Paul's great influence came not from his "great learning" and his oratory but from expressing his own unpolished, sincere, powerful, personal experience. That's what they remembered. That's what we remember.

Paul and Ezekiel have a lot in common. Paul experienced the presence of Jesus on the road to Damascus. Ezekiel experienced the presence of Jahweh on the Chebar River in Babylon. Both were life-changing moments; both men were empowered to go and tell the world about God, to speak the words that God gave them. Neither of them was a professional prophet, and they knew it. They were agents of God and no more. There is no room for egos and agendas in such people. Whether the world listens or not, the Word is to be proclaimed.

Did people listen? I doubt that it was much different for Ezekiel or Paul than it is today. Some hear; some don't. Surely not everyone on Paul's and Ezekiel's journeys was spiritually blind or deaf. No more than today. Some listened, heard, and believed. Otherwise, we would not be here today.

And then, Jesus. We could say that Jesus encounters God on the bank of the Jordan, a voice from Heaven saying to Him, "You are my Son." Jesus is empowered, as Ezekiel was and Paul will be, to speak God's word. He, too, speaks to a world or at least a synagogue that will not hear. They don't trust Him. That probably tells us that they

have experienced those self-serving prophets that Paul will know. They can't see past Jesus to hear His message.

All of which is to say what? Well, I think it tells us that we have a task. I think it tells us that we must be open to hear the word but be ever mindful and discerning of the slightest misuse of the Word for any reason whatsoever.

We have to pay attention. We have to listen attentively. We have to recognize and feel God's grace.

### **Transfiguration**

August 6, 2006

Exodus 34:29-35 Psalm 99 or 99:5-9 2 Peter 1:13-21 Luke 9:28-36

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I really don't like to drive at night any more. I don't enjoy it, and it's stressful. I suppose it has to do with age; my eyes simply aren't as good as they used to be. It could also be a matter of knowing about my own mortality. Years ago, when I was immortal, and probably invincible, I could drive all night. At some point, I'm not sure just when, it occurred to me that to be out in the middle of nowhere in the dark alone at three in the morning might not be very smart.

So I avoid it. Of course, I can't always avoid it. Sometimes there are delays and problems, things over which I have no control that put me on the road much later than I'd like on country roads in the dark.

Dark it is, indeed. Have you ever noticed that there's a lot of the "middle of nowhere" in the state of Georgia? There's a sort of vast empty space in the middle of the state – just sand and scruffy little pine trees. I suppose the land isn't good for farming, so there's no real reason for anyone to live there. You can drive a long, long way in complete darkness. It can be really spooky.

Perhaps you've been there. If you have, you know how good it is to see any small light in that darkness. I imagine the light could be a

house or a barn. I've never really investigated. The important thing is that it's there. The important thing is to know that I'm not alone in that darkness, that someone else is there, and that if I really were in trouble and needed help, I might be able to go to that light. If I did go to that light, what would I find? I have no idea; that's where faith comes in.

You know where I'm going with this don't you? Let's agree that life is a road; that's a good, well-worn, metaphor. We start at point A, birth, and proceed to point Z, death, and we log a lot of miles in between. Sometimes the going is really good; a straight, smooth road, brilliant sunshine, fleecy little clouds, perhaps a few happy bluebirds. Life is great. But if we are honest, sometimes the going is awful. It's a twisting, bumpy road, and you're driving on it in darkness because things beyond your control have changed your life, and your plans haven't worked out, and your windshield is plastered with love bugs, and you can't see where you're going. We all know what it's like. What, or who, is the light in that kind of darkness?

This is the Feast of the Transfiguration. Jesus and His three closest disciples go up a mountain to pray, and there they encounter Moses and Elijah, The Law and The Prophets. Moses and Elijah have, in their own time, come very close to God. Moses met God on another mountaintop. He received The Commandments from God, and the encounter caused his face to shine with a dazzling brightness. Elijah was taken up to God in a flaming chariot with fiery horses, another brilliant and dazzling light in the presence of God. Now, on this mountain of Transfiguration, a cloud descends. The cloud is the "glory," the *shekinah* that is God's presence, and it descends upon the mountain and upon Jesus. When it dissipates, Jesus alone remains with His faithful three. His face and His garments are dazzling. He becomes the light itself.

Jesus is the light here now in this darkness or ours whatever it may be. Jesus is the one, the only one, who can draw us from that darkness; draw the world from its darkness. We must have the light. We cannot live without light. What would the world be like without a flicker of compassion? What would the world be like without a glimmer of reason? What would the world be like without a spark of love? What would the road be like without light in the darkness to tell us we are not alone and to guide us to our journey's end?

The light tells us that after all is said and done, there will be a new day, a new dawn.

### **Eleventh Sunday of Pentecost**

August 20, 2006

Proverbs 9:1-6 Psalm 147 or 34:9-14 Ephesians 5:15-20 John 6:53-59

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What are we doing here? Sounds like a strange question, doesn't it? But every once in a while, it might be a good idea to pause and think about that.

The significant word is "doing." We are a Sacramental Church, a church that is held together with what we do as a body. Our life as a church revolves around the sacraments – things we can see and do that are signs of a very special relationship to God, signs of God's presence here in our lives. We uphold the importance of scripture – we read lots and lots of scripture. We confess our belief in God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit in our ancient creeds, but the things that unite us are the sacraments. We are engaged in one right now – the sacrament of Holy Communion – a great sacrament that Our Lord Himself ordained.

We are about to receive bread and wine, such common things. Jesus and His faithful disciples had bread and wine at every meal. And then, there was one very special meal, a last meal, when Jesus took those common things and transformed them, and said, "This bread is my body; this wine is my blood" – transforms them forever in our Christian faith. Is that something to be analyzed and made literal? Of course

not. We don't have the words to describe what that means. We have instead the experience of that presence.

Jesus told those befuddled disciples, and He tells us, that whoever eats my flesh, my body, this bread, and drinks that blood, this wine, "abides in me and I in him."

Abides: it means that they, and you and I, are one with Our Lord. It means exactly that. It means that through the sacraments, we have gained life – eternal life – in Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

It's not a simple idea, is it? It's a hard saying to understand. No doubt His disciples and all who heard it were utterly confused, perhaps scandalized. Body and blood! Some are still scandalized. There are those today who cannot see what Our Lord meant.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the church was graced by the guidance of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. His term was tragically short, but he was, arguably, the brightest of all in the church. He wrote many books, one of which was his commentary on St. John's Gospel, this morning's Gospel. It is still one of the definitive works about John.

How would Temple answer the question, "What are we doing here?" Temple would tell us that we become complete when we receive the sacrament, the body and the blood. In the flesh, the body, the bread, we are one with His sacrifice – His body given for us on the cross. In the blood we receive the sacred essence of life itself – the life of Our Lord poured out for us.

In receiving both we come to full communion with Him.

In the collect for funerals we make the confession that in death "life is changed, not ended." Jesus, in His death for us, and in His resurrection to glory, changed the life of the world, your life and mine. He opened for us eternal life.

Our response to that great and joyful gift is the answer to what you and I are doing here.

# In Celebration of the Life of Dr. William Montgomery Gabard

Aug. 17, 1922 - Aug. 18, 2006

August 21, 2006

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The second pew on the left – my left – the aisle seat: that's Dr. William Gabard's seat. It is a temptation to look down on that seat and be sad, to mourn the thought that he is sitting there no longer. We can't do that; Bill would not approve!

What we should do is celebrate his life, the life of a truly remarkable man.

Perhaps, with me, you read his obituary with a sense of awe; so many accomplishments, so many degrees and fellowships, membership in so many societies. What a contribution he made as a scholar, a professor, a historian!

Reading all those things, we see a man who lived on a vast and grand scale indeed – a scale that encompassed the past and the present – the past and present of the world, his family, his church. A global scale of interests that spanned time and distances.

Is that the man you know? Here's the man I know.

The door of our nursery – the door of our pre-school opens and a man enters, a man whose presence radiates absolute delight,

absolute love for the children. They are his "babies." He is their "Grandpa."

How many days have been brightened, how many lives have been touched by "Grandpa" Bill Gabard? How many teens and even young adults remember his words and his kindness? How many memories fill this room this evening?

Those memories should give us great joy. And here is another thing about which we can be joyful. We have the promise of Our Lord Jesus Christ that in death life is changed, not ended. We have the promise that in faith we have eternal life with the Father. We have the promise that Bill has gone before us to take his place there and that we, in our time, will be with him there again. We may find him in the company of great historians solving the mysteries of time. We may find him earnestly questioning the movers of shakers of this world. But, be assured, find him there we will.

We can never replace Bill Gabard here – there simply is no other like him. We can give thanks to God for those memories that brighten our lives still.

And, in time, we might actually sit in that seat, second row on the left, by the aisle.

## **Twelfth Sunday of Pentecost**

August 27, 2006

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-25 Psalm 16 or 34:15-22 Ephesians 5:21-33 John 6:60-69

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let's call this "The Stick and the Carrot."

Joshua has summoned all the tribes of Israel to a meeting at the shrine at Shechem. It is a huge crowd, a happy, festive crowd. They have their "promised land." Now it's time for a decision, time for a commitment.

After all those years wandering around the desert living on manna and quail, meeting all sorts of strange people and their strange gods, here they are, just as their God had promised. That's quite an accomplishment.

God deserves a thank you, doesn't He?

However, being as human as we are, and with our short attention span, and our amazing ability to think that we can take care of ourselves, the people of Israel sort of say, "So much for that" and go off after other gods, all those gods they had heard about in their journey, gods of the local Canaanites.

Does that make sense? Of course not, but it happened. And Joshua says, "Choose – now! Our God or theirs. Choose correctly and live

your lives in this promised land; choose incorrectly and you will have nothing. There is no compromise, no half-way faith. Our God or nothing."

Amazing, isn't it? That scene is repeated again and again and again. We, humanity, have an amazing capacity for creating and worshipping other gods. We don't think of them as gods, but they are. They have lots of names: money, power, security, personal fulfillment, self-actualization. They become our gods when we raise them to such a level of importance that they run our lives, our decisions, our priorities.

We give those things immense credit – credit for our happiness, our success, our well-being – just like those comfortable ancient Israelites.

Jump forward a few centuries to a little band of disciples and Jesus. Those disciples are as human as we are. What false gods do you suppose they have at the moment of our Gospel? They did have them, you know. Perhaps self-preservation. That comes to mind. Jesus is becoming a challenge, saying difficult things. It's not safe to be near him. Those who have trooped after Him, thinking they were on the way to their very own promised land, whatever that might mean for them, are falling away. It is much safer to worship their own gods.

Of course there is pressure in being with Jesus. And they, and we, have a driving need to be accepted, to be on the "right" side and never to be laughed at.

There are a few who see through the false gods, a few who remain constant. A few who can honestly say, "Where can we go? You have the words of life." A few know that there is no other choice.

Sooner or later we are all called to make that commitment, that choice. How do we choose? Do we, like those Israelites, choose to

follow God because, as Joshua says, "He is a jealous God" and, if you don't, He will do you grievous harm? That's the stick.

Or do we choose the carrot, rather the bread, the "living bread" come down from Heaven, the gift of eternal life?

### **Fourteenth Sunday of Pentecost**

September 10, 2006

Isaiah 35:4-7a Psalm 146 or 146:4-9 James 1:17-27 Mark 7:31-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have a friend named Paul Dix. He was the rector of a small country parish in Hartland, Wisconsin. I was his Deacon while in seminary. Paul had an attitude.

You know for some reason when you wear a collar, some people feel compelled to say: "Well, I really don't believe in organized religion." We hear it at parties and at check-out lines in supermarkets.

Paul had the definitive response. "If you really don't believe in organized religion, the Episcopal Church is for you."

The question, however, remains. Why do people say that, particularly to me?

I have a theory about that. I think that such people are like the man in the Gospel this morning. I know it's one of the miracle stories: Jesus' healing a man who is physically a deaf-mute; that is certainly one level.

But I hear a story about spiritual healing too. There have always been lots of people who are spiritually deaf, never hear the Good News,

and are, therefore, spiritually mute. The man in the Gospel cannot physically hear or speak; the spiritual deaf-mute cannot or will not. Why? For many reasons, I'm sure.

So my theory is that when people say, "I don't believe . . ." they really want an answer. They want to be acknowledged; they want to be engaged.

What's been lacking for them? Perhaps, someone to take them seriously enough to tell them why they should believe. What actually happens is that their pronouncement shuts down conversation, and we turn away. People just passed the deaf-mute by, physically. We pass by the spiritually deaf-mute. They become invisible.

Have you ever been invisible? It's an interesting experience. You are probably thinking, "Oh great, now the priest is getting weird." So I'll tell you a story. A few years ago, I was visiting the Diocesan office in Savannah returning the Diocesan banner from some liturgy. Around noon we were all going out to lunch at Tubby's Tank House in Thunderbolt. Really. I went out to the car, the old Volvo wagon, in the parking lot to find that the right rear tire was flat. I got out the jack and the wrench and the spare. All the lug nuts came off easily, except one. It was absolutely frozen on. I couldn't budge it with my tools, so I went back into the office and called Triple A. I went back out to stand by the car to wait for them, and it started to rain, hard. It occurred to me that I had an old Viet Nam type bush hat in the car. I put that on. Then I took the black plastic trash bag in which I had carried the Diocesan banner, poked a hole in the bottom for my head and slipped that on. So I was standing there in the rain wearing a black plastic trash bag and a soggy, shapeless Nam hat, and, apparently, I had become completely invisible. No one could see me as they passed by.

That's really not unlike the man in the Gospel. No one sees him, except Jesus. No one acknowledges him, except Jesus. Jesus is present for him; Jesus touches him; Jesus sets him free.

You realize, of course, that is our story too – yours and mine, every one of us. Jesus has been present for us and touched us, somehow. Jesus has answered our unspoken thoughts about faith and religion. Jesus has brought us here today.

Now it's our turn. You and I are supposed to be "doers of the word," proclaimers that the Kingdom is at hand and that God is present in His creation, and that we are loved. Jesus did that. We are supposed to follow His example.

It is easier to just ignore the spiritually deaf and mute. It's easier to just write them off as a loss. We can't do that; we can't just reject them. It's our job to be present for them as Jesus was present for the man in the Gospel. It may be that is all that's needed. What if they have never heard the Word; what if they know nothing of God; what if they have built their own prison wall to shut out the Gospel, a wall that may crumble at a touch; what if our touch is Jesus' touch for them? What if you and I are all that is needed for a transformation?

We are talking about transformation: transformation for the one whose ears are opened and whose tongue is loosed, and transformation for you and for me

When we speak of our faith, we become "doers of the Word"; we see our faith, and we see ourselves clearly. That's contagious. Clarity spreads. Even that deaf-mute in the Gospel becomes a "doer"; he hears and he speaks as he runs off to tell the world about Jesus.

### Fifteenth Sunday of Pentecost

September 17, 2006

Isaiah 50:4-9 Psalm 116 or 116:1-8 James 2:1-5,8-10,14-18 Mark 8:27-38

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is a lovely day; not too hot, not too breezy. The sun is shining, and the birds are singing, and the Disciples are so happy, just walking along with Jesus, suspecting nothing.

Then Jesus stops, turns and asks, "Who do people say I am?" Oh no, a pop quiz! Nobody said there'd be a pop quiz. The Disciples crowd together, avoiding eye contact, hoping He won't call on them.

And there is silence, a long silence. Finally, someone says, "They think you're John the Baptist." Another says, "Maybe Elijah or one of the old prophets." Thank heaven somebody said something. There is general relief; smiles all around. Let's get on with the walk.

Then comes the second question, worse than the first, "Who do you say that I am?" Someone has the presence of mind to give Peter a shove. Peter usually has something to say. "You're the Messiah," says Peter.

Then comes the third question. It's not recorded in the Gospel, but it had to be asked. Jesus looks at Peter and the others and asks, "Just what is a Messiah; what does that mean to you?"

Israel and the world and you and I have been struggling with that question ever since. The reason that has usually been advanced as to why we ask is that Jesus, having just performed a miracle, always says, "Don't tell anyone." The word *Messiah* meant, in their minds, some great conquering king along the lines of David or Solomon; someone who would restore glory and power and prestige to Israel. Since that wasn't God's plan, to mention the word *Messiah* would be confusing and create disappointment. I used to think that was logical.

But, if that were true, why would the people be calling for John the Baptist, Elijah, or a prophet? They are the ones who proclaimed, ranted, against exactly that sort of kingdom. They were outsiders, commenting on the deplorable state of affairs in just such a kingdom. If there is one consistent message in the prophets, it is that things are an absolute mess around here.

If that sort of Messiah really was the expectation, centuries of waiting without any resolution must have desensitized them, lowered their expectations to the point of cynicism and doubt. They could not, or would not, recognize that Messiah of power or any other Messiah.

I question whether Israel really wanted that sort of Davidic Messiah at all. I really think that, in the time of Jesus, if the people had not slipped into a disenchanted cynicism, they had abandoned the Davidic power-state notion. What had that sort of kingdom given them? Glory, but also responsibility and anxiety and pain. Surely they knew, because the Roman soldiers in the streets made it very clear that glory was fleeting and power always succumbed to greater might.

I think, if we could ask the common man or woman on the street of some village, perhaps even Jerusalem: "What do you want; what do you need?" The answer would be "peace."

Is it so different? Haven't the people of the world always desired, longed for, peace? Haven't they longed for the security that only peace can give? Don't we? There is a Jewish prayer, "May you live

to see your children's children. May you enjoy the fruit of the vines you plant." It's a prayer for the security and prosperity and longevity that only peace can bring.

The Prince of Peace Himself walks with those Disciples. He Himself asks those three questions. He challenges them to look forward, not backward, to Elijah and the prophets, to a new age, an age that John and Elijah and the prophets foretold and longed to see. He challenges us.

He calls them to a new life of personal commitment, re-ordered priorities, and self-sacrifice. He calls us.

Above all, He calls us to answer the question, "Who do you say that I am?"

# **Eighteenth Sunday of Pentecost**

October 8, 2006

Genesis 2:18-24 Psalm 8 or 128 Hebrews 2:(1-8) 9-18 Mark 10:2-9

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Have you seen the cross in the Memorial Garden?

It is made from the wood of a huge redwood tree that stood on that spot for years, years of being witness to the life of Christ Church.

The tree saw generations of our parishioners coming and going: it witnessed Christmas services in the dark of midnight with refreshments on the church lawn; Easter Vigil services in the darkness of the pre-dawn hour; stately processions of wooden kings across the lawn in Advent.

The tree saw brides in white with their bridesmaids hurrying to the doors of the church; Bishops in colorful vestments with banners and incense; funerals and many, many committals in that garden.

The tree stood and saw it all.

Maybe it was a symbol of the strength of Christ Church: a tree reaching up to the heavens but firmly rooted in the earth, great roots stretching out in all directions.

A parish with its eyes on the holy, heaven-centered in worship and in its prayers rising to God: a parish of place, this place, reaching out in love and compassion to its neighbors, neighbors in Valdosta, in Georgia, and the world.

How many have been lifted up and assisted by this parish? We will never know. Like the roots of the tree, compassion and love often grow and spread unseen except by those who receive them. That is as it should be.

Some have been given help and encouragement through big programs, national or global; some have received just a smile, a welcome, a random act of kindness from unnamed individuals.

Reaching up and reaching out, that is how trees survive and prosper and grow, drawing strength and nourishment from the sun above and from God's own earth here. Trees must have both. Churches must have both.

With both, a tree can weather the worst of times: the heat; the drought; the winds, changing, bending, stretching; standing; growing; transforming.

A church that knows that its life is of both the heavens and the earth, as this church knows and has always known, is strong, healthy, and growing.

And transforming? Yes indeed. Christ Church is transformed by every new person that worships here, transformed by the gifts, the talents, the questions and the love they bring; Christ Church is transformed by all those it reaches out to, all those it helps.

Christ Church is transformed by your presence here, by the talents that you share so lovingly, and by your gifts. Your gifts flow though Christ Church to its every branch, nourishing its growth, its ministries, and its people.

That great redwood tree isn't gone; it's still there. It's still reaching up and rooted in the soil. Its wood is the wood of the cross. How appropriate.

### **Twentieth Sunday of Pentecost**

October 22, 2006

Isaiah 53:4-12 Psalm 91 or 91:9-16 Hebrews 4:12-16 Mark 10:35-45

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Lord, what will we have?" Peter has finally summoned up the courage to ask Jesus, somewhat belatedly, "What's in it for me?" Well, to give Peter his due, he has made a major commitment to Jesus for quite some time. They have logged a lot of miles together. I'm sure Peter feels that those miles are worth something, and being one of us, Peter can see only the worldly and the material. "We've left everything," he says. "Don't we deserve something?" Of course they do, Peter and James and John and all the others will have their reward, but not here, not now. Their reward will be in the kingdom of God that their teacher constantly proclaims.

That answer may have satisfied Peter but not James and John; they want some specific guarantees. They want assurances of positions of real honor and authority in that Kingdom of God. They want reserved seats on the right hand and the left hand of the throne.

What do you suppose they visualize as the Kingdom of God? A great, golden realm ruled by a mighty king who dispenses justice and punishment from a grand throne, surrounded by His court, principally James and John. How can they have such an image? It has to do with what kind of Messiah you are expecting.

James and John aren't alone in this. Many, many people in Israel saw the role of the Messiah as a conquering Oriental king who would restore them all to power and glory and wealth, as a new David who would reign in splendor. They wanted a return to the "good old days" of the kingdom of Israel.

If that's what James and John are thinking, it isn't difficult to see how they could hear Jesus in a vastly different way. He has already told them of His impending death. To them, in their mindset, Jesus' death would have to be some sort of painless, seamless transition to glory. No conquering king in their experience could be tried and crucified. It had to be much cleaner and neater than that.

But Jesus is not that conquering king Messiah. Jesus speaks of another ancient tradition in Israel; He speaks in the voice of one called the "suffering servant," the one who suffers and dies for the sins of the nation of Israel.

Isaiah speaks of that sort of Messiah. The words are not "glory and power" but "wounded, oppressed, afflicted, beaten, mocked, scourged." That Messiah is "silent before his oppressors – the Sanhedrin, the mob, Pilate – and empties Himself even to death, a sacrifice to atone for our sins."

That suffering for the life of us all is Jesus' Baptism; that death is the cup Jesus will drink; no gold thrones or silver chalices for Jesus. That is what James and John and countless others will share with their Messiah. Jesus will enter His glory not in a flash of fire but through His pain and sacrifice.

Jesus' sacrifice is not made to gain a place for James and John at the left hand and the right hand of God; His sacrifice is not made to secure His own place before the throne. His sacrifice is made in the service of all humanity as a ransom for the sins of eternity.

His sacrifice is made for you and for me.

### **Twenty-Second Sunday of Pentecost**

November 5, 2006

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 Psalm 119:1-16 or 119:1-8 Hebrews 7:23-28 Mark 12:28-34

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Tell us about God." Moses comes down from the mountain, back to the camp of the Israelites carrying stone tablets – we all know the scene – telling them that he has met with God and has received these commandments, the testimony of the will of God.

"God; what God? Who is this God you mention?" Of course they asked those questions; so would we. "Describe Him, please." But Moses can't describe God. Moses has seen only a burning bush and a great light; he's heard only the words of the commandments.

Do we really know any more than they did? Do we have more than His words to be our guide? Not really. We do, however, have the words of this morning's readings: Deuteronomy, Hebrews, and Mark.

We have the great, ancient prayer of the people of Israel, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind."

It's two parts. The first part says that God is alone; there is no other God. It's a statement that no matter where the people might be, God will be with them. They need have no fear of the gods worshipped by

other peoples in other places. Their God is always present with them in any situation. God is One – universal, undivided, undiminished. What incredible words of comfort for a besieged people living in treacherous and uncertain times: incredible words for ancient Israel, and for you and me! We can be assured that God will be present for us.

The second part tells us what our response to that all-present, all-concerned God must be. How can we possibly do other than to love God with heart and soul and strength? That's pure gratitude. Recognize that it is God who takes the lead, God who reaches out, God who makes that promise.

Remembering is not simply failing to forget. Remembering isn't nostalgia. Remembering is acting as though we are conscious, physically conscious, of the presence of God every minute. Remembering is acting with God in mind.

How do we do that? First, you and I are called to live in His presence and to make Him a part of everything we do. That, dear hearts, is a tall order, but generations of Christians have done just that; they are living so today. Then we are called to teach that sense of the presence to the generations to come. Christian Education is an all-day, every-day task. We teach by word and example, and children listen and watch. They must know that there is no time limit on God's presence, no past or future, but an eternal present.

And Our Lord gives us the final commandment, fleshing out all others; "Love your neighbor as yourself." If we truly live in God's presence, we cannot do otherwise. We will, as He would have us, remember Him, see Him in the faces of all we encounter. Perhaps we will teach them by reflecting God's presence to them. We will certainly teach ourselves.

# **Thanksgiving**

November 23, 2006

Deuteronomy 8:1-3,6-10 (17-20)

Psalm 65 or 65:9-14

James 1:17-18,21-27

Matthew 6:25-33

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When I was a boy, we spent Thanksgiving at my grandparents' house in Chicago. It was one of those unbreakable family traditions; some traveled quite far to be there. We weren't a very big family – they were a generation of Scandinavian immigrants and their children, and like a lot of recent Americans, we were very concerned to keep all the American holidays and keep them correctly.

So there would be a big Thanksgiving meal. We had all the traditional American Thanksgiving food, strange as it might be. There would be a big turkey. You know, not everybody eats turkey. When we lived in Germany, we invited our German landlord and his family to our Thanksgiving dinner. We noticed furtive glances exchanged as the turkey was served. We later found that the only turkey they knew of was in the zoo in the next village.

There would be that good dry stuffing made with buttery bread cubes and crunchy celery – except when Aunt Viola made it. Aunt Viola was a rather short, rotund woman who, as I remember, usually wore purple. She had a slight mustache and played the piano at the First Methodist Church of Downer's Grove, Illinois, with far more enthusiasm than skill. Viola made soggy stuffing.

Then there would be big bowls of mashed, white potatoes – I don't remember ever seeing a sweet potato (actually, the bright orange color of sweet potatoes would be too garish for a Scandinavian table) – and all the usual American vegetables like peas and sweet corn and, of course, the dreaded succotash. Succotash was to be avoided at all costs. It was a sort of flavorless mixture of corn and lima beans. I had a theory that if I spread succotash very, very thinly across my plate no one would notice that I hadn't eaten it. I noticed that others subscribed to my theory.

Cranberries made no sense to us whatsoever; they were the wrong size and weren't sweet, so we ate the jellied kind that comes in a can; And, because we were Scandinavian, there would be really good Swedish rye bread and butter. Homemade Swedish rye bread is so good that even Norwegians like it.

And dessert would always be the traditional pumpkin pie – with whipped cream, lots and lots of whipped cream.

The meal always began with a prayer, in English. My grandfather – Lyle Swann Ingemansson – had a really nice voice; he sang in a choir at the First Methodist Church of Irving Park, Illinois. He liked to sing the doxology as grace. It didn't particularly matter to him if anyone else sang. He also sang the doxology in restaurants.

At first, of course, I had to sit at the children's table, a little table in the living room. I would look with envy at the big people's table – an unreachable dream. I visualized witty repartee and sparkling conversation. The fact that some adults preferred to sit at the children's table should have told me something. Then when I grew a bit, I had to sit with the adults at the big, round dining room table. Boring! And I found that I was a right-handed person in a left-handed family – something that I had never really noticed until I became engaged in the competition for elbow room.

After dinner, which was at noon, all the women would gather in the kitchen with my grandmother Tilla and do the dishes and talk. The men would go into the parlor and sort of sink into the easy chairs. They'd unbutton their vests and sit and talk and talk. Then slowly the talk would die away as one after another they would doze off. It would become very quiet. We call that turkey torpor.

I have a cousin named Jan – not the one who set fire to my other grandfather, Sven Olaf Christensson's lawn in Wisconsin – that was Bill. For Jan the idea of calm and quiet was totally alien. Actually, it's still pretty alien, and he's my age. Even Jan would fall under the spell of the afternoon.

All you would hear was the ticking of the mantel clock.

These were not dull people. They were adventurers. They were people who had left everything familiar – the old country, friends, family, places – and set out to a new country of which they knew very little, carrying nothing but their hopes and their dreams and their skills, and they had prospered. They had prospered through courage, self-sacrifice, and plain hard work.

They had the sense to know the true source of all that prosperity. They were people of great faith, and they knew that this day and every day, they should give thanks to God for all they had – every gift, every success.

They truly understood the meaning of this day, Thanksgiving.

# **Christ the King Sunday**

November 26, 2006

Daniel 7:9-14 Psalm 93 Revelation 1:1-8 John 18:33-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Some years ago, an author named Louis Auchincloss wrote *The Winthrop Covenant*, a fictional tracing of fortunes of one New England family over four centuries.

The earliest Winthrop speaking in old age from his home in the New World speaks of his encounter with the majesty and power of royalty many years before. The great Queen Elizabeth is passing in the streets of London, surrounded by courtiers and soldiers and ladies-in-waiting, all in gold and precious gems, glittering in her finery. The adults bow to the ground as she passes. He, in his simplicity, looks at her, and she looks at him. His memory is that of cold, hard power wrapped up in the beauty of the transient moment. Their eyes meet; the eyes of Elizabeth frighten him. He sees eyes that could welcome, forgive, or condemn in one moment. He sees the danger of power.

Such was the power of Caesar, the only King in the world of Pilate. He had been to Rome. He had seen that power exercised, and he had learned that no one was safe, no one was spared, if that power were challenged. The eyes of Caesar were as cold as those of Elizabeth. Pilate had learned that safety and prosperity were to be found only in blind allegiance to the one king, and that all, all challenges must be suppressed.

So he confronts this simple teacher from the provinces who seems to have some special influence over these unmanageable Israelites. This Jesus is as plain and humble as Caesar is ostentatious. Pilate was annoyed and yet amused to ask this man, "Are you the King of Jews?" It is, to Pilate, absurd. Better yet, " . . . are you any kind of king?"

He is in over his head. There is absolutely nothing in Pilate's education and training that would prepare him for Jesus' answer: "My Kingship is not of this world." In six words the centuries of preparation for the Messiah, the anointed deliverer of humanity, are fulfilled.

It's all here; we have heard the prophecies again and again. This is the one that the Psalmist proclaimed; He is the one whose "throne is established forever, from everlasting," the foretold one, a "king of might," but more important, a king of holiness.

Daniel prophesied that the dominion of this "king" will be everlasting, will never pass away, never be destroyed.

The power of this "king" is not "of this world" but of God's world, a world in which God's will is done and in which God's presence is known. The power of this "king" is not "from this world." That power comes not from weapons and politics but from God Himself, "descending on the clouds of heaven." That Kingdom has been, is, and will always be, in the hearts and hopes and dreams of the world.

As He comes near, look into the eyes of this sort of king, this King of Kings coming in humility and see, not the cold, hard power of this world, but the warmth of God's eternal love.

### The Second Sunday of Advent

December 10, 2006

Baruch 5:1-9 Psalm 126 Philippians 1:1-11 Luke 3:1-6

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We were traveling from Texas to California in a change of assignments, driving west across the staked plains of New Mexico and the barren desert, then the pine-covered hills of Arizona. This day we had left well before dawn; it was high summer, and the heat of day came early. The road was filled with early travelers. Then, as though some unheard message went out to us all, it seemed that every one stopped to see the desert sunrise.

First we stood in darkness, the darkness of a sky free from city lights, a blackness punctuated by fading stars. Then there was the soft, almost imperceptible presence of light. Clouds appeared, first pink, then orange, then red, and the tops of mesas far out across the desert were defined by that same advancing orange light. Then the sun, a glaring physical presence on the eastern horizon, long rays of light reaching out across the desert, so bright that we had to look away. Then suddenly, it was a new day.

There was a man named John who appeared in the wilderness of Judea, the Eastern desert of the people of Israel. He appeared in the deepest darkness of a night of estrangement from God, calling God's people to come out to the desert, stop, repent, and be reconciled.

Was he truly a man or an apparition – the very embodiment of the hidden, unspoken guilt and shame of the people, touching their souls?

John stood there in the waters of the Jordan, planted in the path that had led the people of Israel to the land promised them by their God many centuries before, calling them to enter those waters again, be baptized and rededicated, turn and go home.

They came by the hundreds, perhaps the thousands, from Jerusalem and the villages and the countryside, all sorts of people, to answer that call, shepherds and farmers and merchants and Pharisees and Scribes, to see this apparition and to hear his call. They came in their humility and in their pride, their power and their weakness, their wealth and their poverty, seeking one thing: hope.

They came because they were pained and exhausted by the futility of a seemingly endless darkness of sin and estrangement; they came seeking words of comfort and assurance. They came seeking the light of a new day. They came because in their hopes this John was the new Elijah, the herald prophet who would proclaim the Messiah: God's anointed one who would reconcile all creation to Himself.

They came in their hopes to see the path of the Messiah made straight and smooth by the presence of John, the valleys filled and the hills made low, the beams of the light of God's presence cutting though the darkness of the desert of their lives. They came to stand in the overwhelming power of the presence of God, dispelling night and darkness.

There stands John today, planted in our own metaphoric Jordan, yours and mine. He is calling each of us to the brightness of God's presence. Advent is our time of journey. Leaving those places of ease and comfort, we walk our own silent paths through our own wilderness whatever it may be.

At the end of that journey stands John and the light of the rising sun.

### The Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 24, 2006

Micah 5:2-4 Psalm 80 or 80:1-7 Hebrews 10:5-10 Luke 1:39-49(50-56)

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We all need an Aunt Elizabeth; someone to go to when times are hard, in times of stress and worry.

We need that wise, kindly, familiar voice and familiar face – a face and voice we've always known, always found understanding and comforting. We need an Aunt Elizabeth just once removed from the responsibility of telling us what to do, someone who listens without interrupting or shaking her head and making that "tsk-tsk" noise.

Mary had an Aunt Elizabeth. She was sort of removed from the everyday, mainstream family, living with Uncle Zechariah out in the hill country. That's really good. Mary packs up everything and goes off to see Aunt Elizabeth "in haste."

Of course she does! Mary has just had the scare of her life. She has just had an encounter with a genuine angel – booming voice like rolling thunder, bright shining robes, perhaps even wings. There was this angel, completely unexpected and unannounced, telling her – Mary – that she had been chosen by God to be the mortal mother of His only Son, mother of the Messiah, the savior of the world. Who else can she tell?

That sort of thing does not call for moments of impartial and calm reflection, particularly if you are a young girl, perhaps no more than a teenager, spending your life in a little village in a cultural backwater. That sort of thing leads to stress, real stress; so off she goes.

Every moment, every mile of that journey was filled with fear and anxiety. She knew that no one in Nazareth would believe the story about the angel, and she knew that an unwed teenage girl stood every chance of being driven out, ostracized, perhaps even stoned to death by intolerant villagers. She knew that her whole family would suffer from the stigma of being associated with her.

She does not know that in the presence of that angel and in the act of being chosen by God for the world's single most momentous motherhood she, Mary, has been transformed. Is her transformation something visible? Perhaps, but not every eye can see it. The transformation is to be felt; it's a presence.

Elizabeth senses that presence; the baby in the womb of Elizabeth senses that presence. Mary need say nothing; no stories about angels.

It's Aunt Elizabeth who says it all. "You, little Mary, are the mother of my Lord." In those few words Mary receives a powerful gift. She receives a confirmation that what the angel has proclaimed will come to be. She receives the courage to fulfill the role God has given her. She sees that the wisdom of the world need not disbelieve her or better, fail to see in her the presence of the Holy One.

Mary is transformed from a state of anxiety and stress to a state of joy and confidence in God's word and in what will be. Only one with boundless confidence could say, "My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Only one touched by God could say that what is to be is for all time, every generation, and that in the birth of that child in her womb, the world will be changed forever.

# First Sunday of Epiphany

January 7, 2007

Isaiah 42:1-9 Psalm 89:1-29 or 89:20-29 Acts 10:34-38 Luke 3:15-16.21-22

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My father's parents had a summer cottage at the Des Plains Methodist Campgrounds near the northwest side of Chicago. They had bought the cottage in the '20's when many members of their church, The First Methodist Church of Irving Park, were doing so. It was a sort of summer retreat at least for a few weeks, not far from the city. The campgrounds had a summer hotel; a swimming pool, big at least to a little boy; tabernacles, round buildings with sawdust floors and wooden benches. On summer evenings all the old hymns would fill those tabernacles.

Of much greater interest to my cousin Jan and me was the Des Plains River for which the campgrounds had been named. It wasn't a very big river; it didn't flow very swiftly, but it was wet, and it had marshy and muddy banks that were irresistible to two little boys. We spent hours and hours playing by the river, just a few yards from the screened porch of the summer cottage.

On the opposite bank of the river was a picnic and sports area called Rand Park. One Saturday, and I know it must have been Saturday because Sundays were filled with things directed toward personal and group piety, there was a big event across the river. There was a big gathering with a preacher, whom I would now call charismatic, whose voice carried clearly across the water. He was dipping people in the Des Plains River. Jan and I were entranced; we sat in the reeds and watched it all. In retrospect I suppose what we watched was a genuine, old-time revival.

I've been thinking that a revival was going on at the banks of a similar river, the Jordan, led by a charismatic preacher, John, calling for repentance, with lots of people being immersed in the river water, two thousand years ago. That's real staying power.

Why do people go to revivals? They go for many reasons, I am sure. I think some go out of pure curiosity, not unlike two little boys on the bank of the Des Plains. It is quite colorful and exciting and, in a way, mysterious. Perhaps some go as thrill-seekers. That just doesn't sound right, does it?

I actually knew a man who went to all sorts of revivals and always went forward whenever there was an altar call. He said it was to encourage the actual sinners. There are sinners, lots and lots of them. I think the vast majority of people at revivals are sinners and people who think they are. That's guilt.

Guilt is an incredibly powerful thing, and its power can be both bad and good. There are people who carry such a powerful sense of guilt, some deep-seated dark secret, that they are paralyzed. They are trapped within themselves. They lead truly tragic and desperate lives. But, if that guilt and desperation lead them back to God, to repent, confess, and accept His forgiveness, that same guilt has done good work: a person can be restored.

There was Jesus on that Jordan bank, come to be baptized. Why? I think there could be many reasons, none of which imply that Jesus carried guilt. Jesus was sinless and guiltless, but Jesus was compassionate. He could look about into the eyes of the faces of that gathering and see His ministry unfolding. Jesus was there as a sign

of His complete dedication to God and as a sign of His acceptance of the future.

Jesus at the Jordan completely identified Himself with all those He is called to save through His Crucifixion and Resurrection. Jesus was baptized in the midst of sinners. Jesus lived His life in the midst of sinners, and, ultimately, Jesus died between two sinners, one of whom heard and answered a call to repentance.

# Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

February 4, 2007

Judges 6:11-24a Psalm 85 or 85:7-13 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 Luke 5:1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I was searching for words to summarize this morning's readings: words that express just what these readings are about and why someone, I don't know whom, put them together for us.

The words that come to mind are "conversion" and "empowerment." It does seem that in each story a life is changed, and a new mission is begun. That's certainly so for Gideon in his encounter with an angel, or perhaps, with God on that threshing floor. It's so for Paul in his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, and it's so for Simon Peter on the beach at Capernaum when Jesus calls him.

Those are good descriptive words, but I think there is another point to these stories.

Just what would it be like to encounter an angel or Jesus, to have a very personal revelation? Apparently, according to scripture, revelations are accompanied by trumpets, clashing cymbals, peals of thunder, lightning bolts, heavenly angelic choirs, descending doves, tongues of flame, whirlwinds. I guess we must add burning meat and bread and, strangely enough, one talking donkey. It would seem reasonable that if all, or any, of those things happened, God

would have our full attention. But, actually, revelations may be accompanied by nothing at all.

We can have a revelation and an encounter at any moment, a moment just like any other. But do we actually live in the moment – the present moment – and actually hear and see what is plainly before us?

What if Gideon had said, "Excuse me, I have to get this grain threshed. I don't want to be rude, but I really don't have time to talk to you right now, perhaps later. We can do lunch some time."

What if Paul on the road to Damascus had said, "Excuse me, I have a job to do – a very important mission, and I'm on a tight schedule. There are people waiting for me in Damascus. And, by the way, who are you really, and why are you shining that light in my eyes? That's really dangerous. I could fall!"

What if Simon Peter had said, "Go fishing! I beg your pardon; I don't think so! We've been out there all night, for hours and hours. Consider the wear and tear on the boat and on these nets, and I have to pay these people, you know! I'm sorry, this just isn't a good time."

That's true. It isn't a good time. There is no good time; there is no bad time. There's only this time, this moment. It's all they have. It's all we have. What do we do with it?

It's the present moment. It's actually been called "The Sacrament of the Present Moment" by the French Jesuit Jean Pierre de Caussade. It's a Sacrament because every moment of every day of our lives is an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of God's presence and concern and love. Every moment is a gift; it's that simple.

The trouble is that the Gideons of this world, and we are many, will always have just a little more grain to thresh. The Pauls of this world,

and we are many, will always have an appointment with someone, somewhere, and the Simon Peters of this world, and we are many, will always be concerned about the state of their boats and nets and the size of their payroll, and you and I will always have something to do that will draw us into the future, some important plan or some terrible dread, or something to take us back into the past, a happy memory or more likely, a deep regret. We can't help it. The tragedy is that living in the past or the future means that we miss the present moment.

All of which makes me wonder just how many angelic conversations I have missed in my life, how many possible encounters with Jesus went unnoticed because I simply wasn't there.

Being here is very, very difficult. Being here means accepting this life as it is, not as we wish it had been or would be. Being here means accepting ourselves as we are. If an angel can sit on a rock and accept us, if Jesus walking on our beach can accept us, it seems as though we can do that. What clarity we would have! Clarity to see ourselves as we are, to see the world as it is, and clarity to see and to hear that angel speaking to us and Jesus calling us.

### **Second Sunday of Lent**

March 4, 2007

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 Psalm 27 Philippians 3:17-4:1 Luke 13:31-35

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What if the sum total of your knowledge about the Episcopal Church was based on what you read in the newspaper or saw on television news? What would you think about the church?

A few words like "fractured, divided, in disarray" do come to mind. Moreover, I think you would really believe that we are all consumed with issues, one issue in particular, and that our entire life as a church community depended on the decisions and actions of people far remote from Christ Church Valdosta. Is that a fair description? Is it accurate?

Look around and see the people in our pews, all sorts of people with all sorts of backgrounds and opinions on all sorts of things. Are we all in agreement about everything? Is our life driven by issues? Believe me, the answer to all those questions is "Absolutely not!" Do we serve Jesus, are we His Body here in this city? I think so.

I suppose we could call that image of us that seems to dominate the media "bad press." I suppose they see and hear only the angry and the disaffected, the ones with issues of their own that they press upon others, the ones with an overwhelming need to be in control. Such

people make it all so simple, and the media just loves simple, black and white, yes and no stories. They sell.

You know who else received "bad press?" Pharisees. Of course some Pharisees deserved it. Some differed not at all from the news makers of today. It is so easy to dismiss them all as enemies of Jesus, but what about the ones in the Gospel this morning? Here they come to warn Jesus about the designs of Herod. Why on earth would they care? What possible common cause could they have with this Galilean Rabbi who seems to challenge everything they have ever heard?

The common cause, for them and for us, is the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees long for it; Jesus proclaims it. Beyond all their reservations about this charismatic Jesus, they see the possibility that He is right, that it is true, the Kingdom is at hand, and they can put aside everything else to save the one who heralds it.

Who is the enemy for them? It's not Jesus. The common enemy of Jesus and the Pharisees is Herod. Herod represents power and control, not the control exercised by a loving God for His people but control based on coercing power. Herod is offensive to both the Law, the Pharisees, and to the Prophets, to Jesus. Herod is bent on control based on nothing more than his own self-interest, his self-importance, and is perfectly willing to sacrifice both the Pharisees and Jesus and perhaps the Kingdom of God to get it.

At least some of those Pharisees can see that. Some have their eyes open to both the threat of earthly power, the inevitable tyrannical end of the path of Herod, and divine intervention embodied in Jesus. So they warn the one who brings the divine very close. That took courage. It was, and is, far easier to see that as someone else's task, someone else's risk, and to allow the Herods of this world to seize and hold the center of attention. It's not hard to get the attention of the world if you're loud enough. If you can touch on pride and politics,

you are assured of a following in this world; it's an age-old proven formula and works as well today as it did for Herod.

Jesus relies on neither. Jesus simply proclaims that the love and compassion of God will, and do, triumph over all the schemes and devices of humanity.

There is a kindness in the reply of Jesus to those who gave Him warning; the answer isn't a puzzle. Jesus tells them, and He tells us, that they and we must never lose heart, never doubt, that the Kingdom of God is here. "Three days," from apparent defeat to eternal triumph, a very short time in the grand scale of things.

That's the message to you and to me in this Gospel. Never lose sight of who we are, a community formed in the image of Jesus Christ, and why we are here, to worship and to serve.

# Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 25, 2007

Isaiah 43:16-21 Psalm 126 Philippians 3:4b-14 John 12:1-8

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I read somewhere that in a recent survey the majority of Americans said that they believe in God; at least in some sort of "supreme being."

They didn't say that they believed in organized religion. They didn't say that they attended a church, just that they believed.

The second question was "How does that belief in God affect your everyday life?" The answers became quite fuzzy. Some said that, at best, God was someone who set a few rules but was either too remote or too neutral, perhaps too nice and sympathetic with us, to really enforce them.

The picture that formed was that of a sort of vague something that was a cushion, a benign, sympathetic "help-line" sort of God. A nice God: a God with whom we could be comfortable.

Actually, that's not so bad. It's all right to be comfortable with God; in fact, God might like that. He could be a sort of best friend. The trouble comes when we become so very comfortable that we think of God only as a friend, not The Creator, Sanctifier, and Redeemer of the

world. Then we reduce God to just another person remarkably like ourselves and make God available for bargaining, making deals.

God becomes our equal. If God is our equal, we have just as much right and entitlement to this Vineyard as God does.

Here we sit in our very own private Vineyard, convinced that this creation of God's is ours to play with and to dispose of. We really lose sight of the fact that we are just tenants occupying a very small piece of creation for a very short time, and we really don't like to be reminded of that. We get a little short with reminders that we are just passing through. We can still stone a few prophets if they really annoy us.

And we ask, "If God really did take exception to how we behave, would we still be here?" That, of course, is sort of a quotation from a bystander watching Noah pound the last few nails into the hull of the Ark; probably followed by, "Did you feel a raindrop?"

You see the problem. If we reduce God to our level, and we have a pretty good idea of our capabilities, we demote Him from being the omnipotent, omniscient Creator of worlds to being just another participant in things. That's a long way to fall. We take away God's power to change things, and all things remain static, the same forever.

Is that true? Is that your experience that things don't change? Are we just what we have always been? Frankly, my aching back and sore feet tell me that time has its effects.

On a grand and cosmic scale Isaiah tells us that God is creating, constantly creating, a "new thing," a new world, a new you and a new me. He tells us that even now God is cutting a path through the "dry wilderness" of what has always been to lead us straight to what is to be, the Vineyard that is the Kingdom of God here in our world. Then Noah's flood becomes living water for all who thirst.

# Palm Sunday

April 1, 2007

Isaiah 50:4-9a Psalm 31:9-16 Philippians 2:5-11 Luke 23:1-49

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Who were those people in Pilate's courtyard shouting, "Crucify Him?" Were they the same people who lined the streets of Jerusalem shouting, "Hosannah to the Son of David" a few days before?

Perhaps, but humanity being what we are, I imagine the great majority of those people shouted, waved their palms, and went home. They said, "What a great parade; that was fun," and went on with their daily lives.

But some probably followed Jesus to see where He was going and what He would do. They had a little time on their hands, and they were curious; they wondered, "Who is He?" Some of the more presentable people might actually have gotten near Him in the Temple when He apparently pitched a fit, toppling tables and releasing sheep and doves and pigeons.

They ran all the way home saying, "That was not fun!" They did, however, have a really good story to tell as they went on with their daily lives.

Then there was a tight little group of twelve and a few more who stayed with Jesus. They had been with Him all the while.

Now do any of those people sound like they were so involved and impassioned that they would reassemble a few days later and call for Jesus' death? Don't they seem like "plain folks," not really involved in the big events around them, simply making their way through one more day? People like that don't change their minds very quickly because daily life is too uncertain and treacherous to take chances.

So perhaps we aren't hearing a story of the fickle, changing nature of humanity; perhaps it's a deeper, darker story.

We usually say that the people turned on Jesus because of dashed expectations. They had an idea that there would be a Messiah, and he would bring instant, total change to their lives and to their world. All their problems and hardships would just evaporate. Israel would be paradise on earth. The future would be bright. Some of them may well have seen Jesus as that sort of Messiah. We can only guess at what they thought, but if that was what they expected, this man processing in triumph through Jerusalem really disappointed them. Nothing they could see had changed. The question is, "Were they so disappointed as to turn on Jesus and demand His death?" Considering how much disappointment they had in their lives, that would be a huge emotional change indeed. Hopes and dreams become highly theoretical the longer they are unanswered.

There are, of course, other people who absolutely hate the thought of the Messiah. They are the comfortable ones. They don't have hardships or problems; life, just as it is, is really, really good. They are doing very well in the Roman occupation and see themselves at least a step above those people in the streets. In fact, it may be the first time they have even been aware of the people in the streets. They have two great fears: that Jesus will show those people in the streets the terrible inequity that reduces some to poverty while others live in riches, and that Jesus will somehow change things. They are the ones who have a great interest in silencing Jesus. Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes. It doesn't matter what we call them.

I really think they are the ones who cry for Jesus' death. The Romans know them; they count on their support. That explains how Pilate, an otherwise shrewd if ruthless governor, would even permit them in his courtyard. It explains how Pilate, who admitted that he saw no guilt in Jesus, would have Him crucified. And it explains how the official after-action report, the spin, on His crucifixion could reduce Jesus to just another prophet.

Those people who had waved their palms in a very brief brush with God Incarnate would never know what truly happened. Life simply went on for them as it always had, nothing changed, or so they thought.

But we know, you and I, that the old world and the old way died on the cross and that all things had changed.

# Third Sunday of Pentecost

June 17, 2007

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10,13-15 Psalm 32 or 32:1-8 Galatians 2:11-21 Luke 7:36-50

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I really have very few family remembrances. My family came to this country from Norway to begin a new life in a new country and, although they were always nostalgic about "The Old Country," they brought very little of it with them. Perhaps what they did bring was particularly significant to them, sort of representing the world they had left behind.

There was a pipe, a very ornate pipe made of porcelain with decorations, the sort of pipe you see in old paintings of the country people. My cousin has that.

I have a mug, a very large and heavy mug, carved from one piece of oak. The lid was held on by a wooden pin set through a figure much like a lion. The bottom is footed with more lion figures. The very top has carving of one of those patterns of intertwined branches. Over many years, it has taken on a rich, golden color. I once saw another much like it in a restored Norwegian farmhouse in an outdoor cultural heritage museum.

I don't know how old it is. I don't think my grandfather really knew either. I do think it's a fair replica of a vessel from the Viking era of a

thousand years ago. Now if it were really that old, an authentic Viking vessel, we might see an interesting carving on its very bottom. It would look like a figure "T." Actually, it would be a symbol of the hammer of Thor, the Norse god of war and thunder and general mayhem. It was carved there in the very earliest days of the Christianization of the North, carved there just in case this new religion didn't work out. Why take the chance?

So there is the question of the old faith versus the new faith. That's what has Paul all distressed about Peter's behavior. What is Peter up to? Apparently he's slipping back into some old ways, an old faith, as soon as the pressure is applied. Peter is vacillating between the old way, the Old Testament understanding of what God desires and the New Testament understanding of God in Jesus Christ.

What does that sound like to you? It sounds as though Peter is running away again, doesn't it. It sounds like another instance of denying Christ. I have no doubt that's what Paul thought, and he was distressed, and he was disgusted. After all, Paul knew a lot about the old and new faiths, and he took conversion and commitment very seriously. Paul, more than anyone, knew what it would mean to give up faith in Jesus and return to the old ways.

What is the difference; what would Peter be giving up?

Take the story of David in our Old Testament reading. David sins in first, lusting after Bathsheba, then causing her husband's death in combat so that David might have her as his own. He runs roughshod over the lives of others for his own ends, a perfect example of pride and greed. Nathan tells the whole story in a parable; David recognizes his own error, repents and, apparently, is forgiven. But there is a terrible price to forgiveness. The price is the life of David's son, a sacrifice to atone for David's sin. To put it bluntly, in the Old Testament if you sin, you pay; God is a God of judgment.

In the Gospel Jesus enters the house of a Pharisee and is accosted by a sinful woman who washes his feet with her tears and anoints them with oil. The others present represent that old way, pure judgment, but Jesus sees something else. He sees that her actions reflect her repentance and that her repentance reflects her faith; she has sought out Jesus to make her unspoken confession and to seek his forgiveness. She receives it.

In the New Testament if you sin, Jesus pays and pays and pays. That God is a God of mercy.

Judgment is so easy, isn't it? It comes so naturally to us all. Perhaps we're born with it. On the other hand, we have to learn about mercy.

Mercy demands that we see and acknowledge that God is present with us, even in those who seem most bent on demonstrating that He isn't.

# **Independence Day**

July 4, 2007

Deuteronomy 10:17-21 Psalm 145 or 145:1-9 Hebrews 11:8-16 Matthew 5:43-48

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We are a strange nation – a very improbable assemblage of peoples from all over the globe – peoples with very different backgrounds and philosophies and expectations. Some of us are very recently arrived; some come from stock that has been here a very long time indeed. But we must remember that no matter who or what we are, our people came from somewhere to be part of this nation.

Why did they come? There are all sorts of reasons, but all those reasons are summed up in the phrase "seeking a better country."

What is a better country? The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that a better country is a "heavenly country," a nation whose architect and builder is God; a nation with firm and deep foundations. Those foundations are, the Deuteronomist tells us:

A nation that is not partial.

A nation that takes no bribe.

A nation that executes justice.

A nation that loves the stranger.

A nation that worships only God; holds fast to God.

Mark tells us that it is a nation that renders unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's, and knows the difference.

How are we doing after all these years? We have our moments.

We began with a flat, incontrovertible statement that all people are created equal – all people. That doesn't leave much room for partiality.

We began with a constitution and a set of amendments that lay out quite clearly that we are a nation built upon laws, and that everyone is entitled to equal protection under those laws – that money or position or power should not set anyone above those laws. We have a statue of justice that is blindfolded, a symbol of legal impartiality.

We put a big statue in the New York harbor, a gift from France, a symbol of liberty raising a beacon to the world, and wrote on its base "give me your tired, your poor . . . I lift my lamp beside the golden door." It was a moment in which those who had been strangers in this land could see their own beginnings in the eyes of the immigrants and would share the bounty of this nation.

Are we perfect as Matthew tells us we must be, just as our Father is perfect? Of course not. Can we try; can we do better? Oh yes.

Do we lose sight of our past, caught up in the trials and terrors of the present? Momentarily, yes, I think. But there have been trials and terrors throughout the history of this nation and dark times that seemed to have no end – but they did end. And little by little those ideals that are the very firm and deep foundation of this nation have been recovered and endured.

That takes work, and it's your job and mine to look back on the ideals and strengths of the past, assess the present and shape the future to be that "better country."

# **Seventh Sunday of Pentecost**

July 15, 2007

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 Psalm 25 or 25:3-9 Colossians 1:1-14 Luke 10:25-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It's been a few years now – Happy and I were driving down I-95 from Savannah to Honey Creek, near Brunswick, to a meeting. We still had the big old 1988 Volvo station wagon.

Just south of Darien we had a flat tire.

I pulled off, bumping across the apron of the highway. It was the right rear tire, and it was blown out, very flat indeed.

I moved the luggage and got out the jack and the wrench and the spare and started to jack up the back of the car. I had the tire almost off when the jack broke. It just collapsed, and the car came down, pinning the tire to the ground and narrowly missing pinning my hands under it.

We had no cell phone. All we could do was stand by the side of the highway and look pathetic, hoping someone, maybe a policeman, would stop. It took quite a while. Apparently our pathos didn't communicate with cars going by at 70 miles an hour. Finally an off-duty South Carolina patrolman on his way to Florida did stop. He tried to fit his jack under the car, but there was no room. He drove off to find help.

At which point a really beat-up old red pickup pulled up behind us and an equally beat-up driver got out: T-shirt, skinny, missing teeth, dangling cigarette – visualize.

He sized up the situation, took a 2x4 out of the back of his truck, stuck it under the Volvo – the big, heavy Volvo – and lifted it. He held it while I pulled out the tire and the jack, put on the spare and tightened the lug nuts. Then, he took his 2x4 and drove away.

So, a long time ago there was a man stranded by the side of a different road, the road that goes from Jerusalem to Jericho. He had been beaten, stripped, robbed, and left for dead. He was pathetic. You couldn't miss him, lying there in trouble and in need.

A priest saw him and walked on. A Levite didn't stop to help. Why do you suppose that might have been? I'm sure they would have given us all sorts of reasons, but there's really only one. The real reason is that they lacked the one thing that was needed at that time and place. The wounded man needed compassion, compassion that would inspire a person to stop, help, get involved. I have no doubt they were filled with sympathy for the man, but sympathy can be passive, while compassion is active.

Compassion can cause help to come from the most unlikely and unexpected sources, the least probable people. Compassion can reach across all those things that separate people from each other. It's good to know what ought to be done; it is far better to go ahead and do it.

Compassion means that we, like that Samaritan, focus on the needs of others, not just on ourselves. I imagine the priest and the Levite would have explained that they were on a tight schedule, on their way to somewhere to do something really important and that they simply could not take the time to be delayed, to stop, and to help.

I imagine that the man in the beat-up red pickup was on his way to somewhere to do something that was important to him, if only to go home for supper. He was busy, too, but he saw our need. We intruded on his plans and his day, but he put his own needs aside for a while and helped us. That, I think, is compassion.

Of course, I must warn you that compassion has a cost. Compassion really might call for self-sacrifice. It might even mean having that vague feeling that we've been taken advantage of. It probably won't mean praise or material reward.

But it will mean this: that one tiny corner of the world is better, more human, more livable because of one small act of kindness by one latter-day Samaritan. I am quite sure Jesus would approve.

# Twelfth Sunday of Pentecost

August 19, 2007

Jeremiah 23:23-29 Psalm 82 Hebrews 12:1-7(8-10)11-14 Luke 12:49-56

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Just the other day, while sitting in three lanes of stalled traffic on I-95 just a few miles south of Washington, D.C., in 100 degree heat, I got to thinking about interpersonal relationships.

Perhaps it was the thinly masked hostility I sensed in the drivers of the cars around me; perhaps it was the silent mouthing of words I, mercifully, could not hear, but something, something seemed to say, in the words of Jesus in this morning's Gospel, "division."

Stress has an interesting effect on us fragile human beings. Stress makes quick casualties of patience, cooperation, and community. Stress sends us back into our own private little comfort zones, some of which are automobiles in immobile traffic, from which we peer out at the world with general suspicion, absolutely certain that we deserve a lot better than we are currently getting. Do I exaggerate?

Jesus had some familiarity with stress; that's what He's talking about in this morning's Gospel. The stress Jesus is talking about isn't anything so ephemeral as slowed-down traffic or a slowed down life. He's talking about the opposite, an acceleration, a leap into something totally new. There's stress for those who make the leap and for those who stay put.

In this age, when religion is no longer the constant center in the lives of many, perhaps most, people, it's hard to comprehend the division that Jesus predicts, and it is a very accurate prediction indeed. Families split apart, communities split apart, as one person sought to follow Jesus and others would not. There were anger and tears and bitterness, even violence. Christianity did not bring peace to the world; it brought a very divisive sword, but why?

What on earth can be found in Jesus' message of God's unearned, undeserved, unrequited love for His children that would cause such grief? You know what it is, don't you? It's the second half of that message of God's grace, the part that says, "Go and do likewise." That is what Jesus taught; that is what Jesus modeled. He is the very embodiment of God's expectations of our behavior, or better, God's demand for our behavior. If God so loved us that He would suffer His Son to live as one of us that He might die like one of us, nothing, nothing we can possibly do can match that love.

However, that does not mean that you and I can't try. It's the want of trying that troubles the world today. It's the want of trying that sends us all to our own private hidey-holes of personal isolation, our very own cars trapped in a spiritual traffic jam that has no end.

But it does have an end, and that's our job. So, when you are caught in that same mess on your own I-95, give it some slack, open some space. You may get some words and some looks and hear a few outraged horns honking, but for a moment you will have made the world whole again. That's enough.

# First Sunday of Epiphany

January 13, 2008

Isaiah 42:1-9 Psalm 29 Acts 10:34-43 Matthew 3:13-17

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

John is a man of the past. He's the last prophet of the Old Testament. He looks like a prophet, specifically like the great prophet in the Book of Kings, Elijah. John wears what Elijah wore, a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt. John acts like a prophet, prophesying by his actions as well as his words. He's out in the wilderness, the dry and barren land, land stripped of all distractions, land favored by prophets, living out his prophecy like a new Jeremiah or Isaiah. He is the living embodiment of Isaiah's words: "a voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." His message is prophetic. Prophecy is not a prediction of things to be in the future. Prophecy is a statement about man's relationship to God in the present. For John, Israel and the world of the present are dark indeed.

His message is simple. If you truly wish for deliverance, truly yearn for a messiah anointed by God to right the wrongs of the world, "Repent!" Turn your lives around and live as God would have you live. All your troubles come from your failure to be as God has commanded. You must eschew pride and all that comes from pride, do no wrong to anyone, and worship God sincerely, not just occasionally in the Temple in Jerusalem but every minute of every day. As a sign of your repentance and your commitment to begin life

anew, be baptized, immersed in the water of the Jordan. You must pass through the Jordan as your ancestors did and enter the Promised Land anew. You must honor the ancient First Covenant of God and His people.

Ironically, with John at the Jordan, the Old Covenant comes to an end.

In that moment at the Jordan, when John looks into the eyes of Jesus, the old gives way to the new, "The old has passed away, behold the new has come." Everything is changed. John confronts the fulfillment of all prophecy, the answer to centuries of fervent prayer. John sees the "chosen one" proclaimed by Isaiah. How improbable! The "chosen one" is a plain traveler from Galilee, but he is plainly there at the Jordan to be baptized. He is definitely not what John and Israel expected, and, possibly, not what we expect.

The point is, of course, that God is not bound by our expectations; God can be and do anything God chooses. This is the God of the Psalms, the almighty creator of all things. The idea that the Messiah would come in triumph as a majestic, powerful ruler, a new Davidic king who will restore wealth and prestige to Israel, was Israel's idea, not God's. If God so chooses, the Messiah can be anyone. God chooses Jesus. This Messiah is the "suffering servant" in Isaiah's writing, one who is God's sacrificial lamb, who will give up His life for the salvation of the world, a humble servant; that's the point that John misses.

John would give place to Jesus, but Jesus is to be baptized – to be one with those He would save. The divine Jesus is fully human, and he is among humans, a sinless man among sinners. In Jesus' response to John's call for repentance, the response of all sinners is raised up to God, theirs and yours and mine. In the baptism of Jesus the repentance of all the baptized is offered to, and accepted by, God.

In that moment the world is made new. Is that just a moment of long ago, a familiar story of scripture?

The baptism of Our Lord, shared by Jesus with the repentant at the Jordan, is shared with all the baptized down through the ages, with you and with me. If we have eyes to see it, the dove descends again and again and again at every baptism. If we had the ears to hear, God declares, again and again and again, "This is my beloved child."

# **Second Sunday of Epiphany**

January 20, 2008

Isaiah 49:1-7 Psalm 40:1-12 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 John 1:29-42

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Basically, there are two ways to herd sheep.

And just how do you know that, you may ask.

Well, we lived in Germany for a while many years ago, in a mostly rural area in the southwest, in the hills close to the border with France. The village, complete with a picturesque ruined castle on the hill, narrow winding streets, and a village square was nestled in a valley at the foot of steep, wooded hills. The valley opened on to a plain filled with farms. Places like that change slowly and painfully; in some ways we were living in a time capsule of many years ago. Some of the farming methods and machinery were pretty modern, but a lot of the past was still to be seen. We would encounter wagons pulled by massive draft horses as often as we would encounter tractors and wagons. Livestock was everywhere, pigs, cattle, and sheep, lots and lots of sheep.

There were what I took to be huge flocks of sheep on the farms; they also were the living lawn mowers of the region, often in the center of town or moving through the street. Caution was essential when driving.

Sitting in a car, waiting for a flock of sheep to clear the road, a task at which they never hurried no matter what your schedule might be, one can observe a great deal about sheep herding. One can also observe that, except for moments of great crisis, being a shepherd is a really low-stress job.

And now I imagine you're thinking, "I wonder when he'll get to the point, assuming he has one." It's this: the first way to herd sheep, the one we all envision is to have a dog, a small, hyperactive, yapping dog that constantly circles the flock and keeps them in line. The dog can move the sheep along; it can chase down the sheep that wander away from the flock and make them run back to huddle together in the safety of the crowd. How can the dog do all that? Because the sheep are scared to death. The dog drives the sheep by threats of terrible consequences if they stray or disobey. That's herding method number one.

The other way is the bell-sheep. It was really common to see one sheep wearing a bell around its neck at the head of a flock leading the way. As far as I could see, it looked just like all the other sheep, a sheep among sheep, not distinguishable in any way except by what it did. It didn't drive; it led by a calm example, showing the other sheep where to go by going there before them, finding the green pastures and the cool waters.

John the Baptist proclaims Jesus to be "the lamb of God." Lambs were very important in the time of John and Jesus. Of course, we don't often see lambs in person but, to our mind, a lamb is a soft, cute, wooly, white creature to be cuddled. Not so with John and Jesus; lambs were for sacrifice in the Temple. Lambs were gifts to God, the life of one creature as ransom for another from sin. It was an everyday practice that probably recalled the tradition of a scapegoat, a goat on which everyone's sins were placed and then driven out of town to take its chances in the desert. With it went all the people's sins. It's the same idea.

John also says that Jesus, the lamb, will take away the "Sin of the World." Notice John says "sin" not "sins." There was, and is, just one great, all-pervading sin, "Self-Will." The great sin is preferring my way to God's way, putting myself in His place, being unconcerned about anyone else or the greater good. It's straying from the flock and going it alone. It's the antithesis of sacrifice.

Jesus is God's lamb, the lamb that God gives as sacrifice for His people. Jesus will go to the cross in perfect obedience to the will of God, and therein lies God's great love for us all. You see, God could if he chose, and there are those who say that it is His choice, drive us all into being an obedient flock, siccing the dogs on us when we stray. That's not His choice, and it doesn't work very well anyway.

The lamb of God is the bell-sheep, the leader who goes before the flock, showing the path to be traveled to the security and comfort of the presence of God.

# **Vespers Homily**

#### Third Sunday of Epiphany January 27, 2008

John 1:1-18

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is the time when the days and weeks and seasons of the church slip by so quickly.

In just a few weeks we've come from the stories of Advent, preparing us for the great Feast of the Incarnation, stories of prophecy about a new king to restore Israel to its days of glory.

We've celebrated Christmas with its stories of the birth of Jesus, a humble birth to humble parents in humble surroundings, a stable in a tiny village called Bethlehem, a baby in a manger whose birth is proclaimed in Luke to shepherds by angelic hosts, and to Magi in Matthew by a mysterious star, a portent of the birth of a great new king in Israel.

We've learned of the baptism of that very baby, grown to manhood after a childhood of which we have only one story, itself a metaphor of being in "his father's house," written long after the moment.

We've heard that man identified as "The Lamb of God," by John, and we've heard that man Jesus call others – Peter and Andrew and James and John as His Disciples.

All these stories speak of a specific time, set in the reigns of emperors and governors, and a specific place, a very small plot of earth we call Israel, or Galilee, or Judea.

And now, we hear in the Gospel of John, perhaps the last to be written, a different story. In a stroke John expands and elevates our thinking, elevates and expands his Gospel story. In John a temporal event becomes an eternal reality.

"In the beginning was the Word." To the Jew John speaks in the words of the Book of Genesis, the beginning of the history of the universe, the first Creation. To the Greek, knowing nothing of Jewish scripture, John speaks of the foundations of all philosophy, all thought.

"The Word," in Greek "Logos," is the word of God by which all things were made. It may, to the Jew, be the proclamations of the prophets; it may, to the Greek, be that rational principle that gives unity and meaning to the world.

To the Christian, after John, "The Word" is the self-expression of God, everything comes to be through God's self-expression. The verb, in Greek, means "causes to be."

Why do we hear John this week? It's to serve as a corrective to the very tempting, and therefore dangerous, tendency to see Jesus only in terms of the baby or the man in Galilee or, for that matter, the man on the cross, missing the real meaning and significance of the Incarnation.

"The Word" became flesh and dwelt among us. "The Word" does not merely indwell, doesn't take its place in the human being, Jesus of Nazareth. The identity is complete and absolute: "the Word" is Jesus, and Jesus is "the Word."

But, he is flesh as we are flesh, taking upon himself all our aches and pains, fears, and shortcomings. God does not adopt Jesus at some moment, at the Jordan, or in the wilderness, or on the Mount of Transfiguration. That's a heresy. And Jesus is not simply God in the guise of a human. That's another heresy. And Jesus isn't just a very, very nice man. That's a third heresy. Jesus is the Incarnate Word,

God expressing himself in terms and images that we, thick as we may be, really should not miss.

### Ash Wednesday

**February 6, 2008** 

Joel 2:1-2,12-17 Psalm 103:8-14 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It has been said that Ash Wednesday is a "wake up call," a call to face both our sinfulness and our mortality.

Here we are, together, to kneel, to pray, to ask God to forgive us those many, many ways we have fallen short of being what we might be.

Point by point we lament our failures in the Litany of Penitence; we confess our sins, both big and small, and seek God's mercy, humbly ask God to accept our repentance. And so we begin our season of Lent, forty days to open ourselves to God's presence in our lives, to reshape ourselves to be what He would have us be, to allow God to transform us.

On this one day the cross that was made on our foreheads with Holy Oil at our Baptism is retraced in ashes. The ashes are the remnant of the palms of Palm Sunday, carried green and fresh in the joyous celebration of Our Lord's triumph, now dried and brittle, signs of a faith grown cold in the course of time. That cold faith has come through a transforming fire, and it's reasserted in the cross of ashes that marks us, once again, as children of God.

That is what we proclaim today, not in pride as did Matthew's hypocrites. Ashes do not connote pride. They tell of humility, of awe in the knowledge that God does love us and is merciful, and seeks not the death of sinners but their repentance.

We have the forty days of Lent, beginning here this evening to stop, to look at our lives, to think of where we are going. We have forty days of Lent to discard those things that keep us from being one with God, things that pale to insignificance in the presence of His love.

We will say, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

It has been written, "Remember, you are nothing but dust: Precious dust, molded and formed in the womb by a loving God, precious, precious and beloved are you."

"Remember you are nothing but dust and to dust you shall return: unique and precious, created for eternity."

"Remember, you are nothing but dust: and that makes you free – free from human ambition – free from prideful denial – free from fear."

"Remember, dust you are, and as dust you are loved and you are free."

### **Second Sunday of Lent**

February 17, 2008

Genesis 12:1-4a Psalm 121 Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 John 3:1-17

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee with a Greek name. That must be unusual. Apparently, he is what is known as a Hellenized Jew. They were the Jews that were open to foreign, non-traditional ideas and influences, as opposed to the conservatives who saw and knew nothing but Torah, the Law. Those were the Pharisees, in the midst of which is this liberal, Nicodemus. How he became one of them is an absolute mystery.

All of which might explain why Nicodemus seeks out Jesus. Jesus is certainly an object of curiosity, a man with some very new, or perhaps old and forgotten, ideas about the relationship of man and God. Nicodemus is curious about Jesus in an intellectual sort of way.

He comes to Jesus by night. It may be that Nicodemus is a secret believer. It's very nice to think so. However, it might well be that to be seen with Jesus would be embarrassing to a man like Nicodemus. This Jesus is a Galilean Rabbi, a man from the hinterlands, certainly no intellectual. Jesus is no Pharisee, and it may be that Nicodemus thinks Jesus is a bit beneath him. But, then again, there are these reported miracles; Nicodemus calls them "signs." What to make of all that? Jesus is worth a look.

It all starts out well for Nicodemus. He makes a few opening compliments. He really expects to ask a few questions, hear the answers and get a fix on Jesus, categorize him and fit him into a place in Nicodemus' tidy understanding of the world. Then Nicodemus could go home; it should take only a few minutes.

Actually, there's a bit of Nicodemus in all of us. It's not a matter of going through a crisis, not a matter of a loss of faith. We just want to fit Jesus into our lives, into our busy world. Perhaps it's a matter of growing up and recognizing that this is not a tidy world, that there are and will be things beyond our comprehension and control, painful as that may be.

I went though that period of questioning; perhaps we all did. I had a long list of questions that begged answers for me to believe. I probably should reassure you that was long time ago, nothing recent. In retrospect I imagine God was either amused, or perhaps bored, by the same old questions He had been hearing for millennia.

The big question was and is, "How do we fit what Jesus did, his miracles, into our understanding of the realities of this world? How do we live in this world according to the very compelling words of Jesus, the parables and teachings, the Beatitudes?" It's no easy thing.

We can try to reconcile it all by knowing about Jesus; that's what Nicodemus is doing. What happens? Every question is met with not an answer but a statement, a call to faith, not to understanding. Jesus tells him, you feel the wind, you experience it, you don't know or understand it.

We experience Jesus; we come to his presence loaded with questions, and his sheer presence overwhelms us. First comes faith, then comes a wonderful understanding of what faith in that presence means. Faith is a motivator, the power that inspires us to live according to what we have come to understand. What we understand is that a world freed from anger, hatred, violence, and pride is not the

way to the Kingdom of God; it is the Kingdom of God. We are the ones who will bring that kingdom to be.

Nicodemus experienced Jesus. What happened? The Gospel tells us that at the trial of Jesus, it is Nicodemus, one of the Sanhedrin, the council, who protests, "Does our Law judge a man without first learning about him?" It is this Nicodemus who, with Joseph of Arimathea, prepares the corpse of Jesus for burial.

Nicodemus is profoundly changed by knowing the presence of Jesus in his life; so are we all.

### **Fourth Sunday of Lent**

March 2, 2008

1 Samuel 16:1-13 Psalm 23 Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9:1-41

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There is a special darkness, the pre-dawn darkness after a long night, a darkness that descends as the stars fade away, after the moon has set, and no light at all penetrates the night. The night winds die away. The small sounds of the night, the rustlings and stirrings, cease. Then there is a profound sense of isolation, of being utterly and completely alone.

Of course, we have all the images of days and years past, days and years of light and color, blues and greens and reds, and the faces of ones we love, visual memories to cast light into those moments.

What if we had no such images, no such memories, what then? Such was the man born blind in this morning's Gospel. Could he imagine, could he dream? Could he fill that deep, deep darkness in which he lived?

The dawn of a dark night comes slowly, gradually, unfolding for those who can see. There is a lightening of the darkness of the sky, grayness and a slow revelation of clouds and trees and the world about us. Then a flash of fire in the east, clouds made pink, then orange, then flaming red, and then the rising sun, long shafts of

golden light breaking the last pall of night, dispelling the darkness, and it is a new day.

Was it so very different for the man imprisoned in the blindness of his birth? Of course, there were no tones of gray, no slow spreading of light. There was just the sudden revelation, the fiery flash of a vision of a world which he had never seen, never known.

Are we still talking about a physical blindness? There is another kind of blindness, spiritual blindness. Perhaps that's the real point of this story. Perhaps we are talking about a man who has never confronted, perhaps never heard of, Jesus Christ. Such people are legion. They aren't exactly sinners, they aren't really evil, they simply do not know what it means to be in the presence of Christ, to have Him in their lives, and never having known Him, they simply don't miss Him. They live in a true spiritual darkness, unrelieved by the vision of a different, better life. They just don't know what they're missing.

The blind man is this Gospel is just such a person. He doesn't ask Jesus to give him sight; he doesn't know what sight is. For him life is perpetual darkness, cold and hard; it always has been, and it always will be. He doesn't call out. It's Jesus that reaches out to him; it's Jesus who touches his eyes and opens them to a new and brighter world.

He doesn't know who Jesus is; he doesn't even care. All he knows is that he has received, without even asking, an incomparable gift, a new life.

That is the way it happens. If we just let Jesus come close, let Him touch us, we will be made whole and new no matter what darkness we carry about; we will be changed forever. "Once we have been in darkness" and darkness comes in many forms, but now that we have received His touch, "in the Lord we are light."

That's not all. The newly-sighted man, running about telling everyone about this incredible gift, finds himself in a world of doubters and cynics. He finds himself in the company of people who would deny his healing, throttle his joy, and reduce him to a life of darkness again. But they can't. No matter how critical, mean, and hard they may be, he has the one, perfect answer, the only answer. "One thing I do know: that I was blind, and now I see." Is there need for him to say more; is there need for us to say more?

I don't think the man was driven from the company of the doubters. He was too joyful, too spirit-filled to care what they said. I think he left to find the one who had given him sight, and he found Him. And his words and our words and the words of all who have ever known the presence of Jesus and felt His touch, who have been made whole by Him are, "Lord, I believe."

# **Easter Day**

March 23, 2008

Acts 10:34-43 Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 John 20:1-18

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus says to Mary, "Tell the Disciples to go to Galilee, there they will see me." Go back to where it all began; go home.

Galilee is home, of course. The Disciples have only been away for a few years, three at the most. It's really only a short while since Jesus had appeared to them in the midst of their daily work – they can still feel the coarse nets on their hands and hear the sound of the waves against the sides of the little wooden boats, see familiar faces in their mind's eye, hear their voices and the myriad small sounds of the village, smell the cooking fires. They know well what they had left behind. And at times, perhaps in the small hours of the morning, they missed them, you can be sure.

But, oh the places they had gone and the sights they had seen in those three years of following Jesus! They had walked with Him from noisy, dusty little villages to the grand Jerusalem itself, happy memories and sad. They had seen sick people made well, lepers made clean, blind men given sight, deaf given hearing, and even one man raised from the dead.

They had seen Jesus in controversy with all sorts of grand and important people, people of whom they had walked in fear,

proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had come, a Kingdom where the poor and the weak and the humble would be exalted and the proud and mighty would be brought low.

They had bravely vowed that they would be with this wonderful Jesus to the end, but the end had come, and, of course, their weak flesh betrayed their willing spirit.

Well, that was all over now; time to pick up where they had left off, resume their lives, and tell wondrous tales to their grandchildren about the adventures of their youth. In time the bad moments would fade in their memories, and only the good times would remain, and it would become more and more difficult to remember exactly what Jesus had said and done, what exactly he looked like: such is our frail memory.

"We'll just go home," so they thought.

Actually, we all have our own personal Galilee, the place we call home. It might be a geographic place, a town or even a building, or it might be a time in our lives, a time filled with memories. Home is where we go for comfort. Jesus walked into the lives of the Disciples, into their comfort place, and said, "Follow me." Jesus has walked into our comfort place, too.

The question is, of course, where were we when He walked into our home place and called us? There's no need to answer; it's an unfair question. I imagine very few of us can point to a moment in time, a moment in our lives, when Jesus made His presence known, but walk in He did, or we wouldn't be here this morning.

What then? There are those who, like Peter and James and John, have simply abandoned their lives and homes to follow Jesus – great heroes and heroines of the Church – and there have been many more whose names we will never know. But we can't all do that; far more have heard Jesus' call and stayed put, stayed at home, with lives

transformed. We are transformed if what we do is to the greater glory of God and, in the unfailing presence of Jesus Christ every day, even the simplest routine task takes on new significance if He is present with us as we do them.

We can be sure that the villages of Galilee were more beautiful in the eyes of those Disciples returning from their great adventure. We can be sure that the nets of Peter and Andrew, James and John were different in their hands, all because of the presence of Jesus.

Of course we aren't simply talking about an event of long ago. In His Resurrection Jesus speaks to every one of us, saying, "This is your Galilee. Live here and now in this world as my good Disciple," and, "This is where you will see me."

### **Vespers Homily**

Easter Day March 23, 2008

Psalm 148 John 13: 31-35

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Judas departs of his own free will, his own choice. He's not expelled from the company of Disciples, even though his identity and his purpose are known to Jesus. And Jesus doesn't try to hold him, to obstruct his going. In that complicity Jesus assures that the plans of God go forward.

Jesus watches Judas go. A flood of memories goes with him. Judas is a disciple and a companion and a friend. They've walked the roads of Galilee and Samaria and Judea together for at least three years. Judas has been with Him to hear Him preach and teach and see Him heal the sick, even raise the dead.

The door opens briefly to show the darkness into which Judas goes, leaving the light of the room and the presence of Jesus, then closes securely on Jesus and the company of the remaining eleven. Jesus speaks, quickly, to assure the confused and fearful disciples that all things are as God would have them.

Jesus – Son of Man, Son of God – is now glorified. The departure of Judas in treachery initiates the sequence of events that will lead inevitably to the glory of the Resurrection, an unfolding drama of descent into the darkness of the night and the tomb, followed by the

dazzling clarity of the realization that this Jesus, this Son of Man, is raised from the dead. The light that is the Glory of God will shine though Jesus, breaking the grip of the dark night of the world.

God is glorified in a triumph over death, glorified in the presence of the risen Jesus, and Jesus reflects that glory here, in this world.

The departure of Judas says, "Now! Now it begins."

Jesus also goes of His own free will into that dark night, the willing object of Judas' betrayal. He goes as the sacrificial Passover lamb, the lamb given by God for the sins of the world: He goes to the cross.

Where He goes the eleven cannot go, no matter their greatest resolve and best intentions. Jesus knows their hearts; He knows that their courage will fail them and that they will all flee into that same dark night.

They may fail Jesus; they must not fail each other. If they break apart and go their separate ways, the words and the acts of Jesus, even the sacrifice He makes, will be nothing more than a memory, a transient, ephemeral memory, soon lost.

They must hold together as one, a community, to preserve the memory of Jesus and to proclaim the Gospel message.

What binds such a community? What is it that holds them together? Every instinct must tell them simply to go home and take up their lives as they had been when they had encountered Jesus, to return to their metaphoric fishing. The powers of fear or the prospects of gain cannot override that instinct – only love can do so.

The bond that united them, and unites us, is love: love for Jesus Christ, and love for one another.

### The Third Sunday of Easter

April 6, 2008 (9:30 a.m.)

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17 1 Peter 1:17-23 Luke 24:13-35

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Years ago – twenty, at least – there was a priest serving the parish of the Church of the Atonement in Augusta whose name was Lou Lindsey.

Lou told the story of being at an ecumenical gathering of clergy – being the only Episcopalian at the gathering at which the topic under discussion was Baptism. Lou said that the minister next to him, whose denomination shall remain nameless, turned to Lou with fire in his eyes and asked, "Do you believe in infant Baptism?" – a question obviously preparatory to a discussion or a lecture. "Believe in it? I've actually seen it done," was Lou's response. Thus endeth the conversation.

Of course we believe in and celebrate infant Baptism. It's surprising, at least to me, that there are those who don't. It must be a matter of perspective, a matter of different ideas.

Which raises the question, just what is happening in Baptism?

Well, going back two thousand years, you will recall that Jesus Himself appeared on the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by

John, not alone to be sure, but as part of a great crowd of people from Jerusalem and Judea, all sorts of people.

John was crying for them all to repent of their sins, to turn their lives around – and it is highly probable that everybody in the crowd needed to do just that – everybody except one, Jesus, the one without sin. Everyone, save Jesus, was reaching out to God for pardon and salvation; Jesus alone realized that God was reaching out to us as vigorously as we reach out to Him.

Baptism, then and now, is a moment of God's reaching into our world, our time and space, acknowledging that each one of us is indeed His child, His son or daughter. If we could see it, we would know that at each Baptism the heavens open, and a dove descends, and a voice says, "This is my child," and an infant is transformed forever.

In the water of Baptism we, no matter our age, are reborn into that relationship given us by God. We make a sign on the forehead, a cross made with holy oil, a mark that signifies, indelibly and eternally, our identity, seen always by the eyes of God.

We welcome the very newest Christian in the world into the Communion of Saints, all Christians past, present and future, inviting the newly Baptized to share in both the wonders and the labors of our faith.

### The Third Sunday of Easter

April 6, 2008 (8 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.)

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17 1 Peter 1:17-23 Luke 24:13-35

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Where do we first encounter Jesus? Think back a bit. It was probably in Sunday school when we were very, very young. It might have been a picture of Jesus, a mimeographed sheet to color and take home, after the teacher had given us the morning's lesson. Or, and this my own personal first encounter, a colorful picture of Jesus that clung, as if by magic, to a flannel board at the First Methodist Church of Irving Park, Chicago. After a flannel board, mimeo sheets were never adequate again. My mind tells me that Jesus was a shepherd at that first encounter, but I may be mistaken.

Of course, whether picture or flannel board, Jesus remained a twodimensional figure. We could learn a lot about Him – what He had said and done – but we couldn't get very close to Him; we couldn't sense His presence.

Now the two sometime Disciples on their way to Emmaus are at the mimeo and flannel board level of faith. They were keenly aware of what Jesus had been doing. Of course they had made their own judgments and interpretations. To them Jesus was a prophet, as they say, like one of the Old Testament prophets that made such penetrating comments upon God and humanity. To them Jesus was

a social reformer, almost a revolutionary, who would correct all the problems of the day. Prophet and social reformer are not necessarily the same as the Divine Son of God, the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world – that part they had missed.

So, not having really seen Jesus when He was in His earthly ministry, it's not a surprise that they don't see Him on the road to Emmaus. They are neither expecting to see Him, nor are they open to see Him – they are utterly self-absorbed in their own interpretation of what has happened.

It is Jesus who joins them. It's Jesus who initiates the contact. It's Jesus who patiently explains to them all that has happened before, down through the centuries, so that they might grasp what God has done. You might say that they encounter Jesus with their minds' images on a flannel board.

They already know a great deal about Him. When do they come to know Him? It's at the table, isn't it? Jesus has reached out to them on the road; they reach out to Him, asking Him to stay with them, still unaware of just who He is but sensing the wonder of His presence.

At the table the knowledge of Him gives way to the personal encounter with Him as He blesses, breaks, and shares the bread that is His body. Had they seen Him do that just a few days earlier at what we call His "Last Supper?" Had they been present or had they been told that Jesus had proclaimed "This is my Body; whenever two or three gather in my name, I will be with them?" Here He is, present at table.

That's how it is, of course. In the midst of our lives, as we are totally absorbed in planning to do something quite different or caught up in the past, we somehow become aware of a presence, a presence we may have consigned to the mimeo and flannel board phase of life, long put aside. The heart knows Him first, feels the warmth of His presence, and then the mind, the understanding.

# Wednesday Homily

April 23, 2008

Acts 15:1-6 John 15:1-8

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Isn't it comforting to hear that all the politics, rule-making, exclusions, and distractions that beset the Church today are nothing new?

Perhaps it's just human nature that when two or three are gathered together they form a club. (Actually, that's sort of a paraphrase.) So, in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we hear about the Circumcision Club. I know scripture calls it a "party," but it's really a club, and it has a very specific rite of initiation. There's no mention of Jesus in that reading, absolutely none.

Which contradicts the Gospel reading from John. According to John the center of the life of any Christian is Jesus.

John writes for Greeks; unlike the concrete thinkers Paul has to deal with, such as the Circumcision Club, Greeks can handle metaphors and abstract thinking, so John can talk about vines and branches and fruit with some assurance they'll get it, just like us.

So, as we all know, God is the Vinedresser, the planner and planter of it all. The Vine that God has planted is Jesus. Now, in the Old Testament The Vine always represents Israel, so, in a way, John is saying that Jesus is the New Israel. Jesus is the center of our existence because we, you and I, are a bunch of little green branches.

Grace and mercy and salvation flow to us by Jesus. By Jesus we are fed and sustained, made strong, so that we can be good branches, do our part, and bear fruit.

What is fruit? Fruit is whatever God says it is: compassion, charity, love, peace, righteousness, all those things and more, things that show that we know that we are (1) the work of the Vinedresser, (2) attached to, and utterly dependent on, the Vine, and (3) just one of many, many branches.

# The Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 4, 2008

Acts 1:6-14
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36
1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11
John 17:1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Friday evening, I suppose around eight, Happy and I walked in the Relay for Life, in the midst of many, many other walkers. We walked the track at the Valdosta Middle School. There came a moment when the sun was setting, the sky in the west turned flaming red, and the sharp light filtered through the rising smoke of cooking fires at the tents set up by churches and businesses and civic groups in the infield of the track, a forest of tents.

A timeless scene: the vision of the nomad tribes, the Israelites, camped on numberless ancient fields; the vision of armies through the centuries on what was once called "the tented field."

Several years ago a book titled *Being Dead is No Excuse* was very popular. Written by two ladies in a small town in Mississippi, it was a comparison of the funeral customs of the local Methodist and Episcopal Churches, very funny and embarrassingly accurate. There are differences in customs and the use of flowers, when, where, and how receptions are to be held, and, particularly, food.

There is a great difference concerning what might be appropriate music at a Methodist funeral as opposed to one at the Episcopal Church – but we all knew that, didn't we? However, there is one point of universal agreement, and that is that "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" is listed as "Nevah again!"

"What on earth brought all that to mind," you may ask. It's the lyrics. It's the words and what they mean, not just in history but here, this weekend. "I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps." It's the presence of God, the omnipotent, omniscient God, present in the hearts and minds of His people, gathered for a great purpose — every great purpose. It's the timeless smoke of fires, warming and sustaining fires, smoke rising like the prayers of the saints in incense hovering over the camps of His servants, reflecting the bright, flaming light of His glory.

Causes may be greatly different. The cause may so often be strife and war for many, many reasons. This weekend the cause has been compassion. Those in the tented field are motivated in many ways – patriotism, anger, pride. This weekend, the motivation was love, love for those who are with us no more, love for those with us who are survivors, and love for all those who may come after us: love that motivates us to find the means to make their lives free of suffering.

What better way to say it than in the concluding words of our hymn, "As He died to make people holy, let us live to make people free."

# The Second Sunday of Pentecost

May 25, 2008

Isaiah 49:8-16a Psalm 131 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 Matthew 6:24-34

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Forrestal Building is a large Federal office building on the Mall in Washington, D.C., a sterile gray concrete and glass creation of the sixties, standing in contrast to the exuberant red sandstone architecture of the Smithsonian Castle just across the street. Looking South from the building, you can see the Capitol; from the top floors of the Forrestal Building, there's a sweeping view of the Potomac. The building housed, some years ago, some of the offices of the Department of the Army.

There was I, a captain, fresh from some years in Europe and a graduate school assignment, walking the corridors of power on my first day ready to report to my new assignment. I was to report to Colonel Snyder.

As I reported to Colonel Snyder my eye was drawn to a framed picture on the wall over the colonel's desk. It was a picture of a dog with his paws over his head; the caption was, "Today is the First Day of the Rest of the Trouble." This did not instill confidence in the new guy.

I now know that it was obviously a paraphrase of this morning's Gospel from Matthew: "Tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." I'm sure that's just what the colonel had in mind. The colonel embodied the antithesis of the other phrase, "Do not worry about tomorrow." He worried.

He was a big man, slightly balding; in memory I see him at his desk, head between his hands, much like the dog in the picture, staring morosely at some paperwork, obviously feeling himself the victim of cruel fate.

We know the colonel, don't we? Sometimes, we are the colonel, aren't we?

It's that two o'clock in the morning, or any time for that matter, playing of the "what if" tapes over and over in our minds. What if this happens; what if it doesn't? Why do we do that? We do it because we have the strange notion that we are in charge. We really feel that we can predict, and therefore control, the future. No, we can't. We don't do all that well controlling the present, much less the future.

Now I'm not saying that it's pointless to plan ahead; we need to do that, or we have perpetual chaos. The trouble arises when planning becomes so rigid that it produces fear and anxiety; then we have a problem. We have to leave room for faith.

"Faith is believing in things not seen." I believe Paul said that, and the future, tomorrow, is certainly something not seen.

Paul also said, "The Lord will bring to light things now hidden." The future, tomorrow, is hidden from us. Paul assures us that not only will Jesus be present with us tomorrow, and in all the days to come, but that He will open our hearts and minds to His presence. We will see His light.

Isaiah assures us that tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow the Lord will never forget us; He has given us comfort and will always give us comfort because He has compassion for us in our human plight.

It's been called "Blessed Assurance." It's real and it is ours. What better news for the future could there be?

# The Fourth Sunday of Pentecost

June 8, 2008

Genesis 12:1-9 Psalm 33:1-12 Romans 4:13-25 Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This Abram in this morning's Old Testament lesson is one of a generation of travelers from Ur in Mesopotamia to Canaan. But the journey has been interrupted; it's incomplete, and now he and his people are settled comfortably in Haran. They've been there a while. Now their leader is dead. Their question is, "Why go on; what's to be gained by going to Canaan; what can we have there that we don't have here?"

Matthew is seated at a table in a comfortable chair viewing the world, viewing life, across stacks of gold and silver coins, the taxed wealth and the taxed poverty of his neighbors. Matthew is feared. Matthew is hated, but Matthew is rich. Why leave this life; what riches might be found that would match what lies before him on that table?

Then comes the voice, the irresistible prompting. In a poem titled "The Explorer," Rudyard Kipling gives us a hint of that voice. He writes,

Till a voice as bad as Conscience, rang interminable changes On one everlasting Whisper day and night repeated – so: "Something hidden. Go and find it." On one level Kipling's poem is about an intrepid Victorian British pioneer going bravely alone into an unknown place of mountains and valleys, impelled by that voice inside him. On another and deeper level that voice is saying, "There is more to life than what is found here, there is something greater, something better; go and find it — it is yours."

That is what God is saying to Abram, isn't it? There is a great new land, a great new life, and it is yours. It is mine to give, and I give it to you. You've come this far on your journey, and I have walked with you. I am not going to abandon you halfway on the road to what you have been promised: land of your own, a great nation, descendants as many as the stars in the sky and the sands in the desert. All those things are yours, waiting for you. Just get up; just go.

That's what Our Lord Jesus Christ is saying to Matthew, the collector of taxes. Jesus is asking Matthew, "Are you truly satisfied with this life of yours? Do you measure your life, your person, by piles of dead, cold silver and gold? Is material wealth all that matters to you, or is there more to you?" Jesus asks if there is not deep inside hard old tax-collecting Matthew a person with a heart, with a spirit, a person who secretly yearns for a world of peace and justice and compassion. If that is so, and Jesus knows that it is, the little voice says, "Get up; follow me!"

It occurs to me that Abram and Matthew could have had a very modern view of life, the life view that extols possessions and position and appearance. We are constantly bombarded by messages that call us to place our attention and our values on what we possess. Abram and Matthew could have judged the world, judged themselves, in those terms of personal comfort and wealth, but they didn't, so how about us in this modern world of ours?

I dare say every one of us lives in the midst of more daily comfort and convenience than Abram ever dreamed of in his tents and mud-walled villages. I dare say we all have a bigger pile of silver and gold than Matthew ever amassed.

I suppose that in the midst of our comfort and plenty we might miss that little voice, that persistent whisper; we might even think that it has fallen silent.

Here follows a short personal story, a reminiscence. If it sounds familiar, it probably should, because I guarantee that others here this morning share this experience.

The first whisper came for me a long, long time ago. It was just a passing thought, an enchantment with the look and the feel and the sound of the Episcopal Church. It was when Happy and I were married; then the demands of life and time reasserted themselves – employment, family, graduate schools, a career as an officer in the Army. Twenty years went by really fast! I never lost contact with the church; the best times were always when we had a church family.

I had an assignment to Headquarters, Department of the Army in the Forrestal Building on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Behind my desk on the top floor was an enormous window through which I could look down the Potomac River to Alexandria, Virginia. There is an Episcopal seminary in Alexandria; the whisper returned. One day I finally called the seminary requesting information; I had them send it to the office, no point in alarming the children.

Almost immediately I received orders to attend Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, which was very, very good for my career. At the time I thought those orders originated from the Army; in retrospect I think it was God whispering, "You're hooked; I shall reel you in presently." I suppose it was the equivalent of Abram making it as far as Haran and receiving further orders.

Reel me in He did! On completing the year of school, I was offered a three-year assignment in Hawaii; we turned it down. We were offered three more years in Europe; we turned it down. We went to Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia; once again, God at work. Finally, taking the hint and listening to the whisper, I simply stopped saying "no."

You realize that you never need actually say "yes" as long as you don't say "no." Once you stop saying "no" it all falls into place; for me it was ordination as a Vocational Deacon, retirement from the Army, seminary, and priesthood.

I suppose I am saying that this is my personal Canaan. I have been on the road to this place, with a few harassments, a few detours and side excursions, far longer than I knew. Kipling's poem closes near the end with "He chose me for His Whisper."

This one response to the unending call of Jesus Christ is "follow me."

# **Vespers Homily**

Fourth Sunday of Pentecost June 8, 2008

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It's just a little synagogue, a small square building of mud and stacked stones. It's a warm afternoon, and the dust particles hang in the still air in the long, slanting, golden rays of the afternoon sun.

Men are seated on long benches around the walls, the best seats and the most important men seated by the Eastern wall. In the center of the Eastern wall are the niches, the tabernacle for the great scrolls of Torah wrapped in purple velvet with silver fringe and scrolls of the writings of the prophets. Not all the prophets: the synagogue is tiny and the scrolls are very expensive.

The western wall is a low wall topped by a lattice screen of wooden branches. It's the space for women and children, boys not yet having Bar Mitzvah, to stand and hear and see without entering the synagogue.

A young boy is squeezed up against the screen watching and listening with awe and fascination as the words and the sights of the synagogue unfold. He's Mattiyahu bar Alphaeus, and he is drawn, so very drawn to God. The world of the synagogue is his world. The Cantor and the Rabbi are his heroes.

So Mattiyahu goes home elated, filled with the sense of his destiny and says to his father, Alphaeus, "Abba – Daddy – I went to synagogue today, and I think I want to be a Rabbi."

Alphaeus drops his bowl and matzoh, looks up to the ceiling and cries, "A Rabbi! A Rabbi! O God, he says he's a Rabbi. After all I have done for him, this is the thanks I get. Never mind that his mother and I have slaved to keep him fed and with clothes and sent him to schul. A Rabbi! Who will care for us as we grow old – a poor Rabbi?" And he tears the edge of his robe and pulls at his beard and cries.

Mattiyahu says, "So maybe not a Rabbi?" Alphaeus, suddenly calm, says "I hoped, your mother and I hoped, we dreamed that you would go into the tax business with Uncle Moyshe, a man of qualities, a man of riches – a man who loves his family, but no, a Rabbi!"

Leaping forward a few years, Mattiyahu, now a young man, is seated one day at a table in Moyshe's Office of Taxation Collection, Inc., the dream of being a Rabbi long past, pressed down. He has accepted a life he did not choose — chosen by another — and with it he has accepted a world of power and influence, a world in which he is estranged from all but a tiny core of like people: the tax collectors, harlots and sinners of other persuasions who form a people apart. That is his world.

But, occasionally, when it's very quiet, a memory of the beauty of that day in the synagogue, of the sound of the Cantor, the pealing of the Holy Words, the rustling of Tallits, the slanting golden rays of sunlight, creeps back into his memory.

So it is on the day that a voice from the sunlit courtyard calls to Mattiyahu, "Follow me."

#### The Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

June 15, 2008

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7) Psalm 116: 1, 10-17 Romans 5:1-8 Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I attended Nashotah House, the Episcopal seminary in southern Wisconsin. The seminary is in a mixed area of very expensive resort property and summer homes on an abundance of very beautiful lakes and farm land, principally in corn. The soil in that area is deep, rich, and black, perfect for farming and for gardens.

Happy and I lived in an old building, built in the 1860s, called The Fort. It was so called because the seminary dean had been the first to live there; when he died, his widow refused to vacate the building. There was a genteel stand-off until the seminary built a second such building a few hundred yards away (just a bit of history).

Next to The Fort was a large field, most of which was leased to a local farmer. The remainder was available to us seminarians to plant gardens, and many of us did so.

As I was saying, the soil and the temperature and the rainfall at Nashotah combine to create really good gardens. The problem is that the growing season, compared to South Georgia, is very, very short. Seeds are planted in late spring, May; by mid-September there might

be the first frost, by mid-October the first snow. However, in the weeks between the gardens grow and grow and grow.

Many seminarians plant gardens, mostly vegetables such as sweet corn, carrots, radishes, beets, beans and tomatoes — lots and lots of tomatoes. Happy and I planted wildflowers, which was, I suppose, rather counter-cultural.

Of course, some of the seminarians traveled during the summer and didn't really tend the gardens they planted; some just lost interest, but most worked at it and made a real harvest. Then, once the season was over, the weeds quickly overwhelmed the area, and the plantings simply disappeared, submerged in the tangle.

I found that to be sad. I think there is a real sadness about gardens that are no longer tended, gardens that have received years of planning and work and love by some one. There is a house on Williams Street that, for many years, had a garden lovingly tended by an elderly man. It was a delight to see the flower beds so cared for. Last year he was gone; I don't know why or where. The flower beds faded away untended; this year they are gone, and a little corner of loving care is gone with them.

The gardens at Nashotah, overrun by a tangle of weeds and no longer cared for, had a special sadness, too. One very crisp and frosty September morning I was feeling that sadness looking at the field when a small spot of color caught my eye. It was bright red. Then I noticed another and another. So I walked over and found, under the weeds, beautiful little tomatoes, survivors.

"The harvest is plentiful; laborers are few," says Jesus to His Disciples. Perhaps that is as true today as ever. This is the age of weeds, all sorts of weeds. Most of the weeds have been growing for a long, long time: weeds such as self-pride and false idols, lots of false idols. There isn't much in the world out there that extols Our Lord's call to love and charity and humility.

And then, of course, we have our divisions and dissensions in the church, weeds of theological controversy that have little to do with His commission to us. It's as though the garden is being overwhelmed while the harvesters stand on the edge of the field arguing the fine points of agriculture.

We've been here before. If the history of the faith tells us anything, it is that the weeds may grow and seem to flourish but that the faith will survive; the faith will survive the weeds of dissension and the frost of neglect, irrepressible and utterly tenacious, waiting to be discovered once again.

#### The Sixth Sunday of Pentecost

June 22, 2008

Genesis 21:8-21 Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17 Romans 6:1b-11 Matthew 10:24-39

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have always supposed that one of the great attractions or selling points of the faith in the very earliest days of Christianity must have been that it had no secrets, nothing arcane or hidden. It was available and accessible to everyone: no secret passwords or handshakes, just one simple story about the love of God and the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ.

Of course, there was a rite of initiation, perhaps not at the very beginning but very early in the life of the Church. Just a few years after the Resurrection, Paul is telling the Christians at Rome that they are "united with Christ in Baptism." Baptism was, and remains, the entry into the family of God, joining with Jesus as God's sons and daughters. That's not too strenuous an initiation, considering what it brings to us.

It brings salvation. To be "united with Christ" means that, just as Christ died to atone for our sins, we, with Him, die to sin; we are washed, cleansed, and born anew. That is the plain fact of the Christian faith.

The wonder of it is that it is a gift to us all. Paul spoke of the love of God in that when we, humanity, were still sinners, Christ made His

sacrifice for us. The sacrifice is unearned; we have nothing so valuable as to be given in exchange for His saving act upon the cross.

It is His gift to us because He loves us; we have value in God's eyes. We fret and fume and worry about the pains and surprises of life, sometimes losing sight of what is truly significant, truly important in life, and that is God's unqualified, inexhaustible love. "Fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows," means that we, created as we are by God, share in His love for His Creation.

That is what we are called to proclaim from the housetops.

That is what we are to proclaim to the world.

Realistically, however, proclamation has pitfalls; be aware that there is a cost; there may be conflict. You and I both know that there are people out there who cannot or will not or simply do not believe what we have to say.

Why?

For some people it's inertia: it's just too much trouble to hear and learn something new. If they believe the proclamation, they might have to make a commitment, and that's just too much bother.

Some people really do prefer a life of sin, strange as it sounds, and cannot imagine changing from the life, shallow and pointless as it may be, that gives ease and pleasure.

Some people just won't believe anything.

Do not be anxious! Your job is to tell the world the Good News of the Gospel message, the salvation of the faithful. God won't leave you out there struggling with the words to say and the courage to say them. His has been, is now, and will be your support and your guide.

### Wednesday Homily

July 2, 2008

Matthew 8: 28-34

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus encounters a man, or two men, possessed by devils in the village of Gesera or Gadara – the problem is, of course, that although this encounter is to be found in all the Gospels, the details are different

Actually, it doesn't really matter: the story is the same. The devils confront Jesus crying, "We know who you are. What are you going to do, torture us?"

Actually, in the original they cry, "What have we to do with each other?" What's ours is ours, and what's yours is yours; we won't bother you, don't you bother us. They are attempting to say that there is some portion of God's creation that is not in His power, that they are equals, in a position to bargain with God.

Of course they've already acknowledged the fact that Jesus can expel them, and He does, sending them into a herd of swine grazing nearby. Now that's a clue that this story takes place somewhere other than Israel, probably across the Sea of Galilee where the population included pagans who could keep the swine forbidden to the Jews.

Pigs are unclean; that's where devils belong.

The possessed pigs run down hill, over a precipice into the sea. They destroy themselves, meaning that evil is self-defeating: ultimately it consumes itself.

All of which tells us that the authority of God is not bound by place or time, that it is universal and sovereign and that it is within the power of Jesus to correct us and to save us.

### **Independence Day**

July 4, 2008

Deuteronomy 10:17-21 Psalm 145 or 145:1-9 Hebrews 11:8-16 Matthew 5:43-48

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Help us, O Lord, to finish the good work begun here." We will pray that together soon; it's one of the prayers set aside for this day. It says two things about us.

First, it says that we, as a nation in this world, are a work in progress; we aren't finished yet. We have come a long way, though, from the days of our formation as a people.

This country was founded in revolution: that's a well-worn phrase. When we hear it, we think of the trials and the heroics of a great struggle with Great Britain, winning our independence. There was another revolution just as, perhaps even more, significant.

The other revolution was in the minds and the hearts of the people. That revolution had to do with the nature of humanity itself. The document on which we rest our identity talked about the right to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." That was itself a revolutionary idea. It elevated humanity; it said that we have choices and decisions to make about the present and the future, that we participate in the decisions that shape our lives and our world. Those very rights have been praised and asserted in other places and at other times, but here, in this nation, they have remained the active center of our understanding of ourselves.

That is the beginning; how are we to finish this work we've been given?

Consider our Baptismal Covenant: we, as a people, acknowledge our belief in and dependence on a higher power, God. Then we make some promises.

We promise that, with the help of God, we will "persevere in resisting evil," and that when we do fall into sin, and you know we will, we will repent and return to God. Nations can sin as well as people, of course, and nations can repent as well.

We promise to "proclaim the good news of God in Christ," a nation demonstrating to the world that it is possible to forgive, possible to make sacrifice for others, possible to live in peace and in harmony, and that all humanity are cherished children of God and have His love.

We promise to "seek and serve all persons," to "love our neighbors." That promise does not concern just the family next door or the people down the block; it means our global neighbors with whom we share this earth, and it calls us actively to seek ways to better their lives, not for our own gain or glory, but for the love of God.

We promise to "strive for justice and peace," and we promise to "respect the dignity of every human being." Every human being! In a world of respect, there can be no have-nots, no impoverished nations, no exploitation, no wars.

Can you visualize such a world, a world in which the agendas of God and Caesar are the same? Can you visualize a nation that truly shines forth the Christ light? Can you visualize it all beginning in such places as this with such people as you and me?

If so, you can visualize the completion of the work we have begun.

### The Eighth Sunday of Pentecost

July 6, 2008

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 Psalm 45:11-18 Romans 7:15-25a Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus speaks of a yoke – what is that? I am sure we've all seen pictures of a yoke, perhaps seen one in person in Colonial Williamsburg or in some other living history display. It's no more than a big piece of wood, a beam shaped to fit across the neck and shoulders of two big draft animals, perhaps oxen. The beam is attached to traces that lead to a plow or a wagon. The entire purpose of the yoke is to allow the two to work and pull together as one. Two pulling together can do far more than one alone.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul has a different sort of yoke. His yoke is not making his life and his work easier; his yoke is a burden. It's as though there were two of him, as though he could look aside and see himself, a very different Paul not working in harmony with him but pulling against him.

Paul really wants to be good. He has encountered Jesus Christ and knows well exactly what he, Paul, should do to follow Our Lord. In fact he is so certain what one must do to follow Jesus that he writes letters telling people about it, laying down the rules to all sorts of little churches. We are still reading those letters several thousand years later.

But then there is the other half of the yoke. There is that part of Paul that does not follow his own advice. As good as Paul would be, the other half thwarts him and does what is evil in his sight; the other half pulls against him. Of course, unless two halves pull together a yoke is useless, nothing is accomplished, and Paul feels that he is getting nowhere.

That's not such an uncommon situation is it? Do we not all know people who seem to betray their own best intentions and defeat themselves again and again? It's not that they don't know what they should or could do. They aren't fools, and Paul is no fool. It's as though, as with Paul, something holds them back. I know there are all sorts of psychiatric explanations for that obstruction, all of which are, I'm sure, valid. I can try to understand them, to help them, to encourage them, try to help them to pull in the right direction, but, in all honesty, I know I can't change them. The question is, who or what can?

So Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you." That's an offer to take up the other half of the yoke and pull with us. Jesus isn't saying that he'll do all the work and pull the load alone. He expects us to do at least fifty percent of the task, but He does offer to lighten the load. His yoke is easy; His burden is light. Our burden is light, whatever that burden might be.

It really comes down to our choice between two options. We can, of course, be like Paul and just bemoan our failures, acting as though we are powerless to do better, or we can listen to Jesus and accept His offer.

### **Vespers Homily**

Ninth Sunday of Pentecost July 13, 2008

Psalm 25:1-10 Luke 10:25-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We've all seen the road in this Gospel story. We've seen it in countless television reports on Israel and the Middle East. It's an asphalt ribbon through a landscape of rocks and barren earth: a treeless landscape on which a few stunted bushes struggle to survive, a landscape without shade.

The road runs down the steep escarpment from the Judean hill country to the valley of the Jordan. The valley is lost in the haze of the heat rising from the road and the rocks, and a shimmering haze obscures and distorts the vision.

The roadside is marked by a metal barrier, guarding against a fall down the steep hillside.

Now close your eyes a moment and visualize that road, not of asphalt but of dirt and pebbles and shattered stones, a road without signs or markers or protection from danger. That's the road in the Gospel story. The heat and the haze and the dust are there as always.

Standing on that road, looking down the sloping track, you can see something lying by the roadside. From that distance it's a pile of clothing; closer, you see that it's a man, severely wounded and unconscious.

In the haze you can just make out two figures farther down the road, separate figures. They must have passed this wounded man a short while ago. Why did they fail to stop and help him?

Now, we know that one of them was a priest of the Temple. If the man were dead, the priest would have required ritual cleansing to return to his work, and that would have been time-consuming. It is, after all, his only source of livelihood; he can't place his job in jeopardy. We know the other was a Levite, a servant in the Temple. He has a very strictly defined, narrow set of duties, and he looks no further. His motto is, "It's not my job."

Lest we be angry with those two, we can add some reasons of our own: What can I do, I'm not a doctor. What if the robbers are still here? I have a very important meeting and simply cannot risk being delayed. I'll call for help. Someone else will take care of it.

Ironically, all those things may be true, but here comes a third man who passes you as you stand on that road. You hear the soft hoof beats of his donkey in the road dust as he brushes past you. He's a Samaritan, a stranger; he makes none of those excuses. He simply sees a person in need and stops and helps.

This life of ours is a sort of road. It may be steep and narrow, and it may run through some very uncomfortable and inhospitable and downright dangerous territory. The future is hard to see, lost in a haze. There are wounded on the roadside.

The ones in need may not be physically injured, but they need us. They need a word or a hand. There are professional voices to say the word of comfort; there are professional hands to lift up the fallen; but, ultimately, it's always one on one, person to person, neighbor to neighbor.

### The Tenth Sunday of Pentecost

July 20, 2008

Genesis 28:10-19a Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23 Romans 8:12-25 Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It has been said that weeds are just perfectly good plants in the wrong place. I strongly suggest that you not repeat that in a gathering of farmers or at a garden center.

From our earthly, human point of view, weeds are just an annoying pain, an intrusion. There is something very satisfying in creating tidy, predictable rows, straight mounds of good rich dirt, in the fields or the gardens we have planted and tended with such care, and then, suddenly, weeds pop up out of nowhere. Weeds simply do not fit into the scheme of things in our world.

Weeds take up space without being productive. They take up water and food. They occupy far more than their share of the farmer's or gardener's time and energy and concern.

That being the case, we farmers and gardeners would say, "Pull it out, get rid of it. Sock it with some Roundup!"

Strange, isn't it, that the gardener in this morning's Gospel doesn't say that at all. He says to let it grow amid the good, productive wheat that he has sown in his field. Leave it alone.

Of course, this gardener is God, and He has a vastly different perspective on things than we have. God has a broader view of things. He also has an infinitely bigger garden. And, of course, He doesn't have to worry about rainfall and sunshine and bugs; He has all that under control.

Personally, I have some difficulty telling the weeds from the stuff I have planted, at least while it's all just a bunch of seedlings. I have probably cut short the productive life of a lot of perfectly good plants. It's really only after they start to look like the picture on the seed packet that I have any real confidence.

Of course the pictures on the seed packets are little masterpieces designed to instill confidence in the heart of the gardener. Some years ago, on I-95 coming into Jacksonville, there was a billboard with a huge picture of a perfect garden, the most perfect garden ever filled with perfect flowers of all varieties, with the motto, "Faith will never die as long as they print seed packets." That is an absolute truth, as long as we interpret faith along with Saint Paul as "belief in things you cannot see."

That's the question: even when we do see the little shoots, how can we really be sure what are weeds and what are, let's say, wheat, except by the fruit they produce? And how can either weeds or wheat produce fruit unless they grow and ripen? And how can they grow and ripen if we tear them up?

If that's true on the relatively tiny scale of our efforts, then it is true in God's fields and gardens, in this world of His creation.

Some of us weeds turned out okay. God, in His infinite wisdom, let us grow up right in the midst of all sorts of wheat, just to see what kind of fruit we might produce. God is very, very patient. He has all eternity to watch over the wheat of His field – and the weeds.

# The Fourteenth Sunday of Pentecost

August 17, 2008

Genesis 45:1-15 Psalm 67 Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A few years ago Happy and I attended a birthday party for one of her three sisters. The party was a surprise. All sorts of people – childhood friends and neighbors from years before were invited. Of course, many of them were people from Happy's past also, and many of them remembered her. Inevitably, there were people who would come up to her and say, "I bet you don't remember me." How true. Of course she didn't. Years had gone by since she had seen them. She had changed, and they had changed. Surely you have been in that same situation; we all have. With any luck they may identify themselves, but not necessarily.

So here's Joseph in Egypt; it's sort of a homecoming party, at least for Joseph. His brothers don't have a clue. Years have gone by. Joseph has changed, really changed. Joseph is an Egyptian, or so it appears. He's in a palace, seated on a chair of gold, fanned by slaves with peacock feathers. He's wearing a sort of crown and lots of gold. He looks good.

Here are his brothers, fresh from the flocks, smelling vaguely like sheep. They are a ragtag bunch in rough clothing, with scraggly beards. They aren't very clean.

Joseph knows who they are. It's probably hard to forget the faces of people who throw you into a pit, then haul you out and sell you to a caravan of slavers. I should think that sort of thing would stay in your mind. Needless to say, the brothers do not recognize Joseph.

In all honesty, what would you do at that moment if you were Joseph? Tempting, isn't it? What a great position to be in; what a great scenario for sweet revenge. Joseph is big: he can have them jailed, made slaves, killed. There was no one to complain about it, no one to criticize him. He has an absolutely free hand.

Joseph doesn't yield to temptation. He has grown up. He has come to realize that who he is, all that he has, all his good fortune is the direct result of the brothers' one act of cruelty, the direct result of the brothers' yielding to just such temptation. Good has come from evil.

Which means, he knows that something far greater than Joseph and his brothers has been at work in the world, that it is God who has taken a hand in the life of Joseph. Joseph's faith in God has never wavered, even in the darkest moments of the pit and the prison. God has led him through those times to the present. Object Lesson Number One is that God can and does cause what we call bad to lead to good: it is one of God's many graces to His people. Object Lesson Number Two is that if God can be so gracious to Joseph, then Joseph must be gracious to others, specifically, at the moment, those scruffy, clueless brothers. He doesn't say, "Bet you don't remember me." He says, "I am Joseph."

Just who or what is Joseph? What is this story really about? Of course he's a character in Genesis, but he really is a universal. Joseph is everyone who has been abused, victimized, injured, or abandoned and has yet not lost faith. There have been, and there are today, countless Josephs.

Saint Paul was a Joseph. In the course of his ministry as a missionary, Paul was beaten, imprisoned, run out of town, all of which without

ever losing faith in the God that had sent him on the road. Strange as it may sound, the woman who confronts Jesus in this morning's Gospel is a Joseph. Faith in the healing power and presence of God brings her into Jesus' presence, and faith gives her the courage, the temerity to stay there in the face of what you and I would call rejection.

The point is, of course, that nobody, absolutely nobody, is forgotten in the sight of God; He does remember us, you and me, even if we haven't talked to Him in years.

### The Sixteenth Sunday of Pentecost

August 31, 2008

Exodus 3:1-15 Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c Romans 12:9-21 Matthew 16:21-28

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Have you ever wondered about Satan – who or what is Satan? We all have. Personally, I can't really accept the classic picture of a figure with horns, a pointy tail, a red suit, and a pitchfork. I mean, that's certainly colorful and unforgettable, really alien and other.

We like to think of Satan as other, something apart from us and unlike us. However, the word is Hebrew and Arabic (in other words, Semitic), and it simply means adversary – one who asks questions. Who asks us the most questions, after our children of course? The answer is, we do. We are constantly running tapes that start with "what if, should I, if only I had," all those little voices that follow us around all the time. Call it what you will – introspection, self-doubt, insecurity, obsessive behavior – it's lots of questions.

Now, in this morning's Gospel we have Jesus rebuking Simon Peter, saying, "Get behind me Satan!" Actually Jesus is saying, "Leave me!" Why? Because Peter has said, "No: God forbid that you should undergo suffering at the hands of the priests and scribes; God forbid that you should be killed."

Let's go back a few years in the Gospel. Jesus has been baptized by John in the Jordan and designated to be Son of God. He's gone to the wilderness. Why? Perhaps to try to understand what has happened; perhaps to try to prepare himself for what such an identity must demand. He's alone in the wilderness when Satan appears. Satan says, "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." Jesus is hungry, he must be hungry; he has been in the wilderness for many days. The hunger gnaws at him. Satan is really saying, "Do you really have to be hungry? You do realize that it's unnecessary, don't you?"

Jesus is alone in the wilderness. He must be lonely; he is human, after all. Satan offers company past anyone's wildest dreams. All the kingdoms of the world, all of humanity, will be with Jesus. Wouldn't that be nice? You need not be alone, you know; you need not spend this time in the wilderness all by yourself.

And then Satan touches on Jesus' and our greatest vulnerability.

What if it's not true? What if it's all an illusion, a dream, and God really isn't there to support and uplift him? What if he embarks on his earthly ministry and it all falls flat, and he's rejected? All that must have gone through the mind of Jesus at some point. Satan suggests, why not test it? Why not place yourself in danger and see what God does? Why not test your faith in God and God's faith in you?

Jesus rejects Satan and drives him away, until, as the Gospel tells us, "an appropriate time." Now he's back and he has another question. Through dear, impulsive Peter, Satan asks, "Why? Why should you suffer and die? Why should you go through these things if, as you say, you will be raised? What's the point?"

The point, and it is surely lost on Satan, is faith. Jesus has perfect faith that God loves the world so much that he would give his Son, his own life, for his creation, an atoning sacrifice for all. Jesus calls his disciples and calls you and me and all the world, to such a faith.

He tells us all that if we would save our lives, if we withhold from God our utter faith in that love and care, we will lose everything. If we emulate Jesus and give what we can offer, however great or small that may be, give it in faith, we have salvation.

That is, actually, a choice we have to make and it is our choice. Years ago a comedian named Flip Wilson created a character named Geraldine, one rowdy individual, whose mantra was "The devil made me do it." The devil can't make us do anything. The devil, Satan, relies on our cooperation, which means, he relies on our paying heed to those voices of doubt.

#### The Seventeenth Sunday of Pentecost

September 7, 2008

Exodus 12:1-14 Psalm 149 Romans 13:8-14 Matthew 18:15-20

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As you know, I'm sure our Bishop plans to retire in a year or so, whenever his successor is named and consecrated. So a process has begun to elect that successor. That is one big job! Several committees have been appointed to assess the needs of the diocese and the vision of the diocese as to what that next bishop should be, to supervise nominations and the election, and plan the transition to the new bishop. Our own Walter Hobgood has been tasked with conducting the assessment process: a truly massive task.

Thus far he has conducted "town meetings" for lay people and clergy at a number of places around the diocese, meetings open to everyone. I attended a meeting for clergy; it was very interesting. You may actually have noted that we clergy are a diverse, perhaps eclectic lot, and, if you believe what is written about us, we might even be fractious. Perhaps this diocese is unusual – of course it is! – but fractious the meeting was not. There were many ideas expressed, but all were given credence and respect.

Now, I must say that if all the qualities that were asked for in the next bishop were really fulfilled, we have no need for an election process. He will come again in the manner in which we saw Him depart. However the assessment of what the diocese, let's say the Church, is and what we would want it to be spurred my thoughts. This morning's readings, by a strange coincidence, are really appropriate.

What would you say is the center, the glue that holds together the worship community in the Old Testament readings? The psalmist makes it very clear that the bond is the statutes, the commandments, the decrees. The reading from Exodus is a wonderful example of those decrees. It outlines in detail exactly what must be done by all the members of the community, first at the Passover and then down though all the succeeding generations. The identity of the nation is found in the memorial of that act, and that is fine. There's room for that; there is a great need for traditions that speak to God's saving acts for His people.

But then hear the words of Paul in his letter: "Love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." "Love your neighbor as yourself... love is the fulfilling of the law." That has a very different sound, doesn't it? It brings the statutes, commandments, and decrees up close and personal. What Paul says is that the worship community rests upon the love and compassion and sacrifice of one member for another, in emulation of Christ Himself. Without that sense of love the community may crumble. Is that not what Jesus speaks of in telling His followers how to resolve problems among them? He admonishes them to strive for reconciliation and understanding; division is not to taken lightly or effected in haste, because what we do is for eternity.

What then is the central point, the bond, the glue of a Christian church? It is love, and we cannot be together in Jesus' name without love. When the church, large or small, has love, He promises He will be there.

Now what was apparent at the clergy meeting was that both the traditions of the commandments and our faith history, without which we are lost, or worse, reinventing ourselves again and again, are to be honored, and the overwhelming need for love and compassion, the love and compassion that has been and is the great characteristic of our church, will carry this diocese through.

#### The Twentieth Sunday of Pentecost

September 28, 2008

Exodus 17:1-7 Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16 Philippians 2:1-13 Matthew 21:23-32

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Happy and I have two sons, Bill and Steve. Bill is the older son; he was with us in Valdosta for about a year. He is an artist. He has a real touch for portraiture and has long experience in computer graphics. He is also a trained, certified sushi chef, speaks Japanese, and now teaches English at a high school in Wakayama, Japan.

Steve is a few years younger. He has degrees in philosophy and library science from William and Mary, Indiana University, and the University of Tennessee. He taught philosophy at Indiana University, was at Marymount College, and now is with the library system in Falls Church, Virginia.

Can you detect a difference in their personalities? It was ever so. Bill has always been the mercurial, emotional artist; Steve, the calm, reflective, detached philosopher.

When they were small, we would say, with good reason I might add, "Please clean up your room." Bill, the artist, would go ballistic. He would sputter and fume and then go and clean up his room. Steve would say "OK" and go straight to his room. Perhaps an hour later, noticing that we had neither seen nor heard Steve for some time, we

might peek in to see how he was doing. We would find him sitting in his room, happily playing in the midst of chaos.

Reflecting on that, and on today's reading from the Gospel, it occurs to me that there really are only four possible responses open when we are given a task or a mission.

One is to say "no" and actually not do whatever we are asked to do. That certainly makes it all very simple: annoying, but simple. In a way, I suppose, it's also quite honest. It does put false expectations in their place.

Then, of course, we can also say "yes" and not do it, like the one son in the gospel. At the very least, that's polite. If something is so important to a person that they would ask us to do it, who are we to hurt their feelings by failing to agree with them? We really do think that way, don't we? Apparently, so did the son in the reading. Happily, there is always the possibility that the one who asks may forget all about it.

Or, we can say "no" and do what is asked, like the other son; we all do that sometimes too. We do that when that annoying little voice we call a conscience nags us into admitting that yes, we can do something, and yes, we do have the time, and yes, we do see that you need help, and yes and yes and yes. Never underestimate the power of guilt. The value of it all is that, first, the task gets done, and, second, the one who asks has a happy surprise.

Does that all strike you as needlessly complicated — would it not be better, and far simpler, to say "yes" and get on with it? That's the WWJD thing. Surely you remember when "WWJD, what would Jesus do?" bracelets were everywhere. Personally, I rather liked a cartoon of Jesus wearing a WWID bracelet.

What Jesus would do, and did, was to say "yes" and fulfill the task without reservations. He did as the Father said and therein hangs our

salvation. Therein also hangs our calling as children of God. Ultimately, I really doubt that anyone gets away with saying "no" to God, and I think that God knows perfectly well when our "yes" is not sincere.

So I think the point is that when Our Father calls upon us to clean up our room, and this world is our room, and our lives are our room, He can handle the sputtering and fuming. He can wait while we finish playing in midst of the clutter we've created, but the room will be cleaned.

# The Twenty-Third Sunday of Pentecost

October 19, 2008

Exodus 33:12-23
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Occasionally we watch news programs on cable television. I am struck by the fact that, on what is supposed to be a programming presenting information, a group of people can spend a full thirty minutes shouting and interrupting each other. Nobody is listening. We have slipped into the age of polarization.

At some point in the past few years we seem to have lost the art of intelligent and informative conversation and discussion. We have lost the art of persuasion, lost the middle ground of reason. There used to be something called, in philosophical terms, the "Hegelian Dialectic." The dialectic was very simply that if you have an idea, a thesis, and I disagree, I have an antithesis. We can, through reasoned discussion come upon a new idea called a synthesis. Obviously, the process actually implies thought, and we seem to have lost that. The mantra for our time would be "I have an opinion; don't annoy me with yours."

The next step after polarization, and we have already slipped into it, is demonization. Demonization occurs when the person who disagrees with us is not only wrong: he or she is evil. We must not listen to evil people – hence the shouting and interrupting.

The frightening fact is that all this is infectious. It really concerns me that I can sit in my own chair, in my own home, watching my own TV, and feel compelled to answer those people, to shout back. Of course my repartee is on a much higher level, but it's still shouting.

What, you may ask, has all this to do with today's readings? It's this: Jesus is in the midst of a very polarized crowd.

On the one hand, the Herodians, the ones who asked the question about taxes in the first place, are collaborationists, supporters of Herod, the puppet king of Judea, and, therefore supporters of the Roman occupation. The Herodians are doing very nicely under the Roman authorities; they have no problem with taxation. They always receive far more than they give. Caesar can be very generous with his friends.

On the other hand, there is the crowd, the people of the streets, who don't receive much, if anything, for what they pay in taxes. They carry the burden without the benefits. They see the fruit of their labor disappear into the hands of the Romans and, of course, the Herodians. Religious scruples aside, they have every reason to oppose taxation.

Here is Jesus standing between these two polarized factions. If He answers, "Yes, pay taxes to Caesar," the crowd will be very ugly toward Him; if He says, "No, do not pay taxes to Caesar," He is speaking as a revolutionary and precipitating a rebellion. One glance at the armed might of the Roman army says what the chances of success would be. The cost in lives and property would be dreadful.

Jesus answers neither, or both.

Jesus has no money of His own; He must ask for a coin, and He receives a Roman coin bearing the image of Caesar. He asks, "Whose image is this?" Someone raises his hand and says, "I know; it's Caesar" – the obvious answer, and it's the wrong answer.

In the world of Jesus there is no division between the secular and the sacred. God is sovereign in all things: all power and authority to rule

is from God, including that of Caesar. The image on the coin is not simply that of whoever might be Caesar at the moment: it is of God because we are all made in the image of God, including Caesar. The Caesars of this world have their brief hour, and then they are gone, transients in history; only God is eternal. God's image is stamped upon the world of His creation, upon a Roman coin and upon us all.

Jesus sees beyond that polarized moment, beyond Herodians, Romans, and the disadvantaged. Jesus sees the presence of God in all His creation, in all humankind. Jesus knows that polarized moments do not last forever. Jesus knows that the message of the Gospel is not to be appropriated and used to promote, or to serve as an excuse for, anger, conflict, and division by anyone.

The faith of Jesus is true faith: faith in the long-term presence and love of God that transcends polarizations and divisions of the moment. Jesus' faith is in the inexorable, inevitable progress of God's plan for the salvation of the world, a plan that is far greater than all the apparent, momentary failures and crises of time and people.

But we left Jesus standing holding a Roman coin. What about that coin? You recall, I am sure, that somewhere around Matthew, Chapter 6, Jesus talks about coins, saying, "You cannot serve two masters; you cannot serve God and Mammon." The coin is a little piece of Mammon. Jesus holds up that little piece of Mammon for all to see, Herodians and the crowd, and, predictably, all eyes are riveted to that little coin. Jesus is standing between Herodians who have lots of Mammon and the crowd who have none, and He knows that Mammon is master of them both, one for the love of it and one for the desire for it.

Jesus knows, and you and I know, that Mammon, money, cannot be master. Money is a tool in our hands, a tool to be used. Our task is to use it wisely. If we do use it wisely and properly in the service of others, it is being used in the service of God and to His greater glory.

### **Vespers Homily**

#### Twenty-Fourth Sunday of Pentecost October 26, 2008

Matthew 22:34-46

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Some years ago I retired from the Army. A friend with whom I had served for years suggested, as we were all retiring at roughly the same time, that we keep in touch.

It began; it started with the idea of a newsletter. That led, of course, to the need for an editor. How will we cover the costs? Send money, of course, which led to accountability, which led to a treasurer.

If you have a treasurer, you have an organization; that means incorporation with elected officers and regional representatives and big annual meetings to pass more bylaws to govern the corporation. It is huge!

We seem to have a need to make complexity out of the most simple and obvious ideas.

Consider Saint Francis, the world's most popular saint. Jesus spoke to him and gave him a vision. The vision was utter simplicity and complete poverty. Even during his lifetime his followers were passing rules and amassing property and becoming a highly organized society.

What do you suppose Francis heard Jesus say? We just heard it in the Gospel.

I think he asked Jesus, "What am I to do for you?" I think Jesus replied, "Francis, love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." That's not a theoretical, theological statement: that's a call to action, to live a life that reflects the love of Jesus to all.

Ancient Israel managed to surround those commandments with many, many more, so many that it was quite possible to lose sight of that one great, central commandment to love. They made it all very complex.

The Franciscans created a great world organization that broke the heart of the simple Francis who longed for the pure love of his beginnings.

A church, be it small or a grand cathedral, without the foundation of love is just a building. A Christian without love simply cannot be.

### The Twenty-Seventh Sunday of Pentecost

November 16, 2008

Judges 4:1-7 Psalm 123 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Matthew 25:14-30

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This morning's reading from Judges sort of leaves us hanging, doesn't it? I read it and thought, "Wow, let's see how God is going to smite Sisera and all his army." So, assuming that the story would continue, I looked at next week's Old Testament reading, and it won't be from Judges at all; it will be Ezekiel, and it's something about sheep.

This sent me straightway to read Judges, specifically Chapter 4, to finish the story. Have you read it? It's awful.

The short version is that there is a huge battle. God, through the army of Israel, triumphs over Sisera and his army of iron chariots, a real upset, and Israel's enemies are routed, and they all run away.

Apparently in the area of the great battle, a small tribe or family of nomads, Kenites, are camping. One of them, a woman named Jael, happens to look out the door of the tent and sees Sisera running for his life. She tells him, "Come in here and you will be safe." Jael tells lies. Once Sisera is inside, hiding under a rug, Jael dispatches him with a tent peg. I will spare you the details. Suffice it to say, so much for hospitality, compassion, and honesty.

Why, we may ask, is this story in the Bible? What has it to do with the Gospel reading about coins and servants? Having pondered that, I concluded that the connection has to do with opportunities. The question is, "What do we do with the opportunities God gives us?"

Appalling as it may seem God gave Jael an opportunity to strike a blow, literally, for the liberation of His people from oppression. Appalling as it may seem, she took it.

That's not unlike the good and faithful servant in the Gospel, the one who is given five talents and actually uses them to his master's benefit. The servant saw an opportunity to serve and benefit his master, and he made the best of it. He used what he had been given to do what he knew his master would wish to have done. Perhaps he took a risk at seizing that opportunity; nothing is accomplished if opportunities are not taken.

A story: A few weeks ago I came to the church on Saturday morning to set up for a Confirmation class. I suppose it was just before 8 a.m. On the walkway just outside the nursery windows was what appeared to be a pile of clothing, just lying there. I walked over and realized that it was two women sleeping under a pile of clothing. They woke up as I was standing there. The one on the left was Liz, probably in her early twenties, a runaway from a rehab center in Lake Park. The woman on the right was Darla, a much older wanderer, on her way south, weather-beaten. They had no idea where they were, but they said, "We saw the name Christ, and we knew we would be safe." Liz had only her clothing and book, a volume of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. Darla was equipped for the road with a backpack, a Bible, and a stuffed animal.

We could have said "On your way." We could have run them off to somewhere. We could have buried the opportunity to serve God by serving his poor lost sheep, but we didn't. We invited them to breakfast.

We found Liz's rehab center; they were relieved to learn that she was safe. They came for her. We hoped that Darla might go with her, but she was back the next day, Sunday morning, sleeping on the porch of Miller House. Perhaps you saw her that day; much of the parish did. Nobody took offense or fright at her presence; nobody told her to leave. On the contrary, people brought her breakfast and coffee, and lunch and blankets and a jacket; people listened to her story with respect and compassion, and, finally, people of Christ Church bought her ticket to her destination in Florida.

That is a real-life opportunity, a God-given opportunity to show the love and concern and compassion that every Christian is called to. We could have done nothing, burying that opportunity, and failed our Master, but Christ Church chose to use the opportunity.

I do believe God would say, "Well done, good and faithful servants."

# The Last Sunday of Pentecost — Christ the King

November 23, 2008

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 Psalm 100 Ephesians 1:15-23 Matthew 25:31-46

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We have a promise, a divine promise, you and I, that God will call us, His people, to the "glorious inheritance among His saints." So says Paul in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus. His words echo the even more ancient promise made by Ezekiel, the promise that God will search us out from all the places we have strayed—that doesn't mean geographically – gather us, feed us and lead us to shelter and to rest. That is a very nice promise.

Of course, being biblical, both Ezekiel and Paul put the promise in terms of sheep, a very common sight in their world. The people of their audience lived in the midst of flocks of sheep, sheep everywhere, and they knew that those sheep had a few common characteristics. One characteristic was passivity: as long as the grass grew green, life was fine. Another characteristic was that they were easily led; they were born followers. It took very little persuasion to move the entire flock to green pastures or to disaster. Any leader would do.

So Paul and Ezekiel talk about leaders, shepherds. Ezekiel speaks of David; Paul speaks of Jesus; one shepherd, placed by God over

all His flock, one compassionate, loving shepherd to lead all those wandering sheep – read "people" – to safety and security. That's the point of the Gospel isn't it, the point of every Gospel reading? It speaks of compassion and care and love, the love of God for His people.

This morning's Gospel is the final reading for this year. Next Sunday our church calendar begins a new year with the season of Advent, a new season of preparation for the Feast of the Incarnation, Christmas, and all that that great breaking into history brings. This Sunday we receive the promise, but we also receive a job. We are working sheep, strange as that may sound. We are sought out and brought in to be God's special flock, led by our shepherd, Jesus Christ, to do His will, to be His hands and eyes and voice in this huge pasture of ours.

Which means it is our task to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick, and to visit the prisoner. That's what it means to follow Jesus. You will remember that Jesus asked Peter no less than three times "Simon, do you love me?" Presiding Bishop Allen, a few Presiding Bishops ago, always said that that was the final exam for all Christians, for us all, and that in saying "Yes, Lord," we take upon ourselves the work given by Jesus, "Feed my sheep."

#### The Third Sunday of Advent

December 14, 2008

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 Psalm 126 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 John 1:6-8, 19-28

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If I mention John the Baptist, what image comes instantly to mind? It's the man in the camel hair and leather, isn't it, the intense, unkempt loner out there in the wilderness, sort of loud and wild-eyed, perhaps from too much wild honey in his diet, haranguing the crowd out by the waters of the Jordan.

That's the Synoptic John, the John of Matthew, Mark and Luke. They load the Gospel with details so that you and I can place John in time and place. Obviously, John is a prophet in the best tradition of the Old Testament; in fact John is the great prophet, Elijah, the one who immediately precedes the Messiah. It's all there in the Book of Kings and Malachi. In the synoptics John is given credentials, and those credentials give John credibility.

This morning's Gospel is the Gospel of John. In this Gospel John the Baptist has no need of credentials, no need of being placed in time, no need to be seen as an Elijah. In John's Gospel John the Baptist is present for only one thing: the message he proclaims, the presence of the Messiah.

Notice how impatient John becomes with the questions about who he might be, as they try to place him in their frame of reference. "Are you the Messiah, they ask?" He replies "No, I am not the Christ." Are you Elijah?" John answers, tersely "No, I am not." "Are you a prophet, they ask?" The answer is a loud, resounding, impatient "No!" John is saying stop trying to say who I am, I am not important, listen to what I am saying! You no longer have time to muddle your heads about Elijahs and prophets. Time has passed you by while you were engaged in endless, pointless, imponderable discussions. The Messiah is not coming: the Messiah is here! The Messiah, the Christ, is standing among you, and you do not recognize Him.

Actually, here's a good question for Advent, or for any time. "How would you recognize the Messiah, the Christ? How would you know Him to be present?"

One very attractive pitfall is to try to place the Christ in a context, just like those who fretted about who John the Baptist might be. It's tempting to see Him in the flowing white robes and the sandals of several millennia ago, an historical anachronism in our twenty-first century culture, not unlike Elijah in the world of John the Baptist.

We would have no difficulty in seeing Him in the crowd. We would have no trouble putting Him into a context. We would see Him; would we hear Him? Would we be so caught up in who He is that we would miss why He is here? It happens.

Personally, I think the Christ would say to the world, "Never mind who I am, listen to what I say."

#### Wednesday Homily

December 17, 2008

Matthew 11:1-17

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Are you the one or should we look for another?" Even at this point is it possible that John has doubt about Jesus? He has seemed so sure that this man is "The Lamb of God, who will take away the sin of the world." The Lamb of God, God's anointed one, the Messiah.

If John has doubts, what would he need to convince him? Words won't do it. John, and the people of Israel, have heard all there is to hear of promises, promises broken time after time. Centuries of "yes" that really meant "no."

Jesus does not say yes or no; as Jesus tells John's disciples, "Look around you, see what is happening. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame dance, and the mute can sing. Does that mean anything to you?"

It's from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah speaks of restoration, restoration of the people of Israel after a long, long period of physical exile, captives in the land of Babylon. There will come a day when that exile will be over, the people restored to Zion, their spiritual home. It has been a long, long time. There will come a time when sadness will turn to joy, and the very earth will rejoice, flowers blossoming in the hard rock of the desert.

In Jesus' time the people of Israel were exiled once again: a spiritual exile, not in Babylon but in their own land, captives of a faith that had become dry routine, estranged from the immediacy of God. John, and others, look with longing for a second restoration, a second return to their ancient relationship with God. They look with longing for a Messiah, an anointed one of God, to lead them, not through a physical wilderness of rock and sand, but through a spiritual wilderness of dull, dead religious routine, to restore them to the joyous faith of a people and a world made young again. They look for a blossoming in the desert that is their hearts.

The signs are there; Jesus invites John, and others, and you and me, to draw their own conclusions.

#### **Christmas**

December 25, 2008

Isaiah 9: 2-7 Psalm 97 Titus 2: 11-14 Luke 2: 1-14

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On crisp, clear nights there is a deep blackness to the sky; stars shine in their thousands, a myriad of points of light. The dazzling Milky Way splits the sky, and the stars are so many and so bright that they seem close, so close that they press down upon us.

Then you are under the real night sky, the ancient sky of the night not compromised by the lights we have created. That is the sky of the shepherds in tonight's Gospel: shepherds, tending their flocks by night, gazing up at the slow, nightly progression of the stars in the constellations, marking the passage of time and seasons, marking the passage of their lives by the sky. It had always been so; it would always be so.

What, then, if that predictable, familiar star-filled sky had been suddenly eclipsed by a brighter light, a brilliant light, the light of the presence of a glittering, glistening angel, filling the sky and proclaiming the birth of a babe who would be the Savior and Deliverer of all the world?

What, then, if that angel had been suddenly joined by a vast host of angels, a heavenly choir filling the sky, singing "Glory to God"?

How easy it is to put this story of miraculous Incarnation into the past tense, to see the birth of Our Lord as an event of long, long ago and far, far away, another time and another place. How easy it is in this noisy, absorbing, artificial light-filled world of ours to fail to see that above and beyond our knowing and our seeing, the stars still shine as brightly as they did for shepherds on Judean hillsides and the angels sing as sweetly now, for us, as they did then.

The glory of Christmas is that the light and song have never been lost, never overcome, in the midst of tinsel, giant inflatable decorations, and miles and miles of pretty paper and ribbons. It's the simplicity of it, the simplicity of the meaning of the day: it means that love is triumphant over all, the love of God for us, His children, that transcends all time. How can we conceive of such a love, find words to express what that love means for every one of us; how can we comprehend a love so great that the Creator of all things would become one of the most helpless of us?

It's in the assurance of the lights in the heavens; it's in the song, the angels' song, sung to shepherds, sung to us:

O ye beneath life's crushing load, Whose forms are bending low, Who toil along the climbing way With painful steps and slow; Look now, for glad and golden hours Come swiftly on the wing; Oh rest beside the weary road And hear the angels sing.

## The First Sunday of Epiphany

January 11, 2009

Genesis 1:1-5 Psalm 29 Acts 19:1-7 Mark 1:4-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

#### "WHAT DID JESUS KNOW AND WHEN DID HE KNOW IT?"

I must confess that I have long puzzled over the point in this morning's gospel, the question being: why was Jesus baptized by John? I hasten to say that I don't question that it happened. All four gospels agree on that point and that isn't always the case, but I do wonder why.

I wonder why because the whole basis of John's baptism, what John called the people to do, was repentance: straighten out your life, turn it all around, beg pardon for your sins, get right with God.

The puzzle for me is this: if Jesus is the Son of God, one in the three of the Holy Trinity, if Jesus is divine, of what must He repent? It would seem that He would have no cause to straighten out His life or turn anything around; He is sinless; He is right with God. Why, then, is He at the Jordan that particular day?

Do you think that the Jesus at the Jordan knew, really knew Himself to be The Son of God? What do we know of the life He had led up to that moment? The Gospels are almost silent on His childhood and youth, the first thirty years of His life. Perhaps we should assume that they were the usual years of a normal childhood of a Jewish boy of

that age, growing up in the house of his parents, Mary and Joseph – going to Shul in his village, learning a trade, nothing remarkable.

There is one story concerning a journey to Jerusalem, to the Temple, when Jesus is a young teen. Jesus is left behind when Mary and Joseph depart the city, sought for and found in the Temple with teachers who are impressed by His maturity and wisdom. When confronted by his parents, Jesus replies that He has been in "his father's house." Much has been made of that brief statement, asserting it to show that Jesus knew Himself to be "The Son of God."

On the other hand that would be the reply of any good Jewish boy. The Temple is the spiritual home of every Jew, and God is the spiritual Father of them all. It does not necessarily mean that He knows His special relationship to The Father.

Paul, writing to the Christians at Philippi says that God "emptied Himself," better translated as "stripped off," His divinity to be one of us, fully human but yet divine, a God who is fully human, while divine. He was born an infant who must learn all things. Perhaps His childhood is the simple story of learning, slowly and sequentially, who He is and what His calling is in this world. That, too, is what it means to be human.

Perhaps the clues of His divinity slowly clarified a growing conviction of His special nature. As children we have to learn many things: not just how to walk and talk and read and write. We learn compassion, how to live in the company of others; we learn to be loved and to love.

Perhaps, like us, He had doubts. To be human, and Jesus was fully human, is to doubt. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane He doubts, even on the cross, He doubts. But the doubts never overcame His growing understanding of His identity as a beloved child of God.

Perhaps the conviction led Him to the Jordan and to the thunderous confirmation that He is the Son in whom the Father is well-pleased.

#### The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

February 1, 2009

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 Psalm 111 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Mark 1:21-28

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The synagogue is still there, or so it is supposed. Capernaum and all that it contained is gone now. But the ruins are there at a place called *Tel Hum* in Arabic or *Tal Nahum* in Hebrew on the shore in the far northwest of the Sea of Galilee. There are two ruins that would be pointed out to you if you traveled there: one would be the stone foundation of a building known as the house of the Apostle Peter; the other is the synagogue.

Of course, it has been changed over time. At some point columns of an ornate style were added as an improvement. They still stand at one side of the roofless ruins. Looking beyond them, looking beyond the centuries of change, you can see the foundation wall of the synagogue, perhaps the very one that Jesus knew, solid stone walls three feet thick.

The synagogue He knew was a substantial building in a substantial village. Try to see it in your mind; take a seat on one of the benches against the stone wall. The air is heavy with the dust of years of use: the light is from small windows set high in the wall, long slanting rays filled with the mist of that dust. You can hear the muffled sounds of the activity of the village beyond the thick walls. And it's warm,

comfortably warm, and you feel comfortable in such a familiar place with all your fellow villagers – and you feel a little sleepy.

Today there's a guest speaker, Mary and Joseph's boy, Jesus from Nazareth; apparently he's relocated, new in town. Of course the Rabbi has to ask him to read and say something about the reading, that's the custom, but it's usually pretty bad, long expositions of the same things, over and over. Everything there is to say has been said before. The Scribes have said it all; Torah is a closed book. Just settle back and let the nice, comfortable sense of predictable comfort lull you. It can't last all that long.

Today is different from all others. This Jesus speaks with authority, a new teaching filled with power, personal, immediate. This Jesus breaks the tradition of the Scribes, a tradition that one commentary calls "the prison house of quotation marks," and speaks with personal conviction.

It's astonishing. You are astonished; everyone is astonished.

So, the question arises: what has happened over these past several thousand years? Why do we, as Christians not astonish the world with this message? Have we ourselves ceased to be astonished? Have we placed this new message, this Gospel message from Jesus in "quotation marks"? Do we really understand what Jesus tells us?

Perhaps we just get it all out of the proper order, the proper sequence. Do you see what happens in that synagogue? First, it's his teaching, the powerful, personal, experiential sharing of the Gospel, and all that it implies for us all. What does it imply: that faith begins with a passive, receptive understanding that we are God's children in every sense, that the key to our Christian faith is not first that we love, but that we know we are loved?

Then, comes the healing, the driving away of demons, the act of giving witness to that love. It follows, must follow, that teaching so that any lingering "quotation marks" are erased.

The problem is that we leap right to the action and fail to take the time to savor Jesus' teaching; we push right on, with the very best of intentions. Lest you think I just said that we don't have to do anything with our faith, wrong: we are called to service, service of God in this world at this time, but, if we do not take the time to be filled with God's loving presence, to really know His love, how can we possibly tell others about it? If we do not live with immediacy of God in our lives, how can we represent Him to the world?

It's all here for us; Jesus' teaching did not end that day in Capernaum. He is still teaching us today, calling us to listen, astonishing us with the experience of God, then sending us out to grapple with the demons of this world.

#### Ash Wednesday

February 25, 2009

Joel 2:1-2,12-17 Psalm 103 or 103:8-14 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 Matthew 6:1-6.16-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Each year churches receive a free liturgical calendar from The Church Pension Fund. The top of the calendar is always a cartoon, usually very pointed and accurate about the life of the church. This month, February, the cartoon is of a priest imposing ashes on a parishioner kneeling at the rail; the priest is saying, "Remember you are dust, but a very high quality sort of dust." The caption says it's for those who feel that Lent is a "downer."

We are dust, you and I. The second story of The Creation in the Book of Genesis tells us that God reached down and scooped up a handful of dust, earth, and shaped and molded us; we are one with the earth itself, made of the same stuff. The name of our mutual ancestor is "Adam"; in Hebrew it means "earth."

But we are not just earth or dust; we are not inert and lifeless. The God who shaped us and molded us breathed life into us, into His creation, and we became complete, we became living beings formed in the image of God, a mortal body of clay inspired, in the best sense of the word, by the creative breath of God.

We are God's children. You and I were proclaimed to be God's children at our baptism. We were baptized in water; we were sealed by the Holy Spirit; the sign of the cross was made on our foreheads in holy oil, the sign of our identity.

The mark of the oil faded quickly, but the sign of the cross remained, indelible. We trace that sign again in Holy Unction when you are sick; we trace it again when you die.

On this day we trace that sign, not in Holy Oil, but in ashes. The ashes are made from the palm branches that we waved last Palm Sunday as we proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. The ashes this day tell the world that we are Christians; more importantly, they remind us of our identity and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We bear that sign proudly but not pridefully: there is a difference.

We proclaim our identity in profound humility, penitent, that we know we have not always lived up to our identity this past year, that we have not been what God wants us to be, that we separated ourselves from God. With this reminder we begin the forty days of Lent, days of reflection, meditation, and self-examination. Lent is the season in which you and I commit ourselves to amendment of our lives. That's not a downer: that's a gift from God.

And it's true: we are a high quality sort of dust.

### The Second Sunday of Lent

March 8, 2009

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Psalm 22:22-30 Romans 4:13-25 Mark 8:31-38

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God makes a covenant with Abram – actually, God makes many covenants with him, all of which involve two promises. First, Abram will be the father of many nations; his descendants shall be as many as the stars in the sky or the grains of sand in the desert. Second, Abram and all his descendants will possess the land, Canaan, or we should say Israel, forever: the covenant is made with all generations to come, forever.

The language is interesting. God simply says I will do this for you, and you will worship me. It's not conditional; the word "if" isn't there. Abram's descendants added the word "if" when they constructed the Law, an enormous body of rules and practices for the people of Israel, rules and practices to be scrupulously followed because, if not, God would cancel the entire covenant. That's not a covenant; it's a contract. God does not say to Abram, if you do such and such, then I will do such and such.

What, then, is the response to God's covenant with His people, with us? Paul goes on and on about it; the answer is faith. Faith supplants the Law. Without faith in God all the rules and practices mean nothing: faith, not because God makes it a condition to be fulfilled to receive

His grace and love, but because it is what flows naturally from us in response to that grace and love.

Faith leads to commitment. Jesus' commitment to God the Father is the cross. He must be rejected and killed if He is to be raised. Christ died for all – all of Abram's descendants, including you and me, for all time.

The Resurrection is the supreme fulfillment by God of His covenant with us.

The faith of Jesus is perfect; His commitment is complete. Peter's faith is imperfect; he questions God. Peter for the moment is Satan, the tempter of the wilderness, reappearing in the person closest to Jesus.

So, how is our commitment; how is our faith? We can be like Peter, can't we? We do question and doubt; we do occasionally usurp the power of God and do things our own way, often with dreadful results.

But our commitment can be greater, can be more. The model for our commitment as Christians is that of Jesus. His cross is our cross. His self-denial and trust in God should be ours. To die? People do die for their faith and commitment even as we speak but, barring that, in countless ways of self-denial. A very old Lenten practice was to give up something significant to us as an act of self-denial. That's a good practice that is, sadly, often trivialized.

Perhaps the greater self-denial is giving others the gift of our time and energy, time and energy usually devoted to ourselves, given to another who is in need of us. Self-denial can be seen in acts of charity and kindness, in concern for others without any expectation of reward or acknowledgment, without placing our "if" on our covenant with our brothers and sisters.

#### The Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 22, 2009

Numbers 21:4-9 Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 Ephesians 2:1-10 John 3:14-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have heard it said that it is the privilege of old age to become nostalgic, to reminisce, and to tell stories. I hope that is true, because I am about to become nostalgic, reminisce, and tell a story, a story about my admittedly eccentric family.

Actually, my grandparents weren't eccentric at all. They came to this country from Norway in the early years of the last century and settled in Chicago as did many, many Scandinavians. Somehow they were caught up in the emotional religious fervor that was common in the Midwest in those years. As I recall, they actually had fifteen commandments, the usual ten that we all keep, plus five: drinking, smoking, card playing, dancing, and something called mixed bathing, that was never adequately explained to me as a child.

I do not know what they thought would happen if they actually broke any of those fifteen commandments. I doubt that they expected flaming, poisonous serpents to fall on the northwest side of Chicago, but there was certainly a precedent – and it's in this morning's lessons. There are the people of Israel wandering around in the desert. We all know the story about how they came to be there, the story of Exodus, God's rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, leading them out as His own free people.

We all know the story; however, they, apparently have forgotten. It didn't take long. Now they are griping, "We're hot; we're tired; we're hungry; we're not having any fun"; the phrase "are we there yet?" is for the future. It's called ingratitude; it's a failure to give thanks to God; it's called a separation from God; it's called sin.

Sin has its price. Here the price of sin is a rain of nasty, flaming snakes, but it could be many other things. We all have our own fiery serpents to deal with – the point being that although we may forget all that God has done, God does not fail to see what we are doing.

What is the antidote for fiery serpents; what is the corrective for sin? It's the image that God raises up before their eyes.

Leaping forward, what, or who, for us Christians is it that is raised up? It is Jesus, of course. Jesus was "lifted up" from the water of the Jordan and proclaimed by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed by God to be the Son of God, the Divine Incarnate.

Jesus was "lifted up" on the Cross, sacrificing Himself for us, for you and me, in atonement for those sins, the sins of the world. He calls from the Cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." He calls for forgiveness not just for the Jewish rulers who have brought Him there or for the soldiers of Rome, but for us all.

Jesus is "lifted up" from the tomb in absolute, incontrovertible proof that God has power even over death itself, and that we, you and I, just as we share in the atonement, share in the power of His Resurrection to eternal life.

Jesus is "lifted up" to the side of God the Father in His Ascension; He precedes us there as a foretaste of our own eternal life in the presence of God.

All of which is to say that "Our Lord Jesus Christ did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save it." He comes to save us all, even if we are wandering around in our own metaphorical desert, griping and forgetting what God has done for us, what God is doing for us every day.

It's a gift: God's Grace is a gift. Paul tells the Christians at Ephesus "You have been made alive," and we might interject eternally alive, "with Christ; saved by Grace," saved by a gift from God.

"By Grace we have been saved through faith . . . and raised up with Christ, seated in heavenly places."

All this is not a reward for our good works; we have been created to do good works. It's our job. All this is the mercy of God, deserved or not, because He loves us.

#### The Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 29, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Psalm 51:1-13 or Psalm 119:9-16 Hebrews 5:5-10 John 12:20-33

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Long, long ago, years before I had any thought of becoming a priest, I was in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, the School of Allied Medical Professions. The course was kinesiology, quite simply, how joints work. It was the end of the semester, time for the final exam, and a group of us, about five as I recall, were studying together.

Looking around the table, I could not help but notice that my notes were apparently far more complete than anyone else's, three times as complete, in fact. I remember being rather pleased with myself and thinking that those poor guys had really missed a lot. Then one of them, noticing the thickness of my notebook, said something to the effect that "wasn't it helpful that the professor had said everything three times?"

That was the moment that I realized that I am not an auditory learner. I do pretty well with pictures and illustrations, and I really do find demonstrations helpful; however, lectures can, and often do, go right by without stopping. I suppose I am what would be called a visual learner. If I am supposed to grasp an idea or concept, show me.

I say this because it occurs to me that the entire Old Testament is case of auditory presentations to an entire nation of visual learners.

Prophets give lectures. Sometimes they give brief demonstrations like walking around naked or lying in the Jerusalem streets, but generally prophets talk, or shout at people. I think you would agree that the technique wasn't particularly effective.

Jeremiah, long ago, proclaimed that God would put His law into the hearts of the people, that all the people would know Him – which I take to mean, do His will. Did it happen? I suppose people heard it, approved of the sincerity of the message, and went on their way. It happened over and over. Visual learners need visual teaching: hence, the Incarnation.

Here is Jesus, the very embodiment of God's will. Yes, he does teach and preach and tell stories, and yes, there were those who understood it all, but for the rest of us He demonstrated what it means to be truly a child of God. At His touch water becomes the best of wine; at His touch the blind see; the deaf hear; and the lame walk. At His touch the dead are raised. His touch is compassion and love itself, love of God for us all. Who could miss, who would not understand God's presence in witnessing such things?

Who could fail to understand the true depth of trust and faith in God as Jesus gives Himself up to cruelty and the Cross in fulfillment of God's atoning plan for the world? And who could fail to comprehend the power of God as Jesus is raised from the tomb and death itself is put to flight?

Of course we must have the scriptures, the Holy Gospel, if we are to understand our identity as children of God, understand our history and our theology as Christians, but for those of us who are not present at weddings with Jesus, or walking with Him on Judean roads, or standing at the foot of the Cross or before the empty tomb, there is the water of Baptism, the bread and the wine made His body and blood in the Holy Eucharist, things that may be seen and held.

Jesus says to us, "Come and see."

#### Maundy Thursday

April 9, 2009

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14 Psalm 116:1, 10-17 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The party's over. Nobody has actually said so, but it obviously is over; they could feel it and see it in Jesus' face. It had been fun while it lasted, traveling around and seeing all sorts of new places, even Jerusalem – heady stuff for boys from rural, remote Galilee, so much better than sitting all day in a fishing boat or counting coins or farming or whatever.

They had met all sorts of new people, huge crowds, and seen some truly amazing and mysterious things, miracles you would call them; it had been exciting, thrilling, fun. It was like being in on the ground floor of some great new project that would change Israel, perhaps change the world.

Now it's not fun. Jesus is distant, His eyes on something they cannot see. Jesus is withdrawn, preoccupied, hearing things they cannot hear. It's a serious, sad little dinner party indeed.

He's made His farewell address. He obviously expects to be leaving, going away. It's a short address, an admonition, a "new commandment" He calls it; "Love one another as I have loved you." As I have loved you: they have to ponder that.

Does it have anything to do with the washing of feet? Was it not strange that the leader and teacher of them all should become their servant, demeaning himself and performing the lowliest of tasks, the humblest of acts, for them? Why did He do that?

Slowly it sinks in: Jesus loves them, sacrificially, totally, without qualifications. It is a love in which the greatest become servants of the most humble, in which the first becomes the last and the last first, in which the world itself can be transformed. If that is what the love of Jesus has been, and Jesus calls them to love one another just so, then the commandment is a commission, a call.

The commandment, the commission, the call is as fresh and clear this evening as it was to the eleven in that upper room; now the call and commandment are ours. The "new commandment" to the disciples defined what it means to be Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. His call to serve was not limited to the eleven in that room; it was a call to serve, in love, all those that are in need and even those who were not, all the children of God's creation. It's a huge task, one that was served in the streets of Jerusalem, the dusty roads of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth by those who shared Our Lord's Last Supper.

In nearly two thousand years that "new" commandment has not grown old. Today and every day it's our commandment, our call.

# Easter April 12, 2009

Acts 10:34-43 Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 John 20:1-18

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Are you afraid of the dark? When I was quite young, my family moved several times, new houses with new sights and sounds. Sleeping, or rather not sleeping, in a new bedroom, listening to the strange sounds of a strange house – for me, it was the partly opened closet door, black and ominous. It could have been the dark at the top of the stairs, but we didn't have stairs. It's okay to say that you are afraid; everyone is, you know. Actually, it's not really a fear of the dark: it's a fear of what the darkness might hold, the unknown, the unexpected, the dreaded closet monster, the entrance to the tomb; it's a black, gaping hole in the rock.

It's morning; the sun has risen; another day has come. But that darkness remains. Women have come with spices to give a proper burial for a lost friend. They stop, they draw back. It's unexpected: there should be a large stone barring the door to that tomb. Someone has rolled it away, leaving only the blackness in contrast to the morning light. They have no knowledge of what lies beyond that darkened entry, no knowledge of what has been unsealed by that stone that has been rolled away.

What do you suppose they expect? What would you expect? They expect death, the dead body of their friend and teacher, Jesus.

Perhaps, in fear and trembling, they expect their own death at the hands of the unknown that lies there in the darkness.

What would we do if we were standing there before that unexpected blackness? Would we have the courage to go farther, to enter that tomb?

They are courageous; it takes courage to go on, to face another day, to brave the double darkness of sorrow at the loss of their dearest friend, and then to enter that dark tomb and dare to be in the power and the presence of death.

What do they find? In the tomb they find light, dazzling light for their eyes in the presence of a young man in white, an angel in shining robes that illumines every corner of the rocky tomb.

They find light for their minds in a dawning realization that Jesus really has been raised from the dead by God, that he is not to be found there, that death itself has been conquered and is powerless to oppose God's will, God's love.

They find lightness for their hearts in the expectation, promised by the angel, that Jesus goes before them to Galilee, that He waits for them there, that they will be once again in His presence, see Him, touch Him, hear His voice.

There is lightness in their steps as they run to tell the Disciples that the tomb is empty, Jesus is risen; running in the light of a new day, a new world, a new faith that God's love can and will transcend all human understanding, that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate God from His children.

You see what happened. God, in His holy messenger, has called them to "come and see" the wonderful truth of The Resurrection and told them to "go and tell" the world that "Christ is Risen."

That is His call to us this Easter morning and every morning.

#### The Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 17, 2009

Acts 10:44-48 Psalm 98 1 John 5:1-6 John 15:9-17

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have mentioned before, perhaps quite often, that I went to seminary at Nashotah House in Wisconsin. Nashotah is not a large seminary; in fact, it is probably the smallest in the Episcopal Church. It's sort of remote in a rural area, situated between two lakes, all quite beautiful. It is self-contained and about as High Church as it gets. Consequently, the community is very close, the same faces at chapel, in class and eating in the refectory together day after day. Seminarians see a lot of each other.

Seminarians come in all sorts and sizes and persuasions, even at Nashotah House. In my class there was a young man, I shall call him Z, from Minnesota, a true free spirit with his own unique perspective on life; we also had a man, I shall call him S, from as far from Minnesota as one can be in this country. He was the antithesis of Z, who was always in motion, never still, the poster boy for the word "uptight." Z drove him crazy.

One day after chapel, Z was in a dimension all his own, and S could take it no longer. He bellowed, "Why are you here?"

To his credit Z might have been offended, but he wasn't. To his credit Z might have said, paraphrasing this morning's lesson from the Acts

of the Apostles, "The Holy Spirit has been poured out even on people in Minnesota," but he didn't. He just smiled. Maybe God smiled too, or maybe God thought, "Didn't I settle that point long, long ago?"

Jesus said to His disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." Have you been present at a Baptism? Have you felt the powerful presence of God as a person is baptized? I assure you, it's true: God reaches out, reaches down and touches that person being baptized, and, if we could hear His words, says, "This is my child." Infant or adult, circumcised or Gentile, it is God's volition and God's action that makes us His own.

Peter knew that; John knew that. John tells us that "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." That leaves no room for our bias, our questions, or our reservations about anyone. But belief isn't just a matter of words – words come easy. Our identity as God's children is shown by word and example, and the example set for us, the one we are to follow, is Jesus Christ.

Our identity is right there in this morning's Gospel. Jesus tells us: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." That is a tall order. It calls for unconditional love even of those who are not at all loveable, even those who are our very antithesis because, if we are children of God, then even if it is beyond our understanding, so are they.

Years ago, in the previous *Book of Common Prayer*, of blessed memory, at the service of Morning and Evening Prayer we actually prayed for "All Sorts and Conditions of Men." Today we would read "people." The entire church, everywhere in the world, prayed that prayer twice a day. What a powerful statement of God's gracious will for His children.

To complete the story, I must add that in the course of three years at Nashotah, S actually came to befriend Z. Obviously, God had something in mind for them. Z is now the Dean of a major Cathedral, and S is a Bishop.

#### The Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 24, 2009

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 Psalm 1 1 John 5:9-13 John 17:6-19

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Happy and I have family in Texas, principally in Houston and Fort Worth. I had the pleasure some years ago of celebrating two weddings of nieces in Houston, actually Cypress, Texas, and, quite recently, that of a nephew in Fort Worth.

The Houston weddings were in a mid-size Episcopal Church; the Fort Worth wedding was not. It was in a real Texas non-denomination mega-church. It was enormous.

The service was in the church's chapel, somewhat larger than our entire church. Having a few minutes, I thought I would take a tour of the rest of the complex. There was a lobby: it was called "gathering space," but it was a lobby – it was huge. There were three or four kiosks with Starbucks coffee. To one side was the entrance to the Christian Education space, which bore a clear resemblance to an amusement park.

Past the lobby, through one of many doors, was the worship space. The first thing to see was a console for electronics: lights, music, and whatever else. It took up almost the entire back of the space. The place was huge: I would say it seated five thousand. Up front was a

stage flanked by giant projection screens. There was a sort of lectern, no altar, no religious symbols of any kind. I must confess I couldn't see how the church differed from a shopping mall or an auditorium. What set it apart from the world of everyday life outside its doors? Perhaps that's not what they intended; perhaps the people who attend there simply don't care.

I also thought about the church's very antithesis, those who completely reject the world. In the extreme, there are still ascetic hermits in the forest, living on nuts and berries. We don't see them because we are not supposed to see them. We see Franciscans who have given up most of the clutter of our culture and taken on a life of poverty. There are still monasteries, communities of deeply religious people who live simply with less. And there are the Amish, the Mennonites, out here in this world living very happily without automobiles, computers, electric lights, the latest fashions, and all the stuff most of us cannot do without.

Once when traveling from Wisconsin to Georgia, we stopped at a rest stop on the Ohio Turnpike for lunch. In the entryway was a machine to tell your blood pressure. There was a line of Amish men and women at the machine, all in their traditional clothing, all having their blood pressure checked. I have no idea how they got there; I did wonder if they actually had blood pressure, living as they did without the trappings of our age.

Jesus prayed that His Disciples, and that would be us, should be "in the world, but not of the world." We don't really have much choice about the first part; we cannot deny the world in which we live, nor should we. If we do we run the real risk of becoming a quaint anachronism and, frankly, irrelevant. Attractive as the thought of dropping out might be, and sometimes it is, we, as Christians are not called to quit this world.

On the other hand, if our lives are so filled with the sights and the sounds and the materialism of the world around us, where is there

room for God? How can we hear Him in the noise of our world? How can we feel His presence in the midst of the distractions? Where do we go if this is all there is?

There must be another way, another answer to the question "what are we doing here?"

It seems to me that you and I, as Christians, are called to community, not personal isolation. It is very easy to become isolated in this world, despite all our electronic contacts: we can isolate ourselves by withdrawing from the world, and we can isolate ourselves in the midst of a crowd in the biggest church in the world.

Neither example is our role, our purpose. We are here in this world to transform the world, not to deny it and not to be submerged in it; we are here to participate in this world. It begins here, at this altar, and it proceeds out there, beyond our walls, proclaiming that God is present in the lives of His children, that He is the source of all we have, all we are and all that we may be.

#### **Trinity Sunday**

June 7, 2009

Isaiah 6:1-8 Psalm 29 John 3:1-17

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The world is full of people like Nicodemus. They are questioners; perhaps they may be doubters; they are certainly people who want the details, people who want all the answers to questions such as "why" and "how." Apparently they've been around for a long, long time.

We have the original Nicodemus in today's Gospel. He is a solid, dignified pillar of the community who is absolutely concrete; metaphor is completely wasted on Nicodemus. Perhaps that's why Jesus speaks in metaphor, talks of water and wind and the spirit, stretching Nicodemus, trying to make Nicodemus think; and the response is, over and over, "how can that be?"

Which brings up an interesting question: how do you explain the wind? Even with all the maps and charts, the highs and lows and isobars, even with Jim Cantore and the Weather Channel, do we, in our modern sophistication, know where the wind comes from and where it goes? We feel it; we can see what it does – grass and trees sway, clouds move by in the sky, leaves rustle – but we cannot see the wind. We just know that it's present.

Through the years there have been all sorts of attempts to explain the wind, or perhaps it's better to say to explain the experience of the presence of the wind, which brings us to the subject before us today, Trinity Sunday. How do you explain a Deity that is three-in-one and one-in-three?

There have been some valiant attempts. I remember a cartoon in one of the less serious journals of matters religious. A priest in the pulpit is holding up a four-leaf clover. The caption was "Too late, the rector realized he had chosen an inappropriate illustration of the Trinity."

Personally, I think the problem lies with the concept of explaining it at all. It's those Nicodemuses out there who want to nail down and make tangible something that is, in truth, a metaphor. The Trinity is like the wind. We can know its presence without explaining it. It's something to be experienced.

Have you ever noticed that God gives us no name, that God makes no attempt at self-explanation? God simply "is." We can only address what God does, and that is a major task in itself.

God is the great, omnipotent, all-knowing creator of all things for all time. The words are mine, not necessarily those of God. The problem is that we have no words or even thoughts that can encompass such a God, so we use familiar ones like "Father" and the masculine gender "He." We simply have no other way of speaking of God; God is utterly beyond our feeble human comprehension, and God knows that.

How does such a God become real for us; how does such a God become known to us in terms we can comprehend? The great creator God does so by becoming one of us, human as we are, to live and die as we do. That would be Jesus Christ, whom we call "God the Son." In Jesus God shows us first that God loves us beyond our comprehension, voluntarily putting aside Divinity to become human with all the joys and pains we all experience. And God dies as we do,

actually far more painfully than we do, to show sacrificial love, and is raised from the dead, showing that God is truly omnipotent over death itself.

Of course God, knowing our human attention span, realizes that our memories aren't really very good, that we tend to embroider and interpret things, adding our own agendas. God knows we need a reminder, and that reminder is The Holy Spirit. It's the Spirit that is present with us here and now, calling us, informing us, empowering us. It's the Spirit that, if we listen, clears away the agendas we impose and reveals to us first who and what we are and who and what God would have us be. The Spirit is like the hot, burning coal that touches the lips of the prophet Isaiah, clearing his heart and mind and filling him with the power to speak holy words to the world.

It's the Spirit that enables Isaiah and you and me, once touched, to say "Here am I; send me."

#### **Independence Day**

July 4, 2009

Deuteronomy 10:17-21 Psalm 145 or 145:1-9 Hebrews 11:8-16 Matthew 5:43-48

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our grandson Erik graduated from Hayfield High School in Alexandria, Virginia. Hayfield is huge, at least by my standards. The ceremony took place in the gymnasium; we sat on bleachers, very tall bleachers, along with several thousand other parents, grandparents, and assorted friends. It was packed.

Alexandria is, of course, a suburb of Washington. To say that the area is ethnically diverse would be an understatement. There is a really rich and exciting mixture of peoples there, and in Hayfield and in those bleachers.

A Pakistani family was seated in front of us, all in what we would call their national costume and they would call clothes. They were chatting in what I think is Urdu. Behind us was a family from Africa. Obviously, at least one was attached to an embassy of their African home; the others were, I think, in town for the graduation. The former was explaining everything in what was, perhaps, Swahili.

It was obvious that they were all absolutely delighted to be there. The school orchestra, a big orchestra, played "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"; I can tell you that no matter what language all those

Pakistanis and Africans and others had been speaking, they really took off on "Glory, glory, hallelujah."

Does that sort of thing happen in every country? Can that sort of thing happen in much of the world?

I really wonder just what it is that can meld so many different people with such profound cultural differences into one happy, singing crowd. What is so different about this nation? What makes us attractive to others? Not every nation needs an agency to deal with foreigners that won't go home.

I know the cynical response that we hear all the time is that we have money: by the standards of most of the world, we are, even in a recession, really, really rich. Our world is filled with material goods; we have an incredibly high standard of living.

All of that is probably, but not uniformly, true, but there is something else: there is an underlying truth about this country that allows such things to be true. It's a philosophy, an ethos, a worldview.

We acknowledge the value and dignity of every individual. We say, and have said since the very inception of this country, that people, all people, have certain "inalienable rights": life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, rights endowed by "our Creator."

Endowed by our Creator; given to each of us by God.

Those are "inalienable" rights: rights that are not to be trifled with, not to be taken away from us under any circumstances. How much of the world is at the mercy of self-serving, capricious men or organizations? We have the right to a "Life." We do not see people as expendable. Life is precious; life is not to be wasted.

We have the right of "Liberty." We can say what we please, go where we wish, read what we like, dress as we wish; we take all those things

for granted while much of the world cannot even conceive of such freedom.

And we have the right to the "Pursuit of Happiness." That's not self-centered amusement: that's self-fulfillment, upward mobility, the chance to better yourself, the chance to do and to be what you will.

No, we are not perfect, but we know where perfection lies. It lies in the unwavering practice of these principles. And you can be sure that Pakistanis and Africans and all the peoples of the world know that too.

That's the thought for Independence Day.

#### The Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

July 5, 2009

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 Psalm 48 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 Mark 6:1-13

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Have you ever experienced a real panic attack? You would know if you had. We all have moments of being nervous; this is far beyond nervous. This is when you feel warm and flushed, your heart beats really, really fast, your hands shake and the rest of you shakes, you can't really catch your breath, and you seriously contemplate either fainting or running away. Obviously, I speak from experience.

Long, long ago when I took the first steps toward a life in the church, I was turned loose on an unsuspecting congregation that stoically suffered through the panic attack of one who suddenly realized the import, the significance of what God was getting me into. The reading must have been painful to hear and watch; the chalice had whitecaps from the shaking hands. Of course the worst part came later: the thought that I had let them down and, perhaps, let God down. That's a very painful thought.

I knew an officer of the British Army, the Queen's Dragoon Guards regiment, who was asked about the superb precision, the perfection, of the guards on parade. He said that they were like swans; above the water swans glide calmly and majestically, while below the water their little legs are going like mad. A panic attack is when your little legs let you down.

We have a reading from 2 Corinthians this morning. Paul speaks of an ecstatic vision, probably his own, that describes a confrontation with God. Then Paul talks about having a "thorn in the flesh." Paul never says what that thorn might be, and people have puzzled about it ever since. The most frequent explanation, speculation, is that Paul was epileptic. Personally, I think it means that Paul was subject to panic attacks.

Now Paul was certainly an experienced public speaker. In fact Paul had a tendency to speak and speak and speak in public. The trouble with such people as Paul is that the world becomes lost in the verbiage, submerged in a sea of words, smothered by glibness. I think that Paul recognized his tendency to panic and realized that those were the moments when he was at his most powerful. He says "When I am weak, I am strong." He knows that when God speaks through him his words are true and strong. Paul is content with that weakness; he knows that at those moments God's grace is sufficient to sustain him.

When God called me to priestly ordination, I had occasion to explain myself to Bishop Paul Reeves, several Bishops of Georgia ago, while walking under the great oaks at Honey Creek. Bishop Reeves had been a Navy chaplain in the Pacific in World War II and took pleasure in ribbing an active duty Army officer on any occasion. This time he was silent and listened as I tried to express what was within me, struggling to find the words. I finally apologized for not being very clear. He replied "If you were clear, I would doubt you."

The point is that when we are glib, we may get in the way of what God is saying and doing. God speaks not just to the ear but also to the heart. The moment of panic speaks to the immense importance of what God would have us say.

Ezekiel says, "Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they will know that there has been a prophet among them."

#### The Tenth Sunday of Pentecost

August 9, 2009

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 Psalm 130 Ephesians 4:25-5:2 John 6:35, 41-51

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Elijah is not simply on a journey; Elijah is running for his life. He has just managed to offend the royalty and the religious establishment of Israel, and he is in great danger.

It's a good story. The king, who was not a very good king, had married Jezebel, who worshiped the Baal gods of the Canaanites; and, not being very religious himself, he had let those become the gods of Israel. Elijah, the great prophet of the Old Testament, challenged the priests of Baal to a contest which, of course, Jahweh won, and then killed all the priests. Jezebel, and therefore the king, found this quite unacceptable, and so Elijah fled south.

He's hot and tired and fearful. Perhaps he really thinks, "This is it; I can't go another step." Then he smells the most delicious aroma, fresh baked bread.

Have you ever walked into a real bakery that was filled with that smell of bread baking? It's not just an aroma; it is absolute comfort. It must have some subliminal meaning, call up some memory from long ago, perhaps a memory of childhood and warm kitchens and long, peaceful days. Warm, chewy, freshly baked bread with a crunchy crust just melts in your mouth.

The angel said to Elijah, "Hey, you have a long way to go and much to do, so get up and have some bread and get on with your journey."

Every Tuesday morning we have a Eucharist at Langdale House. We meet in the activities room; we set up a table with a pair of candles in front of a counter of all the craft projects. Two weeks ago I was celebrating for a small group, and, as I elevated the Host, I smelled freshly baking bread. Of course there was a bread making machine on the counter behind me, a machine with incredibly good timing; whatever it did it was right on cue.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." The bread of life means the promise of warmth and comfort and sustenance. If those associations come to us, think how they filled the minds of hungry, tired, frightened disciples. They too were running, just like Elijah had run, from the threats of royalty and the religious establishment. They, too, would find moments of rest and refreshment in the shade of the trees of gardens.

Jesus tells them that unlike the bread of this world, a bread that satisfies for the hour, the bread He offers satisfies forever; once eaten, it drives away discomfort and fear and promises eternal life.

You and I are about to eat that bread here at this altar. We can bring to this altar all the doubts and discomforts that all too often fill our days, and we can leave them here because we have His promise. We come to this altar to put down the burdens, the regrets and anxieties we carry; we go from this altar, back out into this world on the journey that is our daily life, carrying within us the presence of Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Christ says to us, as the angel said to Elijah, "Get up and eat, or the journey may be too great for you."

### The Fifteenth Sunday of Pentecost

September 13, 2009

Proverbs 1:20-33
Psalm 19
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Take up your cross and follow me," says Jesus.

Jesus might have added "Of course, if you do take up your cross, you will have to put down whatever it is you are carrying now, all the boxes and baggage that are so very precious to you at the moment. You really can't carry a cross if your hands are full."

And, of course, a cross is sort of cumbersome, not at all easy to carry, particularly if it's heavy – and you know it probably is.

And just exactly where are we supposed to go with this cross; just where is Jesus going? Frankly, He makes this cross-carrying sound rather unattractive. I think He's sounding pretty scary with His talk about saving and losing lives, obscure but scary nonetheless.

So, perhaps, we respond, "Maybe not now; maybe I'll just see how it goes, thanks. I'll get back to you."

There have been ten Bishops in the Diocese of Georgia. The present will be the fourth Bishop in my time as a deacon and priest. I am becoming historical. I had been saying, "I'll get back to you," to Jesus

for about twenty years. Finally, at the suggestion of my rector, I made an appointment to talk to Bishop Reeves about "perhaps, maybe" becoming a Deacon. Bishop Reeves was a burly man with a deep, rumbling voice. He had a way of fixing you with his gray eyes; "perhaps" or "maybe" were not acceptable to him. I must add that Bishop Reeves had been a chaplain in the U.S. Navy, and he delighted in "pulling the chain" of an active duty colonel in the U.S. Army; however, on this occasion, he listened with commendable patience and then said, "Are you prepared to leave the life of a lay person forever?"

It was the defining moment. My life was very comfortable; my career was at its peak; and, yet, it was so very, very clear that Jesus was calling me, personally, right then, to say "yes" and to follow Him.

Has the cross been all that heavy? Not really, because Jesus carries most of the weight for those who follow Him.

"Who do people say I am?" asks Jesus. The same people who can't quite pick up that cross, the same people whose hands are so filled by the past, by what has always been: they are the ones who say "John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the old prophets." What has been must be now and will always be. They are blind to the future, to what can and will be, even though it is plainly before them.

"Follow Me," says Jesus. "Where are we going?" we ask. "Into the future," Jesus replies. Don't cling to the past. Life comes at you fast; pay attention, or you might miss it.

The life you may lose is the one you are living in the past, living as though today, tomorrow, and forever will be nothing but the same. Pick up your cross, follow me, and lose that life, and you will gain a new life, an eternal life.

#### All Saints Day

November 1, 2009

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 Psalm 24 Revelation 21:1-6a John 11:32-44

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What, or who, is a saint? We all know the names of quite a few men and women who have that official title. Some of them were Apostles, friends of Our Lord Jesus Christ, men and women who made enormous contributions to the spreading of the Gospel and the founding of what we call Church.

There are many, many more. Down through the centuries all sorts of people have come to the fore in moments of danger and stress and in moments of service, giving real, personal meaning to Christianity. We have some names but certainly not all of them. Some will never be known but never be forgotten before God. Some names come to mind immediately: names such as Francis of Assisi and Catherine, all sorts of Catherines, actually, saints of all sorts from all sorts of places.

I received a book about saints several years ago. The book listed saints to be called upon in all sorts of situations. There is a saint for juvenile delinquency, Saint Dominic Savio, a nineteenth century young man who set himself up as a good example for the rude boys of his village and, remarkably, is not a martyr. There is a saint for physically unattractive people, Saint Germain Cousin, who was

rejected even by her parents, and a saint for hangovers, Saint Bibiana; sounds like the Latin "bibulous" which means, of course, fond of strong drink. Who knew?

As I sit in my usual seat during the Eucharist, I look out over our wonderful parish and think what a joy and a privilege it is, and has been, to be here. My mind drifts back to the appearance of the church a few years ago: yellow walls, red carpet, white tile, a dark brown pulpit and rail and cylinder lights, and I think of the physical changes we have seen together. More importantly, I think of the many people who have made Christ Church what it is today, a loving parish family centered on the worship of Christ and committed to his service.

It seemed that I could see some of those parishioners who are no longer visible with us still in the places they occupied over the years. It's a curious truth that very often those places remain unfilled as though we have a sense that they are still seated there. Of course they are. Those are our communion of saints, and they are many. Looking back over the twenty years that I have known Christ Church so many names come to mind; men and women, boys and girls whose lives have profoundly influenced those around them, models of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Should I name them? I need not, because the list is too great, and I dare say you might have names to add. It seems to me that they have taken their place in an unbroken line of servants of Christ stretching back to those few who heard His call and followed Him. They are still here, of course, some smiling upon us from their apparently empty places, rejoicing in each successive generation at prayer, and many seated today in our congregation. How blessed we are by their loving presence.

As November begins we set aside a date, All Saints Day; in truth, every day is a day to celebrate the saints among us.

### The Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2009

Zephaniah 3:14-20 Canticle 9 Philippians 4:4-7 Luke 3:7-18

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Suppose someone came up to me and said, "Have you heard what's happening down on the river? I've heard that there's this guy dressed up like a camel standing in the water saying 'Come on over here and let me baptize you, like pour water on your head; then you should go home and live a better life."

Would I drop everything and run off to see what that's about? Probably not.

First, I really don't like crowds, I don't trust them. Crowds are noisy and messy, and they get emotional and excited about all sorts of irrational things.

Also, I am really not comfortable around strange people, particularly loud, impassioned fanatics in funny clothes. I don't care what they have to say. They make me nervous.

So, I would say, "Thank you, I think I'll just stay away. I'm sure I'll hear all about what happens in due time." I mean, seriously, why get involved – how important can it be? What could happen?

Thereby, I would miss the whole thing.

Can you imagine how many people must have felt like that, how many had some reason not to go to see and hear John? Can you imagine how many missed the end of an age and the beginning of a new world?

The new world began with John, the latter-day Elijah crying prophetically that the Messiah was come, that the time had come when every person, every single person, would stand in judgment, not by the standard of who they are, not because they are sons and daughters of Abraham, but because of what they do in this world.

Isn't it interesting that the people heard John and they hadn't a clue about how to respond? "What are we supposed to be doing? Nobody ever mentioned personal responsibility before." They are conveniently forgetting centuries of warnings by a succession of prophets on just that personal responsibility. It had been 600 years since Zephaniah had called them to "Save the lame and gather the outcast" if they really meant to do the will of God.

Now the time is up. John tells them plainly that right behind him, perhaps literally, stands the one who will judge, the judge in the deceptive guise of a young rabbi from Galilee. We can only speculate if John realizes that he is that close, in time and space, to God Incarnate.

Why do we read this story now, on this third Sunday in Advent?

I think it's because we are approaching Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation. We read it because we are so tempted to romanticize, even trivialize the Incarnation, the birth of God made human, into just a sentimental story of a baby and a little family and shepherds and wise men. It is a tender and beautiful story that speaks straight to the heart of us all. But if it remains no more than a tender story, we can, if we are not very careful, lose sight of just who that is lying in a

manger. The baby is no less than the omnipotent, omniscient God. The baby in the manger will grow up to be that one standing by John at the Jordan, both the judge and the savior of the world. More than that, in the Incarnation God entrusts himself to our love and care, entrusts Himself to us fallible and completely unreliable human beings. God accepts a state of being dependent on us.

Our faith in God pales before God's faith in us.

Advent is the time to put The Incarnation in perspective, a time to contemplate the magnitude of God's love and trust for each of us.

#### **Christmas**

December 25, 2009

Isaiah 52:7-10 Psalm 98 Hebrews 1:1-4,(5-12) John 1:1-14

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the cold winter nights of the far North, there is a pale light that moves and shimmers in the northern sky, growing from the edge of the world to fill the sky with a radiance. It begins suddenly. One moment you walk beneath a star-filled, incredibly black sky; the next moment your eyes are filled with a light not of this world. Science may call it the Aurora Borealis, the northern lights, and explain that it is a disturbance in the ionosphere. The Cree people, a First Nation people of Canada, in their ancient wisdom call it "the dance of the Spirits." Perhaps we might call it "the dance of the angels."

It would have been like that, of course. To the eyes of shepherds, keeping their flocks on the Judean fields, it must have been a night like any other, a night under a familiar unchanging sky with predictable stars under which they had lived every moment of their lives. Then, suddenly, that familiar sky dissolved in light, first one light and then myriads and myriads of lights, greater and brighter than the stars: angels shining, as they sang the birth of Jesus, and, perhaps, danced for joy.

Joy is the word: simple joy. No great star shines in the East for the shepherds; no ancient texts are to be consulted as to the portents in

the sky. No far land must be sought to worship this newborn Messiah. He is there, right there, for the shepherds. He is here, right here, for us, for you and for me. God in His great love for us has given us the precious gift of the Incarnation, become one of us that we might be one with Him. That love is so great that God entrusts Himself to us, a baby born in a rude stable to a tiny, exhausted family of travelers for whom there is no room. God places Himself in our care.

We, you and I, are called to receive Him, to receive Him and to worship the one we receive. That is what we are about here tonight. In the midst of bright lights and shiny paper, tall trees and tinsel, carols and cookies, the greatest gift of all is there for us tonight.

You know, of course, that the angels still sing; their song never ends. Perhaps you and I can join the song, and, perhaps, dance with the angels.

# The Second Sunday of Epiphany

January 17, 2010

Isaiah 62:1-5 Psalm 36: 5-10 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 John 2:1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the mid-twentieth century the church was graced by the presence of Archbishop William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury and arguably the brightest and most articulate Archbishop ever.

Temple was the author of many books; his interests ranged from the arts to philosophy to theology. He saw theology, specifically the Incarnation, God become one of us in our world, as the center, the center point at which all human experience comes together. For Temple, in the person and the truth of Christ's presence in this world of ours, all things receive value, all things receive meaning, because the divine has become present in all things.

It sounds a bit intimidating; Temple was very bright. It makes sense.

Temple's most popular, and least intimidating work is *Readings in Saint John's Gospel*. It was published in 1939 and is still in print 70 years later. It's popular because it's accessible to us all. Temple speaks of the gospel in terms of our experience. Temple even presents the miracles of Jesus Christ, wondrous inexplicable events such as we have heard this morning, in our terms, terms of what those miracles should mean to us, which brings us to the question of just what we

should make of this story of Jesus changing water into wine, His very first miracle at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee.

It is a good story, a colorful story, over which scholars have exhausted themselves for years and years, pondering why this should be remembered as Jesus' first miracle as well as such details as the number of days of the feast, the number of guests present, and the size of the water jars. A firkin, which is the measure listed in the King James version of the Bible, is, by the way,  $8\frac{1}{2}$  gallons – that's 51 gallons of water and a whole lot of wine, none of which concerns William Temple.

Temple spends no time on the details of the story. He goes directly to the point, that the real message of this story is that the presence of Jesus makes a difference: that the presence of Jesus takes what "is" in our world and in our lives and transforms it all into something new. How simple it is now that we say it.

This world, this life of ours, is a feast given by God to which we are all invited. Most of the time it's nice to be included, nice to be here, although, as is true with many parties, it can have some very dull and trying moments: such is life. Or, perhaps we could say, such is life as long as we remain water. We are the water of the miracle in this story. Water is good and necessary, an absolute minimal requirement for our lives; we cannot live without it, but, let's be honest, water is not very exciting. Water is just water; we can add all sorts of things to it, but it really remains just water.

The change in our lives comes when Jesus Christ is present in our lives. That is when water is no longer just water; that is when life can no longer be bland. Jesus Christ changes that water, changes us, into something more, more exciting, more dynamic. We are transformed

That is the point of the story.

### Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2010

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 Psalm 103 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Genesis tells us that God, the creator of all things, created us; God reached down, scooped up a handful of the dust of the earth, and shaped us, molded us, one with the earth. In the Book of Genesis the very name of the first of us, the ancestor of us all, is Adam, which means "earth" in Hebrew. We are more than dust. If we were nothing but dust, we would be lifeless and inert; we are more. We have the spark of the divine within us, the very breath of our creator.

Genesis tells us that the God who shaped us and molded us from the dust of the earth breathed life into His creation, and we became complete, living beings formed in the image of God; we became a mortal body inspired by the divine creative breath of God. We became God's children.

You and I were proclaimed to be God's children at our Baptism, baptized with water, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own, forever, marked with the sign of the cross on our foreheads, a mark made with Holy Oil. The mark proclaimed our undeniable, inalienable identity as the children of God.

The mark faded, but the identity remained; the identity is indelible. On occasions, when we are ill, that mark is retraced, that identity is reasserted, by a cross of Holy Oil on our foreheads, a sacrament called Unction. It is retraced at our deaths once again.

On this day we retrace that baptismal mark, not in Holy Oil but in ashes. It is the same cross, the same mark of our identity. The ashes make it visible to all; the ashes tell the world first of our identity as the children of God, then that we make that proclamation in profound humility, penitent of all that we may have done to separate ourselves from Him. With these ashes we begin the season of Lent, days of reflection and self-examination, days of commitment to an amendment of life that we may be what our creator would have us be.

# **Vespers Homily**

#### Fifth Sunday of Lent March 21, 2010

Psalm 130 John 11:1-45

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."

Those are words from a sister grieving, feeling acute pain at the death of her brother.

Imagine how often Jesus must have heard those words in one form or another.

"Lord, if you had . . . ." He hears them still. He hears them all the time from those who must blame their loss on someone. Those are words spoken in anguish; Jesus knows that.

But still, how painful the real answer must be, painful to Jesus because the real answer to one whom He loves as a friend is "Yes. He would" – not compassionate, but true.

I have heard those words; we all do, all of us who wear collars. We hear them perhaps in different ways, but it is the same question.

"How could God let this happen; why my brother or sister or mother or father or child?"

I don't know; I have no answer.

All I have is a promise, from Jesus, that death is not an end but a transition. Jesus promises that He has gone before us to be with God and to prepare a place for us and that, someday, He will come again and take us there.

Scripture tells us, and we say it at funerals, that in death "life is changed, not ended."

I say those things. Do I know that? No. Do I believe that? Usually, but how difficult it is to look in the face of such profound grief when even Jesus wept.

How can I say these things? There is an answer to that, an old theological answer that would probably not serve for one in such grief, might not give comfort and assurance. It has to do with who we, you and I, and Lazarus, really are.

We are not simply soft, pliable clay, not just flesh and blood. God has breathed on us; we contain the spark of the divine.

In the old Roman Catholic Tridentine Mass for Baptism, the priest did breathe upon the one being baptized, a symbol of that divine breath that God breathed into humanity in Adam, breath that we all carry in us.

You and I have been washed in Baptism and made children of God, signed with Holy Oil as one of God's own and touched by The Holy Spirit, made brothers and sisters of Christ.

We have two natures as did Christ, one perishable and one imperishable.

This mortal nature, this flesh, will ultimately wear out and perish. It is not made for immortality, not made for eternity. It has flaws and weaknesses and pains and problems; it is our mortal nature, and that is what we grieve for when we have lost one we love, the loss of the presence of the loved one's mortal nature. Martha and Mary grieve over the loss of the mortal Lazarus.

This mortal nature, this flesh, will perish, but that spark of the divine, that breath of God, is imperishable. It does not die; by it we have eternal life. By it we overcome the limitations of our mortal nature. By it we have limitless perfection, and by it all that we truly are, human and divine, has eternal life.

The mortal flesh of Lazarus is raised by his compassionate friend to dry the tears of grieving sisters, but that flesh will die once more.

Once more, because we are promised that the day will come when the perishable and the imperishable will be united in resurrection to eternal life.

### **Ascension Day**

May 13, 2010

Acts 1:1-11 Psalm 47 Ephesians 1:15-23 Luke 24:44-53

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Mount of Olives is just east of the city of Jerusalem, in the time of Jesus outside the city, separated from it by the Kidron Valley. From the summit of the mount, the whole city was laid out before the disciples, the walls, the gates, the pools, and the Temple.

The Mount of Olives was Jesus' place of meditation and prayer as His ministry unfolded. It was from the Mount of Olives that Jesus surveyed the city and called sadly, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem."

They had been there quite often as a retreat from the busy life of the city, separate yet close enough to be constantly reminded of their mission.

Now they are all on the mount once more, led by Jesus, hearing His final instructions, seeing His ascension to The Father, borne by a cloud.

Three of the disciples, Peter, James, and John, must have been reminded of another mountaintop not long before, and of another cloud that descended upon Jesus, proclaiming His true identity, the Son of God; the cloud was then, and is now, the glory of God the Father enveloping Jesus.

It was on that earlier mountaintop, the Mount of Transfiguration, that their journey to this moment began. The journey had been through death itself, through Resurrection, and now through reunion with the Father in glory.

When we speak of mountaintops, we aren't just speaking of a place, of geography. We speak of a spiritual meaning: mountain and mountaintops are both physical and spiritual places. Virtually all cultures have some tradition of a holy mountain or high place. There is a reason.

The base of every mountain, be it a physical or a spiritual mountain, the place where a climb or journey begins, is open and accessible to all. Then the climb becomes progressively more difficult. You can lose your way, make a wrong turn, get on the wrong path, and climb into danger; you can lose your footing and fall very far and very fast. The summit, the mountaintop, is only for those who overcome the obstacles and dangers of the way. At the summit the air is thin, the light is very bright, and the view is spectacular. From there it's one short step to the Father, to the presence of God.

So in this Easter season we, and the disciples, have had the Resurrection, 40 days of the presence of Jesus, and now the Ascension. The Resurrection proved to the world beyond any possible doubt that God can and does effect change in this world, that all things in this world, even death itself, are subject to His will.

The Ascension proves that Jesus is the Son of God. It is as simple as that.

Why the 40 days? It's a long time, long enough, you would think, that the disciples, even the most obtuse disciple, would hear and understand the message and the significance of the presence of Jesus. They don't; they still assume that God is concerned only with Israel, that God's plan is no more than the restoration of Israel to its former Davidic power and glory. I might add that if you are familiar

with such Old Testament books as Samuel, Chronicles, and Kings, you know that God might not want to go through all that again.

Jesus has final, parting words for the disciples, words to be remembered by them and by you and me. God's Kingdom is not restricted in scope; it is universal. They, His disciples, and you and I, will have, and have now, the task of bringing word of that kingdom to the world, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This, Valdosta, Georgia, is the end of the earth to one standing on the Mount of Olives.

#### The Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

June 27, 2010

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20 Galatians 5:1,13-25 Luke 9:51-62

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And so we bid farewell to Elijah! We must admit that's quite an exit; taken directly to God in a whirlwind as his servant, Elisha, looks on and sees "the chariots and horsemen of Israel."

The point is, of course, that Elijah does not die; he goes straight to heaven, and that is a pretty unusual occurrence. It's almost as though Elijah is set apart from the rest of us for some special purpose, later.

I suppose Elijah was missed by some people. A few people, particularly the King, Queen and religious establishment, were delighted to see him go. He had been so difficult, so judgmental about things like breaking a few commandments, ignoring The Law, and worshipping other people's gods. He had no ecumenical sense at all. He was rigid about the morals of kings and downright dangerous if you were the priest of some other God.

There's a sigh of relief in the house of the king: thank god, or gods, it's over. But it's not over; the mantle has been passed. The mantle was, you will recall, the hair of a camel, which would be hard to forget. Elisha has taken up the role and the mantle of his master.

Elijah had been a man of the countryside, the wilderness; Elisha is not. Elisha is a city dweller with some means, some connections. To take up that role means that Elisha must make a choice, a life-shaping choice.

Elisha can go back to living a life of the flesh, a life of relative comfort and self-gratification. He can seek power and wealth. There were then, and there are now, self-appointed prophets who spoke only what those in power wanted to hear. They were the antithesis of Elijah, but their life was easy.

Elisha can, like his master, follow a life of the Spirit, which means listening to, and speaking the words of, God. This is often not popular.

Elisha chooses the life of the Spirit. He slams the camel hair cloak of Elijah into the Jordan and shouts "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" God hears him; God empowers him; God parts the river Jordan and sends Elisha back to the people of Israel on his path of prophecy.

That's the point of this morning's Gospel. There comes a time to choose, a time to set priorities between the flesh and the Spirit. The hard sayings of Jesus shock and upset us, but they get our attention. They all point to one thing, a choice between the flesh and the Spirit.

Calling us all to make that choice is Elijah's purpose and Elisha's purpose. And seven centuries later a man who bore an uncanny resemblance to Elijah had the same purpose. He called all Israel from the banks of the Jordan from which Elijah had ascended and said to them, "Choose." Repent, turn your life around and live in the Spirit, and then go back to the people of Israel and speak the word of God. The mantle is yours now, said John the Baptist.

He said it then, and he says it now, today. The choice is ours.

# The Seventh Sunday of Pentecost

July 11, 2010

Amos 7:7-17 Psalm 82 Colossians 1:1-14 Luke 10:25-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Some time ago I was given a copy of the book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, written by an English grammarian. I see you are thinking "Gosh, that sounds like a fun read, Father Ingeman." The title, admittedly strange, has to do with punctuation, or more to the point, how the inexact use of punctuation can change the meaning of what we read. The author says that she saw an article, somewhere, about a panda bear, that if read as punctuated in the article, ate dinner, shot the cook, and left the restaurant, all because of a misplaced comma after the word "eats." Apparently the comma inspired her to write a book, and, as she developed the topic, she found all sorts of changes that we have probably not noticed or, at least, have not seen fit to challenge. Semicolons have disappeared, and dashes are everywhere.

Have you noticed that our use of words is changing, not just our punctuation. The word "likely" now takes the place of the old word "probably." The word "raise" as in "raise the price' is replaced by the word "up." We now say "A whole 'nother" instead of "another whole." Even Spellcheck questions "nother." I am sure you can think of other creeping changes. There's nothing earth-shaking about these changes; language is probably always changing, and sometimes the

very meaning of words becomes rather blurred and imprecise, which brings me to what this morning's readings are actually about.

Somehow the words "wisdom" and "knowledge" have become synonymous in our vocabulary; we use them interchangeably, and that, in any reference to scripture, is simply wrong. "Knowledge" means an intellectual familiarity with something, most often a familiarity with all the demands of Torah, the Law. "Wisdom" is an entire body of scripture that, in a biblical sense, is not the same as knowledge: wisdom is a code of behavior that makes life "pleasing to God." Proverbs, Job, Wisdom of Solomon are all books classified as "Wisdom Literature." They tell us how to live. The people for whom Luke wrote his Gospel would have known the difference; somehow we have lost it.

The young man comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies "What is the Law; what do you read?" In other words, "Do you have knowledge of God's commandments?" The young man answers, correctly, of course, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." He is absolutely bursting with knowledge, but part two of his answer to "Who is my neighbor" speaks to a woeful lack of wisdom. He knows the Law but knows nothing of what it truly calls him to do and to be.

Jesus doesn't correct him; I imagine Jesus has great compassion for him; perhaps he sees a disciple in the making. Instead, Jesus tells him a story, a parable. It's a very simple, straightforward story, nothing hidden or difficult. It almost seems too obvious, and perhaps that's the point. Wisdom is obvious.

The story is familiar: the traveler is robbed, beaten, and left by the roadside. A priest and a Levite, both Temple servants, pass by and do nothing for him. You can be sure that the two of them were filled with knowledge, and that was their undoing. They knew that if the man in the road were dead, they would be unclean and unable to

serve, unable to be in the Temple until an elaborate ritual cleansing took place, and that would be awkward and a lot of trouble. They hurry by.

The Samaritan traveler has no such reservations. He may or may not know about ritual uncleanness. If he does, he doesn't care. He sees the need for compassion, and he acts. That is "Wisdom" in the best sense of the word; that is doing what God would have His people do, care for one another. The Samaritan acts selflessly. He can gain nothing through helping a wounded stranger; he neither expects nor seeks anything in return.

The irony of it all is that of the three who saw the wounded traveler, the two who might have been his neighbors pass by, and the one who, by virtue of being a Samaritan could not, in the mind of Jesus' questioner, be a neighbor, acts as one. In that moment of recognition, when the questioner admits that God's commandment of mercy and compassion far exceeds the demands and strictures of Torah, the questioner slips from knowledge to wisdom.

Jesus tells him, and tells us today, "Now go and do likewise."

# **Vespers Homily**

#### Eleventh Sunday of Pentecost August 8, 2010

Matthew 14: 22-33

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is a colorful story of a miracle. The Disciples are alone, crossing the Sea of Galilee in a small boat while Jesus withdraws and prays. They are beset by a sudden storm, buffeted by wind and waves; it's a dark and fearful night without their master.

Jesus comes in the morning, walking on the water. Peter seeks to come to Jesus and sinks. Jesus saves him.

Peter's faith is not yet strong and mature.

In the presence of Jesus the storm ends, and they go safely to the shore.

This is a faith story for us all.

We may have such a comfortable familiarity with Jesus that, as long as all is well, we sail merrily along through life on a calm sea.

However, in times of crisis, when storms come up, and the wind is fierce, and we are being blown about by fears and conflicts and indecision, it may seem, and we may think, Jesus has abandoned us, that he is not with us.

That night can be dark and fearful indeed. Morning, light in the darkness comes when we realize that Jesus is there, walking though the worst storm; dawn comes with him.

Is that all? Actually, no. There comes a time when we have to test our faith, to walk, like Peter, in the waves and storm of life, to meet Jesus. If we make it, and it is possible, our faith is strong. If we fail, Jesus is there to help us, draw us out of the turmoil.

Actually, the moments when we sink into the turmoil can be the moments that make us strong, the moments when light dawns and we see Jesus' presence and know that it is in that presence that we may gain the faith to carry us forward.

The dark sea is not without its riches.

When you order Tilapia at a restaurant, you are ordering Saint Peter's fish.

# The Eighteenth Sunday of Pentecost

September 26, 2010

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16 1 Timothy 6:6-19 Luke 16:19-31

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There was a wonderful musical years ago called *Fiddler on the Roof.* It was set in a shtetel, a Jewish village in Russia called Anatevka, in the late nineteenth century, the principal character being Tevye, the milkman.

Tevye is poor, his life is hard, and he's a dreamer; he dreams of being rich.

One of his songs is "If I were a Rich Man." He lives in a hovel and dreams of a big house with real staircases, but primarily he dreams of having prestige and being respected, dreams of having "a seat by the Eastern wall" in the synagogue. That's where the rich men sit. They are symbolically closest to Jerusalem and, therefore, closest to God.

Tevye dreams that people would ask him questions about important matters, about Torah, the Law, weighty philosophical and religious questions, and take his answers seriously. He sings, ". . . it wouldn't matter if I answered right or wrong; if you're rich they think you really know."

In Tevye's world, and in the world of all those Pharisees listening to Jesus, being rich indicates God's special favor. Where do you suppose that idea came from?

It all began with a very simple statement made by God to Israel: "I will be your God, you will be my people." That's a promise to guide them, protect them, and particularly to enrich them with land and crops and power and wealth, and lots and lots of people.

It's quite simple to reason backward to that statement and say that if I am rich, I must be very special in God's favor; if I am rich, it's a sign. Cause and effect are reversed; it's called reasoning *post hoc, propter hoc.* 

By the same logic, if being rich proves that you are beloved of God, then not being rich is proof of the opposite: poor men such as Tevye must be rejected by God; otherwise they too would be rich. So, if God rejects them, who am I to contradict God, says the rich man.

Of course it's wrong. It's a distortion of the Law, a distortion of the commandments, but by the time of Jesus, it was a very old and generally accepted distortion. Even the poor people believed it. "If you're rich, they think you really know."

Actually, in many ways Jesus' teaching isn't really so revolutionary. His teaching isn't new; it's a reassertion of things that had been known long ago and had been forgotten. It's a calling back to a concern, a responsibility for others that had been at the very roots of the traditions of the Jewish people, a calling to compassion that had been supplanted over time by rationalized self-interest. When Jesus says that He has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, that not one line of all that is past will be lost, He is calling Israel to that ancient relationship to God and to each other. That's a good message to hear once in a while. The world does tend to forget.

Many who were immersed in self-interest, such as some of those Pharisees, would not be swayed, even by the Resurrection, someone returning from the dead as the absolute demonstration of God's compassion and care for His children that is the model for our care for one another. God's care and compassion is without qualifications and conditions. That's what He calls us to.

# The Nineteenth Sunday of Pentecost

October 3, 2010

Lamentations 1:1-6 Psalm 37:1-10 2 Timothy 1:1-14 Luke 17:5-10

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let's talk a bit about "grace." Grace, God's grace, really is the subject of this morning's readings.

Paul, in his letter to Timothy, tells us that grace was given to us before the ages began.

*Given:* Grace is a gift from the creator God to His creation, of which we are a part and recipients. It's not something earned or necessarily even deserved. God chooses to bestow it.

Before the ages: Grace is implicit in God's creation. Having created all things, God says, ". . . and it was good." Grace reflects loving investment in what God has made.

Grace therefore is not to be earned by our good works. Rather, our good works are an acknowledgment of, and our grateful response to, grace. They are "what we ought to do."

In Jesus, God's eternal, unearned grace is given tangible form, a form that even we can understand. The abstract concepts of love, compassion, and sacrifice can really be understood only by their

demonstration. I think that love, compassion, and sacrifice for us is a fair definition of grace; Jesus is their embodiment.

We see love in God's voluntarily taking the form of our humanity, becoming fully one of us, complete with our pains, cares, uncertainties and limitations.

We see compassion in the very presence of Jesus, preaching, teaching, and healing those in physical or spiritual need.

We see sacrifice in Jesus' death on the cross. There can be no Resurrection without sacrifice. Even if the story ended at the cross and we knew no more, the voluntary sacrifice for our salvation of one perfect, sinless being is the demonstration of God's love and compassion. The empty tomb confirms it.

So, why are we here? We are here to celebrate God's love, compassion, and sacrifice: that is the very heart of the faith we profess, the very heart of the Holy Eucharist.

We are a church with an incarnational theology; we see God's presence and love for His creation in this world, not as an abstract idea, but as a fact that is constantly demonstrated in our lives. We celebrate that sense of His guiding presence.

We celebrate God's compassion for His children. We read of God's healing words and healing touch, and we know that His words and touch heal us and make us whole. God knows us well. God is one with us and one of us. His compassion for us springs from His incarnation, His humanity. God promises no smooth path through life, just that He will be with us to help us over rocks.

We celebrate God's sacrifice in the crucifixion of His Son, Jesus Christ. If the word "celebration" seems inappropriate for such a painful event, consider the level of love and compassion that led Him to the cross. Consider the gift given to us in death: the assurance of

the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of life eternal. We give thanks, as best we can in our human limitations, each time we share the blessed bread and wine, not for the memory of something done long ago, but for a gift and promise constantly made new. God's sacrifice is real for us here, today, now.

Grace is unconditional, inexhaustible, and never diminished. The Psalmist said rightly, "God's mercies are new every morning."

How can we possibly respond to such love, compassion, and sacrifice? We are truly inadequate. We can do nothing to merit such grace. It's not earned; it is a gift.

We can only do what we ought to do. Our every word and action should say, "thank you."

# The Twenty-Second Sunday of Pentecost

October 24, 2010

Sirach 35:12-17 Psalm 84:1-6 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 Luke 18:9-14

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I actually know that Pharisee. He isn't here in this church, I hasten to explain. Why do I say he is a Pharisee? He never missed church, always sat in the front row, and supported every cause or project that came along. All of which sounds truly commendable, doesn't it? I thought so too, but then one day I complimented him on his generosity and he replied, "I am buying my way into heaven." I thought he was kidding, but he wasn't.

So in this morning's Gospel, we have his ancestor, probably in the front of the Temple, loudly proclaiming his own profound piety, commending himself for the good works he does, all of which is for the benefit of those around him, but particularly for the benefit of God, because the Pharisee knows that God is keeping track of such things. The man is consumed by pride and is convinced that he will be rewarded. He is doing what the writer of Sirach, our first reading, calls a "bribe" in hope of gain.

In contrast, there's the tax collector; nobody likes tax collectors. Does God like tax collectors? The man is not so sure. All he can do is confess his faults and sins and throw himself on God's mercy. He cries for the undeserved, unearned compassion of God.

What do you suppose that Pharisee will do when he doesn't get what he wants? What happens when he perceives that God is not rewarding him in the manner to which he feels entitled? What happens when God doesn't accept the bribe? The man will be gone in a second, feeling rejected and unappreciated by God. His faith is conditional and ultimately self-serving and disappears like a puff of smoke.

Consider Paul and his letter to Timothy. You realize, of course, that for various reasons, Paul was about as popular as a tax collector. Ironically, Paul was a Pharisee himself and probably as loud as the one in the Gospel. Paul at first was mistrusted, for good cause, by the Christians since he had been really enthusiastic about persecuting them. Then, of course, when he became the great missionary for Christianity, he was rejected and abused by the Jews, not to mention the Romans. Then, too, he could be truly abrasive and long-winded in his sermons even with his followers. Paul could be difficult.

When Paul writes, "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith," he knows whereof he speaks. What has brought him through it all? He knows that it has been the grace of God, and he knows, as does that tax collector, that he has done nothing to deserve it or earn it. His conversion was humbling, not exalting. It was so humbling that Paul never speaks of it; Luke tells us that Paul was thrown down and blinded. Perhaps something like that has brought the tax collector to the temple in humble contrition. Paul regains his sight, physical and spiritual, and sees that God is present in Jesus Christ, God's gift to His Creation.

In this letter to Timothy, reflecting on what that has meant in his life, Paul tells us that he knows that God stands by those who stand by Him and that God rewards those who are truly, sincerely faithful. God knows sincerity when He sees it.

You see the unearned, undeserved gift of God to the tax collector and to Paul is ours, yours and mine. He has given the gift to us in the presence of Jesus Christ, and in that gift, we have a promise of salvation and eternal life. Life itself is a gift. We are called to return the gift, to give our lives to God as He has given to us, and do it as generously as we can.

### All Souls' Day

November 2, 2010

Isaiah 25:6-9 Psalm 130 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 John 5:24-27

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If we close our eyes and visualize "saints," we see such as Peter, Paul, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, apostles and martyrs: names we know.

It's right to remember them; they are the great heroes and heroines of the Church in their times – the ones who kept the light of Christ bright in the eyes of the world: preachers and teachers, healers, and mystics, singers and writers, giving witness to the presence and the power of God.

We celebrate them on All Saints' Day, November first.

What of all those good and faithful Christians whose names are not well known or perhaps, not known at all; the ones who lived their lives following, as best they could, the faith of Our Lord and died in the faith? They are legion.

Since the tenth century, the church has set aside this day, November 2, to remember them or rather to celebrate their memory.

We need not look very far to see them. Many sat here in this church, in these pews. With time the image of their presence may have blurred, and their names may be remembered only in the register of the Parish, but here they sat, and prayed and gave of themselves to others, and here they remain.

They are our heritage.

They are the Communion of Saints, every Christian who has ever lived, is living today, including you and me, or will live in time to come. That is the Communion of Saints. It is the continuity of faith down through time, the faith we share today, and the faith that we will pass on to generations to come. It is the faith passed from one individual to another, through word and deed, year after year, time and time again, passed most often by nameless heroes and heroines. It is the faith we hold, that we have received in God's constant presence in, and love for, His Creation and in His promise to us that we shall attain eternal life in Him.

We celebrate them today.

### The Twenty-Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

November 14, 2010

Malachi 4:1-2 Psalm 98 2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13 Luke 21:5-19

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There was a time in high school English class when we read the "classics." The book I particularly remember was *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. I was struck then, and am struck now, by its opening line,

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

Dickens' novel is set in the darkest days of the French Revolution. It is the best of times, though far from perfect, if you are English; dreadful times if you are French. Perhaps that's Dickens' point: the times are good or bad depending on who you are. The good times come easy, don't they? Compared to much of the world, and much of history, you and I have had many years of the good times of health and relative prosperity. The worries have been occasional and few, and we have had lots of support to deal with them. Life has, for the most part, been good.

But these have been the bad times for much of the world. Ironically, it has been the same time as our good times. I tend to awake and get up early, and find, having read the paper, not much to do but watch the news of television. That is not the way to begin the day on a positive note!

I do not recommend going out into the day carrying a full load of crime, natural disaster, hurricanes, earthquakes, cholera, explosions. Such is the news; the alternative is to be told how overweight and out of shape I am because I do not practice Zumba or own a special machine. The better alternative is probably to stay in bed.

Why do I tell you this? I do so because this morning's readings speak of much the same situation and pose the same question: "How do we get through the bad times?"

Can you imagine sitting next to Jesus hearing him tell of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem? It's the center of your life; God lives in there. Can you imagine hearing Jesus' prediction of social disintegration, families torn apart, trials and persecution just for sitting there next Jesus? Bad times are coming, terrible times. Just where do you place your hopes; where do you turn for strength and support?

Where does this age, this time of ours, place its hopes? If you really believe the marketing, you would say "technology." People will draw closer together through technology and electronic communications. We are told that it is so, aren't we? A little story: Happy and I were having lunch in a local restaurant recently. At the next table was a young couple. Both of them were texting someone throughout the entire lunch, never looking at each other or exchanging a word. They may have been communicating with somebody, but they weren't even present with each other. We see it constantly, on the street, in cars, in restaurants, in stores, at the symphony. If two people who are seated three feet apart aren't in communion with each other what does it bode for the bad times, where is the support and the strength? Is the world made better; is life improved?

Did Father Ingeman say technology is bad? No, technology can do many things for us, but there are things it cannot do. It is not the answer to the bad times. It cannot solve the problems of the heart. If not technology, what? I'm sure you know what I'm going to say. The

only true lasting support we have, in good times and bad, is faith, specifically faith that God cares enough to share those times with us.

Long, long ago Isaiah looked on a nation shattered and destroyed by invasions, captivity, and social disintegration and proclaimed that despite the darkness of the moment, a time would come when all would be made right, that there would be peace and justice and compassion and security. God's Kingdom would come. Has it come? In a way, yes. Slowly, slowly, to be sure it has come, even though early morning television may not bother to mention it. It hasn't come through grand pronouncements or programs; it can be seen in the selfless efforts of individual Christians. It can be seen in your efforts; it's that simple. It can be seen in your gift of time and talent and treasure to better God's work here, beginning here and, like a ripple, carrying to the ends of the earth. Never think that what you can give is insignificant; it is the very foundation of what will, ultimately, dispel the bad times.

Paul said it best. "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right."

## The Last Sunday of Epiphany

March 6, 2011

Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 2 or 99
2 Peter 1: 16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, but the Gospel reading is of the Transfiguration; we celebrate the Transfiguration on August 6. Why this reading on this day?

Perhaps we should ask ourselves just what is transfigured. The quick answer is Jesus. His face shines like the sun; His garments become dazzling white, so it says and perhaps that really does reflect the memory of that moment in the minds of Peter, James, and John. Perhaps, though, it is an attempt to put into words, to somehow explain, what happened up there on that mountain. Those three aren't eloquent users of words; they aren't scholars; they must use the words they know that will begin the tell people what that moment meant. So they fall back on the story of Moses and the burning bush, Moses' face shining because of his confrontation with God. And the cloud and the glory mean, throughout the Old Testament, that God is present.

So three sleepy, frightened fisherman try to find words to speak of the close presence of God, an event too great to be described. Jesus does change on that mountain in more ways than His appearance. He is steeled for the final sacrificial act of His earthly presence. He turns toward Jerusalem and the cross.

And the world is changed; we are changed. The profound change is in the world's relationship to God.

That relationship may have been simple at first, the covenant "I will be your God and you will be my people," – a simple, personal relationship – had become, over the centuries, corporate and externalized.

The premise of the Temple in Jerusalem was that there was just one place to meet God. God was no longer to be found under the stars of a desert night or in a burning bush. And there was only one set of acceptable practices for worshiping God. Needless to say, all that was not God's idea.

So the simple, personal relationship of God and the ancients became complex, external, and ritualized.

What is transfigured or transformed on that mountain? God speaks and says, "This is my beloved Son; listen to Him." What has Jesus said, again and again?

His path leads down the mountain to Jerusalem and to the Temple.

Why do you suppose do we have the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple; what is He really doing? He is driving out all the practices, the accumulation of clutter that had come between God and His people. He is reasserting something that had been known and lost – that God is present, not behind a curtain in a building, but here and everywhere; that God demands no burnt offerings from His people but a sincere, profound faith. The Temple is a symbol of all those things that we have interposed between ourselves and our God.

That's what Jesus had preached in His words, in His healings, in His miracles, and He preaches it still to us.

Perhaps the three sleepy disciples did not hear God quite correctly; perhaps the voice said, "Have you listened to Him?"

### The Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 22, 2011

Acts 7:55-60 Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 1 Peter 2: 2-10 John 14:1-14

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"What is to prevent me from being baptized?" so asked the Ethiopian traveler of Philip.

Actually, that was asked of me by my dental hygienist in Savannah several years ago. Not at all the conversation one expects at such times. When I could finally respond, I said, "Nothing, and why do you ask?"

Her name is Kathleen, a good Irish name in a very Irish-Catholic city; I just would have assumed that she had been baptized, but somehow it hadn't happened. Then, as an adult, she began to take part in yearly missions to Belize, with Episcopalians, of course. Something touched her; she felt drawn to the Church, or to the faith; she was quite serious.

So she was baptized in a beautiful old garden in Savannah, by a fountain, with the staff as witnesses, by water in a dental bowl.

The Ethiopian was touched, too. Was it what he was reading? I doubt it. I think God touched Him as surely as He touched Kathleen, and having been touched, he went "on his way rejoicing," a child of God.

It is, as 1 John tells us, "Not that we loved God, but that He loves us." In that baptism, Kathleen, and all that have ever been baptized, are adopted by God: we become His children. He "abides in us, and we in him." We are one with Our Lord Jesus Christ, connected to Him and centered upon Him as branches to a vine.

"Abide." In the Greek the word is *menu*. It means far more than abide. Greek words are subtle; they have many meanings to choose from. Perhaps the better meaning is "remains." Baptism is permanent and indelible. The presence of God remains in us always, and, more subtly, the word implies a very close affiliation and relationship like a child to a father. "This is my beloved child."

Then too, it means "endure." That new identity can endure all the distractions and temptations that can draw us away from God. How? Because it is God's volition that we be His children and nothing, absolutely nothing can be greater than His will.

It means "persevere," a call to face those distractions with courage, secure in the knowledge of who we are.

The call to Kathleen and to all baptized, to you and to me, is a call to faith and security.

#### The Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 29, 2011

Acts 17:22-31 Psalm 66:7-18 1 Peter 3:13-22 John 14:15-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The words of this morning's Gospel are words of comfort, dealing with what we would call separation anxiety.

That is the state of mind of Jesus' disciples.

Jesus' arrest, trial and execution had been horribly traumatic for them but quick; the disciples had no time beforehand to agonize over the thought of losing Him.

This is different. Jesus has been telling them for some time that He's leaving, preparing them for the moment when He will ascend to the Father; even the most obtuse disciple must have caught on at this point.

What is the obvious question in the mind of every one of the disciples? Spoken or unspoken, they are thinking, "Now what; what about us?"

They are thinking that, theoretically it's just fine to give me a few weeks of instruction on being an apostle, a missionary, and an evangelist, but it's a little much to expect me to actually go out and

be one, actually go out and tell perfect strangers about Jesus and the Resurrection.

They are thinking, "What if I fail? What if people don't like me, ignore me, laugh at me?"

You remember, of course, that is exactly what happens to Paul a few years later. He's done pretty well preaching the Gospel to some pretty rustic crowds until now; now he's in Athens at the Areopagus speaking to a pickup crowd of sophisticated Athenians. They are amused. They tell him, "We'll hear more about this," but of course they mean, "Don't call us, we'll call you." You can hear the smothered laughter.

All of which takes us back to the disciples. They are thinking "People might throw a few stones at me, but at least that would show they are taking me seriously, although stones and laughter and being ignored all hurt. So, I think I'll just stay in this nice, cozy, safe upper room; it's calm here."

Does any of that sound familiar? Have you escaped the dry mouth, the pounding heart, the shaking hands and the shortness of breath, all at the moment when you have been called to step forward, to make the leap of faith and courage to do something beyond yourself?

Long, long ago, in a church far, far away, the first time I served as a chalice administrator, I was halfway from the altar to the rail when it struck me that I was carrying a cup containing the blood of Christ. There were whitecaps in the chalice.

What got me through that moment of shaky panic? What gets us all beyond those times, outside ourselves so that we can be apostles, so that we can speak, by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ, speak it even to a world that doesn't know what it's missing?

It must be the Advocate or Comforter or Holy Spirit that is the continuing presence of Christ in our lives. Jesus promised the disciples and promises us that it will be so, that He will never leave them, or leave us alone. Is that not what we all need in the times of stress, the knowledge that we have someone, that we have one who has boundless knowledge of what stress means, Jesus, to be with us as we muddle through?

### **Trinity Sunday**

June 19, 2011

Genesis 1:1-2:4a
Psalm 8 or Canticle 2 or 13
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
Matthew 28:16-20

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Long, long ago when I was about to graduate from seminary, I heard one of our fellow graduates asking his bishop, the Bishop of Northern Indiana at that time, for advice on what to do as a priest. My seminary was truly Anglo-Catholic; the bishop was very high church. His advice was, "Always wear black, always have them call you 'Father,' and never try to explain the Holy Trinity."

I really haven't done well with the first two over the years, but I have managed to observe the third. I had my assistant preach on Trinity Sunday until this year; she is in the Dominican Republic. So, with apologies to the good bishop, we begin.

Here's a different story indeed!

Luke has told us about Jesus' farewell to His Disciples and His ascension at Bethany, on the Mount of Olives just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. John has told us that Jesus breathed upon the Disciples and imparted the Holy Spirit, again in Jerusalem. The writer of the Acts of the Apostles tells us that the Disciples were filled with the Spirit, empowered and encouraged right there in Jerusalem. Apparently, everything important happens in Jerusalem.

But then here's Matthew packing them all off to Galilee, far from Jerusalem, sort of rural backwater of Israel. Of course, that is where the story began, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee approximately three years earlier.

Matthew really insists on Galilee. In his Gospel a few verses earlier, Matthew has an angel tell the women at the empty tomb, "He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him." And they are told to give that message to the Disciples, which they promptly do.

Several chapters before that, Jesus Himself tells the Disciples that after He is raised, He will meet them in Galilee. That's three times.

There's no Ascension from a mountaintop, no farewell discourse for the Disciples; no Pentecost with tongues of flame and rushing wind. They just go home. Why? Perhaps it was to catch their breath; perhaps to take stock and to sort things out, to ask each other, "What now?"

It is the critical moment. Jesus had prefaced His promise to meet them in Galilee with a prophecy from the prophet Zechariah: "I will strike the shepherd, and the flock will be scattered." That could have happened; at that moment it was a real possibility. It all might have ended right there on that mountaintop. They could have gone fishing or tax collecting, whatever they had been doing, and we would not be here this morning.

But they didn't, and here we are. Perhaps that was due to Jesus' last line, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." If the shepherd is present, there is no reason for the sheep to scatter.

Just how will Jesus be with them? Matthew is not clear about that; you and I know that is the work of the Holy Spirit. In Matthew this is the moment of empowerment. Jesus tells His Disciples, "All authority is mine," meaning that in Jesus the authority, the presence of God, is

here among His people, among them. The authority is mine, and now I share it with you. You and I will do the work of God the Father, baptizing, teaching, making disciples.

And in that is the Holy Trinity we celebrate today. God the Father imparts all authority to God the Son; God the Son imparts that authority to His Disciples, to us, through His continuing presence, and that is the Holy Spirit. There is one authority and one God, one presence. Those Disciples passed on that authority, the realization of the presence of the Spirit. And here we are still passing it on, generation after generation. God is present in Jesus, and Jesus is present to us in the Holy Spirit.

Actually, Paul's letter to the Corinthians that we have heard this morning might well have been the words of Jesus to those Disciples as they tried to discern their future. And actually, this morning's words do not convey the meaning of the original Greek; that happens sometimes. Paul really told them, as a community living out the commandments of Jesus, "Keep encouraging one another; keep perfecting yourselves," and finally, "May all things go well with you."

And, Paul tells them and tells us, "As you do these things, be assured that you are loved by God, you have received the Grace of Jesus Christ, and you are living in Communion with the Holy Spirit."

## The Fourth Sunday of Pentecost

July 10, 2011

Genesis 25: 19-34 Psalm 119: 105-112 Romans 8: 1-11 Matthew 13: 1-9. 18-23

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A moment of pity for Esau: he never really had a chance. Even at birth his brother Jacob has a hold on him – literally – holding him back. Not a good start in this world.

Apparently, things never really got better between them. I imagine Esau became a hunter, a man of the field, at least in part to get away from Jacob.

Of course, too, Jacob could truly say, "Mom likes me best."

So hungry Esau comes home after a long time out in the field, hungry and tired, and Jacob sells him a meal, stew and bread, in exchange for Esau's birthright, that is, his future. Jacob takes Esau's place in the family and in the tribe, all for a bit of stew.

Esau is the absolute poster boy for the third category in Jesus' parable about seeds and sowers. Esau's thorns are his hunger and his fatigue; he is overwhelmed by his personal cares. All that matters is his own momentary comfort, and so he loses everything.

Jesus, of course, isn't speaking of physical hunger; his thorns, the cares of this world, overwhelm the Spirit, overwhelm faith itself. We have all met the Esaus of this world who say they can no longer believe in God because . . . fill in the reason. God simply doesn't meet their expectation, doesn't do what they want in some situation. They are the soil that has received the sower's seed and let it die.

There are others; there are those who receive that seed and are absolutely thrilled, filled with enthusiasm, but they never go any further. It's all emotional without understanding what the seed is, what the message of the Gospel is, and so, when some other seeds fall, off they go, just as enthusiastic about something else entirely. We've all met them.

There are those whose reception of the seed is transient, short-lived. Theirs is a shallow, superficial faith that simply has no roots. Those are the puzzling ones. They have heard the word, they know the faith, and yet they fall away; nether hot nor cold, just utterly neutral, as though it had no part in their lives. We've all met them, too.

This is getting to be depressing, isn't it? At least it might be if Jesus hadn't acknowledged the fourth type of faith, the "good soil." Those are the ones whose faith has depth, who do not turn away at discomfort or discouragement, who hear and understand what God's grace means in this world and in their lives.

They are the ones who are "free." They are free because they live in what Paul tells the Romans is the Spirit. They are freed from the law of sin and death, the overwhelming concerns of the flesh, because they are secure.

Do we have troubles? That is a silly question; life is not perfect, and nowhere does it say it is supposed to be perfect. We have the promise that no matter how difficult it might be, we have one who has lived with difficulty, an understanding savior, one who can be called

upon to be with us for help and support. One who actually would go to the cross for us. That is the faith that falls upon that variety of soils.

Have you ever heard the cry "HUAU"? The military do it as a response. Do you know what it means? It means "heard, understood, acted upon." That's not a bad mantra for a Christian, is it?

### The Eleventh Sunday of Pentecost

August 28, 2011

Exodus 3:1-15 Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c Romans 12:9-21 Matthew 16:21-28

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Some years ago, when I was a very new priest just out of seminary, I had a children's Sunday School class. I had covered the lesson assigned one Sunday, and so I asked if there were any questions – a big mistake. One child, a little boy, as I recall, raised his hand and asked, "Can you name the twelve disciples?" Being young, a recent seminary graduate and filled with knowledge of all things related to theology, scripture and the church, I replied, "Of course."

There are Peter, Andrew, John, James, Phillip, Matthew, Judas – pause – Thomas – pause – Nathanael. I could see the child counting. It wasn't twelve.

Then I thought, "Why can't I name them?" I think it's because they are two-dimensional; by and large they are just names. We know nothing about them. They are figures of legend and, therefore, not fact, not really one of us.

Except Peter; Peter is definitely one of us. He is truly threedimensional. He is the most human, the most sympathetic of them all. He is complex. He has all our strength and our weakness. He is impulsive; he leaps from a boat to meet Jesus walking on the water, then realizes he can't and begins to sink. He can be brave, drawing a sword and lopping off the ear of one who would arrest Jesus, and then be a coward saying, "I don't know the man," denying Jesus and running away.

But then he can have flashes of insight. When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" it's Peter who replies, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." He has listened to God.

Now Jesus tells them, "I must go to Jerusalem; I will be arrested and killed and on the third day, I will be raised from the dead." Jesus speaks of death and resurrection. Peter cries, "No! This will never happen to you!"

Jesus' death will be the work of humans; Jesus' resurrection will be the work of God. How can Peter cry, "No?"

Because, in his emotion, he has heard only the first part, the human part, the word "death." He has failed to hear the second part, the divine part, the God part. He does not understand that if there is no death, there can be no resurrection. He's angry and hurt and frightened; he's human, fallible, and sometimes deaf.

Jesus' rebuke of Peter is not really so harsh. He simply tells Peter, "Stop, think, listen to what I am saying; all that I am saying." If God is at work, it is not your place or even in your power to say, "No." To do so is to take the place of God, the role of Satan the questioner, the adversary. "Get behind me, Satan" isn't banishment. It's a call for Peter to support Jesus in this hour, to get with the program.

It's a call for Peter, and for you and me, to "take up our cross." The cross, and it isn't light, is to accept the divine, accept that God can and does act in this world in ways we do not understand. God does not need our permission, nor does God need to explain. That is a call to faith, a call to trust.

We all know the creeds. There are three in the Prayer Book: the Nicene Creed that we will all say in few minutes; the Apostles' Creed that we say at certain services; and the Athanasian Creed that goes on for two pages of tiny print that we never say at all. Actually scripture contains many creeds. Here is one that is ancient, from John's Gospel. We know it well.

"For God so loved the world that he gave – sacrificed – His only begotten Son, so that those who believe in – have faith – shall not perish but have everlasting life."

## **Ordination Sermon: Walter Hobgood**

**September 24, 2011** 

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I am having a nostalgic moment. I was ordained to the priesthood here at Christ Church in 1987. I sat where Walter is sitting, listening to a sermon. Actually, sort of listening; there was much on my mind at that moment. I must explain.

Perhaps you know that no one is ever quite as holy as when they graduate from seminary. There I stood in the entryway that morning in my shiny new vestments, crammed full of theology and scripture and Greek and Hebrew and church history and ethics and, because I had been to Nashotah House, lots and lots of liturgics, shrouded in a vague aura of incense. I was very holy indeed.

The music for the processional began, the procession processed, and in that holy state, I started down the aisle. At the third pew from the back, on the right-hand side facing the altar, a little girl suddenly jumped in front of me, arms wide, shouting "Tada!" She had a Chiquita Banana sticker in the middle of her forehead.

Her grandmother quickly wrestled her into the pew. I went on my way; somehow it just wasn't quite the same. Perhaps the proper word would be deflated, or perhaps humbled. Actually, I think the little girl did me a great favor. On reflection, I realized that the most important one present wasn't me, it was God, a level of holiness that quickly made hash of my pretensions.

I cannot imagine how often I have heard this reading from Isaiah; it is very popular at ordinations and the final phrase is, to me, always new. God asks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" It's a question and God waits for the correct answer, very, very patiently. A wise priest once said that it's not so much a matter of saying "yes" to that question; it's a matter of just not saying "no." God waits for the response, freely given, "Here I am, send me" – where, when, and to whom will be God's decision and God's plan in God's time. God's people are everywhere, and all are in need of a Walter.

In a few minutes Walter will promise to be a "faithful pastor" to those people God entrusts to him. We don't often use the word "pastor" in the Episcopal Church, do we? It really shouldn't sound strange. A pastor is a shepherd as in the Gospel of John. It is all God's flock; Jesus is the Good Shepherd who leads and guards and nourishes them, and now calls Walter, entrusting Walter to be the shepherd of that flock in God's name. In a few minutes Walter will commit himself to pattern his life to reflect the presence of Jesus, to be that pastor, that shepherd. That is not an easy or a simple commitment to make in this world. This is very serious business. There are wolves aplenty, and sheep can be very fractious.

We are privileged to be present when Walter makes that commitment.

What, exactly, are we witnessing?

Several years ago a nephew asked me to assist at his wedding in Annapolis, Maryland. The wedding was at Saint Mary's Roman Catholic Church, a really magnificent mid-nineteenth century church in the old part of Annapolis by the bay. The priest celebrating the wedding was a Redemptorist Father of the order that had established the church in 1853. He was quite gracious in allowing me to take full part in the service.

The reason I mention this has to do with the priest's homily, his charge to the bride and groom. He said "marriage is not a contract; it's a covenant." What's the difference? The difference is in the word "if."

There is no word "if" in a covenant. A covenant is not conditional. You, my dear friend, are called into a covenant with God. God hasn't hired you for a task; God has called you to be a priest, His priest.

There is really no such thing as a part-time priest. We are priests, every hour of every day, no matter where we are or what we are doing at the moment. The title "Father" and the little cross after our names really mean something; once we use them, we accept the life and the responsibility that goes with them. When needed, a priest goes; it's as simple as that. If it's inconvenient, tough; it's probably less convenient for the people who need us. That, too, is twenty-four seven.

And, there is no such thing as "comp time." Jesus doesn't take comp time; God doesn't take comp time. We mustn't confuse comp time with Sabbath time or vacation time; they are not the same thing. Sabbath and vacation time are for your physical and spiritual wellbeing, so that you will not burn out from exhaustion. Comp time says, "Well, I've just put in five hours of work for God, so God owes me." There is that contractual "if." We are not priests by the hour.

Walter, we are what are called "Late-Vocation" priests. I can tell you from my life that all your experiences, all your skills, all your accomplishments are useful, nothing in your life will be wasted. Who and what you are are centered on serving God in His church. God has formed you over time, your entire life, for His purpose. All your talents are now at His service.

And God is at your service. There are two parts to a covenant. You are God's priest; He is your God, which means that He will be with you every hour of every day to support you and strengthen you and guide you. You are going to be tired, take my word for it. And you will be discouraged and sad and even angry. You may even wonder at times just what God is doing. This is a tough job. Just know that you are not in this alone, ever. That knowledge is where your strength will come from.

## Thanksgiving Day

November 24, 2011

Deuteronomy 8:7-18
Psalm 65
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
Luke 17:11-19

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I don't really like turkey very much. I mean it's just fine one day a year, specifically today, and in pre-sliced quantities of white meat; otherwise, not. I must explain.

Perhaps you know that I grew up as an Army dependent. We lived quite a few places during my father's career, and at one time, when I was in high school, we actually lived at Fort Sheridan, an army post on Lake Michigan about twenty miles north of Chicago. That is significant because both my parents' families then lived in Chicago, all of them.

So, family togetherness seemed to call for shared holidays, which leads me to one particular Thanksgiving long ago. It began at noon at the home of my mother's family. That would be the home of my cousin, Bill, the one who set fire to my grandfather's lawn in Wisconsin one Fourth of July; I'm sure I've mentioned him. It was just a small gathering, all sitting around one dining room table, and we had the traditional turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes, corn, peas, and pumpkin pie.

Then, around three or three-thirty we traveled to the home of my father's parents, not so far away, at which there was that large gathering of Norwegians that I may have mentioned. My cousin, Jan, the noisy one who played drum solos uninvited, was present. I may have mentioned that my grandfather, my father's father, always sang the Doxology as grace before meals, even in restaurants. I am sure he sang it that particular day, although I was relegated to the children's table in the parlor, supervised by my Great-Aunt Nancy. We had the traditional turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes, corn, peas, and pumpkin pie.

After the meal, as the old Norwegians were dozing in a state of turkey-torpor in easy chairs in the living room, the ladies sharing quality time in the kitchen, Cousin Jan said, "Let's take a walk." It seemed like a good idea at the time. At this point it was dark, and snow had begun to fall. We trudged through the snow, and I realized that this was not just a walk; Jan had a destination in mind. It was, of course, the home of his girlfriend, to which he had obviously been invited for, of course, Thanksgiving dinner.

They were very nice to me, although I'm sure they wondered who I was and why I was there. They very graciously made a place for me at the dining room table, and we ate – join me – the traditional turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes, corn, peas, and pumpkin pie.

Thank you for sharing all that, Father Ingeman, and do you perhaps have a point?

Yes, and it is this: Thanksgiving isn't just about food on the table; Thanksgiving is about memories. My real memory is of time shared with family and friends. My memory is of conversation and laughter and love for one another. Thanksgiving is here, now, sharing all these things with our parish family whom I care for very much.

#### The First Sunday of Advent

November 27, 2011

Isaiah 64:1-9 Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:24-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Wilmington Island near Savannah, on which I was rector of the Episcopal Church for some years, had a tradition called "Opening the Doors of Christmas," an event shared by all the island's churches.

The tradition was that on the first Sunday of Advent all the churches would put up all their Christmas decorations, lights, trees, and music, and invite the public to come in for refreshments. It was very popular.

As you may know, one does not lightly break traditions in Savannah; however, we said, when approached, that we Episcopalians would be delighted to open the doors and greet the public, but we would be keeping Advent. So we had our purple frontal and our Advent wreath and candles and some greens in the sanctuary and a few Advent hymns playing. I believe we were truly counter-cultural and, frankly, a disappointment to some who entered. To others, however, I think it was a revelation. For one, at least, it was a bit of nostalgia: the Lutheran Pastor on the island said, wistfully, the Episcopalians are the only ones who truly understand Advent and Christmas.

What is it that we understand? I think it is the magnitude, the wonder of the Incarnation, God becoming one with his creatures, the event

we call Christmas, and, understanding that, the realization that we cannot simply say, one day, how nice, open gifts, and go on with our everyday lives; we have to prepare ourselves. We need time to ponder and savor the moment.

The word *Adventus* means coming. It is also a Latin translation of the Greek *Parousia* which means "Second Coming," specifically the Second Coming of Christ. We are living in what has been called "the between time." We look back and we look forward. Our readings this morning point to both.

In Mark's Gospel, the shortest and most direct of the gospels, Jesus speaks of that *Parousia*, the end time, an event presaged by cosmic events that may come at any time. You know, if your mind is on Santa, Christmas trees, colored lights, and candy canes, you just might be put off by that reading, and you are supposed to be. It's a warning. Jesus warns us against complacency, against the assumption that it won't or can't happen in the lifetime of his hearers, assuring them that it can and it may. The people of Jesus' time did not expect, and therefore did not see, that the Messiah, the Christ had come and was standing before them. Jesus warns us to be alert and open to the real possibility that you and I might see that Second Coming. Awesome thought, isn't it? Are we ready for that? That's why we keep Advent – to make ready.

How exactly are we supposed to do that? We might try a selfexamination, that's always good, and daily devotions, readings and prayers that help us to focus on what has been and what will be.

#### The Feast of the Holy Name

January 1, 2012

Numbers 6:22-27 Psalm 8 Philippians 2:5-11 Luke 2:15-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Of course the name isn't really Jesus. Jesus is a much later translation of a Greek word, phonetically *yesus*, which is itself a Greek translation of the Hebrew, *Yeshua* – the same as Joshua – which means "God delivers" or "God saves."

In the Gospel of Luke the angel Gabriel tells Mary to name her child Jesus; in Matthew an angel tells Joseph that the name of the child is to be Jesus. So it is a name chosen and given by God, predicting, as did many Jewish names, the child's future. The future will be "deliverance" – deliverance of whom, deliverance from what?

If you had been there, you would have had an easy answer to those two questions. Your quick answer would be deliverance of the Jews of course, deliverance from Roman domination. It would be so obvious to you that you would look no further.

Jesus didn't do that. Instead Jesus is there to deliver the Jews from themselves, from the suffocating entanglement of laws and rules and rituals that had, over time, stifled and strangled Jewish spirituality and the Jews' relationship to God.

Jesus is the action of God to restore that relationship.

The reading from Numbers speaks of a bright springtime in that relationship. God will put His name on Israel, claim them for His own people and bless them, making Israel the heir to His kingdom. All that had been God's volition, God's doing; Israel needed only to accept it. Then it became complicated.

Little by little, layer upon layer, they built a wall of rules and practices between God and themselves. The breaking down of that wall was the deliverance that Israel needed, that God promised, and that Jesus brought.

This time that deliverance isn't proclaimed first to priests and kings; here the angels sing to shepherds. God knows that announcing it to Moses and Aaron and Aaron's sons, the priests and Levites who were to build that wall, hadn't worked out well. This time angels proclaim the good news to the other end of the social order, a young mother and a carpenter in a small town, shepherds in the fields, the poor and the powerless. They have no agenda or position; they can only proclaim the wonder of the Incarnation to all the world.

That is the world into which Jesus is born. Paul tells the Philippians that in Christ Jesus God "emptied Himself" to be born a human, a very humble human, living and dying as a human. In that living and dying, Jesus is one with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds.

It is in His sacrifice that they, and we, are delivered.

# The Second Sunday of Epiphany

January 15, 2012

1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20) Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 John 1:43-51

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Speak, for your servant is listening." I have long thought that God is speaking to us all the time. If we fail to hear what God tells us, it's not His fault, it's ours. We don't, or perhaps can't, listen. This is a very noisy world. The problem is to hear what God tells us through the cacophony of our world and our lives.

Perhaps we need to break through that noise if we are to hear Him. But silence is a rare and precious thing. Let me tell you a story.

Years and years ago, I was in the process to become ordained a Deacon of the church. I had one final meeting with the Standing Committee and the Commission on Ministry for approval; the meeting was at Honey Creek. I was on active duty at Fort Gordon in Augusta. We met on Saturday afternoon; it had begun to rain and the temperature was obviously dropping before I could begin the drive back to Augusta.

It continued to rain until I reached Statesboro; then it turned to sleet. North from Statesboro to Augusta, it was a two-lane road through what was then a pretty vacant countryside. As I drove on, I noticed two things: first, that the sleet was accumulating on the roadside and,

second, that I had not seen another car for at least twenty minutes. It was getting dark, and the headlights were reflected off the icing road.

It's safe to say that I was present in the moment. My entire world, my complete consciousness, was in that car focused on that icy road on that night.

Then a voice said, "Do you think I brought you this far to abandon you on a road in Georgia?" Did I actually hear it? I don't know. But it was there, and it filled that car; I had a profound sense of being cared for and protected; a profound sense of the presence of God.

I wonder how often God speaks and I fail to hear Him. I really doubt that He speaks to us only at times of stress. How often do I, like our reading from Samuel, mistake what God says for some other voice? There are so many other voices filling our minds, telling us what is right and what we should do. How do we discern what is authentically that of God?

Perhaps the answer for me on that icy road, and the answer that has remained with me for many, many years, is that sense of a caring presence, the sense that we are never, never alone.

### The First Sunday of Lent

February 12, 2012

Genesis 9:8-17 Psalm 25:1-9 1 Peter 3:18-22 Mark 1:9-15

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of Mark is generally accepted as the first to be written, probably just a few years after the Resurrection. It is short and to the point, almost like journalism, because Mark could see that the generation that actually knew Jesus was dying away. Mark had to get the whole story down in print quickly before all was forgotten; his common connective phrase is *kai euthus*; it means, "and immediately."

But, just because it is brief, it is no less true. And, since it is true, what does it mean to us?

We know the story, Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, the opening of the heavens and descent of the Spirit, and God's proclamation, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." We know it, but what should we, personally, take from it?

What occurs at the baptism of Jesus, and at your baptism and mine, is a covenant, God making a covenant with us; a descending Spirit, a statement that we are God's children without qualifications or reservations: that's a covenant.

What is our response to that covenant? It's conversion and commitment. It's conversion in the sense that we take up a new life, a new identity as a child of God and make a commitment to live out that life. Both conversion and commitment come easy in the emotion of the moment.

But then there is that wilderness. We need not go far, just far enough for all the distractions and temptations of our old life to reassert themselves. Mark never tells us what Jesus' temptations were, but, probably, they were much the same as ours. The real test of that conversion and commitment comes with the question: "What am I supposed to do with this faith? How does it work in this real world?"

What answer do we have? Left to ourselves, we are lost. Left to ourselves, we can be overwhelmed by what we consider reality. Then there is backsliding, slowly eroding and peeling away the faith we have received. God, who seemed so close, so present at that baptism, comes to seem remote and His covenant, irrelevant.

But God is not remote, not irrelevant. God is present with Jesus in the wilderness, present in the moments of Satan's temptations, and He is present with us, always. Mark speaks of angels waiting on Jesus, strengthening and upholding Him. Angels are God's grace, to Him and to each of us.

So we, like Jesus, baptized and called God's children, supported by God in our own wilderness of temptation, like Jesus once again, are called to go out and proclaim that covenant to a world much in need.

### **Ascension Day**

May 17, 2012

Acts 1:1-11 Psalm 47 or Psalm 93 Ephesians 1:15-23 Luke 24:44-53

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What's so special about this day; why is it set apart for celebration?

It's the Feast of the Ascension, celebrated since at least the fourth century. It's not just a day of preparation for Pentecost, although it is often overshadowed by that day; it is in its own right one of the great feast days of the church, one of the three days that proclaim most clearly the love of God for His people, for us.

Three days: The Feast of the Incarnation, Christmas; the Feast of the Resurrection, Easter; this day, the Feast of the Ascension. These are three events at which Our Lord himself was present.

In the Incarnation God Himself became one of us. God lived our lives as we really live them. God, in Jesus Christ, experienced our joys and our sorrows, our comforts and discomforts; He spared Himself nothing so that He might know what our lives mean and that He might strengthen and guide us. Why would God do that? Because He loves us. It is that simple.

In the Resurrection, Jesus is raised from death, the real death of a real man of flesh and blood. It's proof that the love God has for us is so strong that it overcomes even death, and a real man, Jesus, is reunited with those closest to Him, His disciples. They are the reliable witnesses to God's love.

Today, Ascension, is 40 days after the Resurrection, 40 days of His holy presence here with God's people. Now, this day, He is called to the side of the Father in heaven, and Jesus ascends as He is, the resurrected man, an exaltation of His humanity, and ours.

In the Incarnation we speak of birth. In the Resurrection we speak of vanquishing death, two poles between which we all live our lives. In the Ascension we speak of the promise of eternal life.

# **Independence Day**

July 4, 2012

Deuteronomy 10:17-21 Psalm 145 or 145:1-9 Hebrews 11:8-16 Matthew 5:43-48

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let me tell you a story. Actually, it's a genuine American success story that seems correct for this national holiday. I have often mentioned my family, that they were immigrants to this country; I don't think I've ever really mentioned how they came to be here or who they really were.

My grandfather was Sven Olaf Christenson, Scandinavian, specifically Norwegian. He was an engineer who left Norway to find a job in the industrially expanding economy of North American of the early twentieth century. He came not to the United States but to Canada, to Winnipeg; there my grandmother, Inga Emily Ingebretson, joined him. Early in the twentieth century, they migrated to this country to Chicago. He had a position with Western Electric, a company engineering for the Bell System, early in the telecommunications age. He did well.

In time he realized the dream of every Norwegian: he bought land. There is very little horizontal land in Norway, only about nine percent of the country, so land is scarce and very attractive, which is why all those Norwegians settled in the prairies of the American Midwest, huge tracts of flat land. His land was in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, on

the fringe of what is even today a very posh resort area. My grandfather, I hasten to say, was not posh at all. He built a little cottage, as all Norwegians will, and he put up a flagpole; Norway is full of little cottages with flagpoles. There are tiny islands in Oslofjord with a cottage and flagpole. My family spent summer vacations at my grandfather's.

At this point in the story enters my cousin, Bill. I have spoken of him before. Bill and I grew up together. Many, many years ago, we spent each summer together at that summer cottage in Lake Geneva. Wisconsin. It was paradise for little boys. There was a lake for fishing and a creek to be explored full of tadpoles and turtles and frogs. There was swimming at a place called Button Bay, now a State Park, and boat rides on Lake Geneva. There was an attic filled with ancient National Geographics and Saturday Evening Posts for rainy days. There were huge, to us, shade trees for long, lazy, hot afternoons. and July in Wisconsin can be very hot indeed. My cousin was, and is, an inventor. One summer he invented his own fireworks for the Fourth of July. He filled a brown paper bag with confetti and a long string of the little firecrackers called "ladyfingers," this being before such things were deemed dangerous. His plan was to wait until dusk on the Fourth while the adults were relaxing in lawn chairs, those big wooden Adirondack chairs. Then Bill would creep up behind them, light the firecrackers, hurl the bag over their heads, and look on as the explosion created a shower of confetti, all of which would elicit appreciative applause from our delighted parents and grandparents.

This he did, and it worked, far too well. It had been an exceptionally dry summer in Wisconsin. The explosion was impressive but the confetti, of course, caught fire, falling all over the tinder dry lawn, igniting hundreds of little fires. Rather than being pleased, or even mildly irritated, the adults were suddenly busy, running about, stamping out fires. They were not amused. Bill vanished. Why do I tell this story? Well, we all have our moments of spiritual complacency, sitting in our own metaphoric lawn chairs, thinking the job is finished and we have done it all. Those really are the moments

when Jesus tosses a few fireworks into our lives to get us busy and active again doing what He has called us to do. The job is never really finished, and the doing is very exciting. And, I might point out that Bill went on to the Illinois Institute of Technology, became an engineer, and founded a company called Explosive Technology Incorporated – as the twig is bent.

Have a great Independence Day.

### The First Sunday after Christmas

December 30, 2012

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 Psalm 147 or 147:13-21 Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7 John 1:1-18

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Some years ago, when I was a brand new Deacon, I served at a church in Augusta. There was a Christmas pageant; one of those when Christmas and Epiphany are blended into one, with shepherds and sheep and wise men and camels, all vying for space next to the manger of the infant Jesus. And, of course, the angels: in this instance several dozen little girls in white robes with shiny silver haloes and glittery, glittery wings. Perhaps you know that glitter, once present, can never, never be removed from carpets or clothing; it is eternal.

There were a similar number of little boys, shepherds with robes and head scarves, whom someone had given sticks to carry. The floor of the sanctuary was stone, slate. The first stick fell with a resounding crash onto the floor; the rest followed.

Despite all this, Joseph and Mary, slightly older and thus more sophisticated, remained in pious adoration of the baby Jesus; that year, there being no babies of appropriate age, He was symbolized by a baby doll wrapped in swaddling clothes.

We progressed. Then a little girl, seated with her mother halfway back on the right side of the aisle, realized that the baby Jesus was, in fact, her doll; nobody had consulted her! Her mother was just a second too slow to stop her from indignantly marching up the aisle, taking her doll from the manger and marching back to her seat.

Mary and Joseph didn't move. The shepherds and angels were delighted. And the pageant went on.

Now, lest you think that there is no point to this story and that I am rambling nostalgically, I must say that as the years have gone by, I have come to the conclusion that the little girl had it right. We really shouldn't leave Jesus in the manger; we are supposed to take Jesus with us.

That is why we hear the familiar, and powerful, beginning of the Gospel of John this morning: "In the beginning . . . ." The very words are designed to call our thoughts back to the opening of the Book of Genesis, the onset of creation.

John's Gospel stands apart from Matthew, Mark and Luke; it was written much later. John assumes that we know a part of the story, that we know of the earthly, human Jesus. He assumes that we know of the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke, about a shining star and hosts of angels; about the Magi and camels and gold, frankincense and myrrh. We read John to complete the story.

John speaks of the divine Jesus. John tells us that in the Nativity, in Christmas, we celebrate the Incarnation, the presence of the creative Word of God here in this world. Without John we might well see Christmas as just a yearly pageant, sweet and sentimental and all very familiar. Without John, we are in danger of trivializing the most significant event in the history of creation. Without John, we might well leave the baby Jesus in the manger from year to year, just another decoration to be brought out and be submerged in the midst of giant inflatable Santas and Snowmen.

Christmas isn't just a day on the calendar; Christmas isn't just a season. Christmas is our ongoing, never-ending, heart-felt gratitude for God's loving presence in our lives and a joy-filled celebration of His Blessed Incarnation.

# The First Sunday of Epiphany

January 13, 2013

Isaiah 43:1-7 Psalm 29 Acts 8:14-17 Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Happy and I have two sons, Bill and Steve. Bill, the older, was baptized as an infant in Fayetteville, North Carolina; we were stationed at Fort Bragg at the time.

It was a private baptism, late afternoon, with just the priest, Bill, Happy and me, and one godparent there, gathered at the font. It was, of course done with the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*.

Steve, the younger son, was baptized some years later in Germany, a tiny congregation of Episcopalians meeting at an Army chapel in Kaiserslautern. Three Sundays each month, the service was Morning Prayer led by a Lay Reader; the Episcopal Chaplain came once a month from Heidelberg. At that baptism the entire congregation, admittedly not many, gathered around the font, and Steve was literally baptized in the midst of the Church.

Two very different events; two different experiences, yet both were baptisms. Here's a third: this morning we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, the baptism of Jesus outdoors in the River Jordan by John in the presence of a large crowd.

The age-old question is "Why?" Why was Jesus baptized, and why, several thousand years later, did we have our sons baptized? Of course we used to know the answer to that question. The answer was "sin"; baptism was a sort of fire insurance.

Personally, I have trouble with the idea that the newborn infant Bill at the font in Fayetteville was a sinner. Steven, somewhat older, had some mysterious ways about him, but even so I cannot put him in the sinner category. And Jesus?

The very foundations of our Christian belief say that Jesus was spotless, without sin and, moreover, that in His sacrifice, His death on the cross, He took upon Himself the sins of the whole world, including yours and mine. If that is so, and I sincerely hope that it is, there must be another, additional reason for us to bring infants and children and many adults to the font.

I think the word would be "incorporation" or perhaps "transformation." In baptism, we become one with the "communion of saints," the body of Christians, those who have acknowledged, or ever will acknowledge, Jesus Christ as Savior. We assume a new identity as children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ. I concluded long ago that at every baptism the heavens open and the Holy Spirit like a dove descends on the one at the font, and a voice says, "This is my beloved child."

At that moment, we take on that new identity, perhaps our real identity, just as the true eternal identity of Jesus as God's beloved Son was acknowledged to Him by the Father at the Jordan. When, at a baptism, the priest makes the sign of the cross on the baptized, a cross made in consecrated oil, it is an indelible sign that this one so marked is God's own, forever. That cross is still there; it never washes off and it never fades. We trace it again when you are sick and we ask for healing; we trace it again when you die. On one day a year, Ash Wednesday, we trace it in ashes so that our identity is proclaimed to the world.

Under that sign, we take on a new and sacramental life, first of baptism; and then through receiving the strengthening sacrament of Holy Communion, we are incorporated into the Church as the living body of Christ.

And the congregation says, "We welcome you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim His resurrection and share with us in His eternal priesthood."

# The Second Sunday of Epiphany

January 20, 2013

Isaiah 62:1-5 Psalm 36:5-10 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 John 2:1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Following the baptism of Jesus by John, the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all tell us that Jesus was drawn into the wilderness and there he was tempted by Satan. John takes us to a wedding.

This is not a wedding as we might understand it; this was enormous. Everybody was invited. The wedding might last a week. The guests received gifts. The guests were fed, and the guests consumed a lot of wine.

Thus, it is in John's Gospel that Jesus, following His experience at the Jordan, has called His disciples. One theory is that one of the disciples was a relative of the bride or groom. Another is that there was a connection between the family of Jesus and that of the groom, specifically Jesus' mother Mary. But Jesus and His followers are welcome even though they are late, really late if the wine has run out.

Mary, a Jewish mother, has complete confidence in her son: "Just listen to him; he can fix it." But Jesus replies – actually in the original Greek "Woman" which is a standard form of address, no disrespect

implied, "What's that got to do with you and me?" And, as written in the Greek, Jesus actually says, "Has not yet my hour come?"

There's a different sound to that isn't there? To John, Jesus need not go to a wilderness to be tempted by Satan to show off His powers; He can find temptation right here at a wedding in Cana. How tempting it would be to make a great public demonstration, wave his arms and make great quantities of wine appear. How tempting to draw attention to himself, to be seen as a worker of miracles or, more likely, just a magician.

But Jesus' hour has come. He knows it. He has heard the voice at the Jordan proclaiming Him God's beloved Son, entrusting Him with a work, a mission. He knows that if He has any power to effect change it is in fact God working in Him and though Him.

Nothing, absolutely nothing Jesus says or does may diminish that work. It is sometimes called "The Messianic Secret." Tell no one of what you have seen, because what you have seen pales to insignificance against the power of God.

No one knows where all that wine has come from, no one except astonished servants and, perhaps, some amazed disciples. The host of the feast congratulates the bridegroom, not Jesus, with the most significant words of this reading, "You have kept the best for last."

This is the first miracle, the beginning of a long, long story that will unfold through the seasons of the church year, following the life and works of Jesus. Perhaps we might call that a feast. We follow that unfolding story to an end at the cross and a new beginning in the joy of the Resurrection. That is the best, and God has saved it for last.

# The Third Sunday of Epiphany

January 27, 2013

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 Psalm 19 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a Luke 4:14-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Last Sunday, the Gospel of John took us to a wedding in Cana of Galilee; this Sunday, Luke takes us to church, to a synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus goes home.

Visualize that synagogue. It's probably about the size of this room, the size of St. John's, Bainbridge. The walls are stone; the floor is stone pavers or pounded earth. Light rays slant down through a few windows set high in the walls. A fine dust covers it all. Men, and only men, of Nazareth sit on benches lining the walls. At one end of the single room there is a cabinet, and ark, in which the precious scrolls of Torah are kept and a table from which they are read.

Of course everyone in the synagogue knows who Jesus is: he's Joseph's boy. He had been gone away somewhere for a short while, but he seems much the same, a little older and a bit more serious, but much the same. Now he's back, and it's the custom to invite anyone who has traveled to read a lesson and make some remarks at the service, give the people some new wisdom or insight. The expectation is that the visitor will select a passage from scripture and expound upon it.

Jesus stands at the table and reads; He selects the reading. It's from the prophet Isaiah; Isaiah is prophesying that the day will come when everything in Israel, all its pains and problems will be made right and peace and justice will reign for the Jews, a people now oppressed and conquered and poor, captives in exile in Babylon. It's a golden age to come: a golden age when God Himself will be present to restore Israel, to lead them home to the land of their heritage, the age of the Messiah. It will be the "acceptable day of the Lord."

Jesus reads well; there are nods of approval, smiles. He replaces the scroll and sits down; they all wait for him to say something about the text he has read. Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Now the problem arises with the word "acceptable." In English, it usually means no more than that something is all right or at least not too bad; I can live with that. But in the original Greek, translating from the Hebrew, *acceptable* means "to be received." To be accepted, something offered, something received.

Jesus chooses the passage from Isaiah because His time is not so different from the time of the prophet. The people of Israel have strayed far from the closeness of God. They are captives in their own land at the hands of the Romans. Their hopes and dreams have vanished with time.

In essence, Jesus is saying "today," God has placed this offer before you; the age you have longed for is here, fulfilled right here in front of you. It's a gift, a grace of God, held out to you. I am the gift; I am the Messiah. You may "accept," you may "receive" me or not, the gift is given, here and now. The Messiah is sitting among you.

# The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

February 3, 2013

Jeremiah 1:4-10 Psalm 71:1-6 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 Luke 4:21-30

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Visualize Jesus seated in the little synagogue of Nazareth. He is home, in the midst of men who have known him as a child, seen him grow up on the village streets, seen him at work helping his father Joseph, the village carpenter.

Now he's about thirty, a grown man, returned to the village after some time away. He's just read a passage from the prophet Isaiah, a passage of the hope of Israel and the presence of God leading His people from the despair of captivity to the joy of renewed life, all of which speaks of, or at least refers to, the age of the coming Messiah. It will be "the acceptable" day of the Lord.

They all know that; they all know the scriptures and prophecies; they have all longed for the day when it all will be true.

Jesus says, "Today this text is fulfilled in your very hearing." This is the day you have awaited for centuries.

Well, it doesn't look any different to them: no thunderclaps, rushing winds, blaring trumpets. This is, after all, just Joseph's son. Who does he think he is saying such a thing? Is he a false prophet? There are

plenty of those around. Is he one of those revolutionaries that they hear about, making trouble for all the decent, quiet people of Israel? Is he crazy?

Visualize turmoil in the synagogue. It's the turmoil we see on the news today, passionate emotional chaos over perceived blasphemies and insults to God. Visualize also Jesus sitting quietly in the midst of it all and finally saying, to those who can hear Him, "No doubt you will quote the proverb, physician heal thyself." Is there such a proverb? See if you can find it in Hebrew scripture. Jesus is being ironic. He is saying to those who have such a pretense of wisdom and tradition that they are far removed, estranged from the faith they profess, so far removed that they cannot see what is plainly there. They cannot believe, cannot accept, that the moment is at hand. God has acted.

Is Jesus surprised? I think not; I think he understands them very well. Centuries of disappointment have made them cynical about prophets and messiahs, particularly local prophets and messiahs. They demand more than words; they want proof. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark speak about miracles of Jesus done in Capernaum before his return to Nazareth; Luke assumes you know that. In Luke, Jesus already has celebrity. But the men of Nazareth haven't seen any miracles. Why should they believe it?

What is missing from it all? The answer is faith. Cynicism has eroded their faith to the point that they are no longer open to wonders, to miracles, open to the presence of God in their world; in their lives. The presence of the Messiah must be seen through the eyes of faith. The grace of God falls upon people of faith. It falls on a widow in Sidon, a gentile woman in a Phoenician city; she has faith. It falls upon Naaman, a Syrian general and a leper, who is cleansed because he has faith.

It falls on us in the midst of a world filled with tragedies and strife, but it does fall. It is so very easy to be caught up in issues and contentions and to fail to feel and see that presence. Perhaps the best corrective for the stresses of our time is to see that figure of Jesus in the midst of it all quietly saying to each of us, "Today it is fulfilled in your hearing."

## The Last Sunday of Epiphany

February 10, 2013

Exodus 34:29-35 Psalm 99 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This morning's gospel reading seems out of place, doesn't it?

It's the Transfiguration of Jesus, which we also celebrate each August 6. Why, do you suppose, we read it now?

This Sunday we come to the end of the season of Epiphany. The very word epiphany means a "revelation," God's revealing Himself to people, to the world. It starts with Luke's Gospel and a revelation to Jews, albeit a small and rather marginal group of Jews – shepherds in fields tending flocks in the fields of Judea, the traditional reading from Christmas. Then, in Matthew's Gospel, read at the Feast of Epiphany, God reveals Himself to Gentiles, magi, or kings, symbols of the greater world outside the narrow confines of Israel.

Now, on a mountaintop God reveals Himself to Jesus. That does sound strange. We know that at the Jordan, on His baptism by John, Jesus was clearly identified as God's son, the heavens having opened, a dove having descended, and a voice having proclaimed, "This is my Son" – just a voice.

Now, here in this mountaintop God is present not simply as a voice but physically present. It's the cloud that descends; in the Old Testament it's called the *shekinah*, the "glory of God." One never sees God, one sees His "Glory." That's close enough. The Glory is God's self-revelation to Moses in a burning bush and again on top of Mount Sinai, a self-revelation of such power that Moses is transformed, his face shining like lightning.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus is transformed, not just His face but His entire presence.

On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus is joined by Moses and Elijah. Moses represents Torah, the Law of Israel; Elijah represents the prophets; together they represent the culture and faith of Israel up to that moment. In the Glory of God, they disappear, and Jesus is left alone.

All that had happened up to that moment is summarized and embodied in Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah.

All this is witnessed by Peter, James, and John, Jesus' closest companions; they represent us. They're sleepy, a bit confused, more than a bit frightened, but they know that something remarkable and powerful has happened. They want to stay there on the mountaintop, freeze the moment. Perhaps that's because they fear the future.

What can become of their leader, Jesus, down there in the everyday world of Israel? Slow as they are, they actually have that one right – the world will not, cannot, comprehend and accept the presence of God in Jesus. His path down the mountain will ultimately lead to the cross. To the disciples, that is the end.

Perhaps even then Jesus sees, as they cannot, that the path leads beyond the cross to the Resurrection. The cross is not simply an end of things as they have been; it is a beginning of things as they might be.

And so, this Last Sunday of Epiphany is itself an end and a beginning.

### The Second Sunday of Lent

February 24, 2013

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18 Psalm 27 Philippians 3:17-4:1 Luke 13:31-35

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Herod wants to kill you." That's not true at all; Jesus knows that it's simply not true, yet here come the Pharisees claiming that they are warning Jesus to stay away from Jerusalem, to go and hide.

Why? Because they know that Jesus has won the ongoing spiritual, religious confrontation. The Pharisees cannot refute what Jesus says or explain what Jesus does.

Jesus has traveled a long road engaged in preaching and teaching, in healing and miracles; you can be sure that the Pharisees have been with him as observers every inch of the way. There is no religious or philosophical argument to be made, so they resort to a threat.

What is the final straw for the Pharisees? It's Jesus' statement that "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." In other words, those that give lip service to their faith and have made a dry, stale legality of Israel's relationship to its God, no matter what their credentials might be, will be superseded by those who actually practice the commandments and live out their faith, even the Gentiles.

The Pharisees know who and what Jesus means, and so they make this false warning. It is in their interest to keep Jesus from Jerusalem. As long as he remains a prophet in the towns and villages, Jesus is a local marvel, a celebrity; in Jerusalem, Jesus will become a significant force; we need only witness the joyful crowds of what we call Palm Sunday, proclaiming Jesus as Messiah as he enters the city.

The Pharisees were not sent by Herod; they despise Herod. Herod is not a Jew; he's an Idumean from the desert region south of Judea. He is a king of Israel in name only, superimposed on Israel by Roman politics and power. He is a religious affront to all orthodox Jews, particularly the Pharisees.

In a few chapters, Luke tells us that Herod sees no threat in Jesus. Herod has no interest in local religion; he knows nothing of local traditions or history. When three wise men appear in Jerusalem, Herod has to consult his staff on the prophecy about a Messiah's being born in Bethlehem. Herod's job is to preserve order. This traveling rabbi is no political or social threat that Herod can see. Luke tells us, a few chapters later, that Pilate sends Jesus to Herod and that Herod is happy to meet Him, had heard about Him, and wanted to talk with Him. In fact, in the Greek, Luke tells us that Herod "thought nothing" of Jesus. He saw no threat at all.

How does Jesus respond to these threats? Perhaps He sees that the end time is approaching, the plan is unfolding and nearing its fulfillment; that, ironically, even Pharisees and an Idumean king are playing their part. He simply says that He must go to Jerusalem; it is there that the great event must take place, as all great events in the history of Israel have taken place. Jerusalem will be an end and a beginning.

It will take Jesus "three days to finish His course," three apparently dark days from death to Resurrection.

What of the Pharisees? Jesus tells them that their "house is forsaken." Actually the words mean your house, the Israel that you have made, "is left to you."

## The Third Sunday of Lent

March 3, 2013

Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Is the God of the Old Testament the same God as that of the New Testament, the God Jesus talks about?"

There comes a point in a Bible study class, or at seminary, when we've really looked at scripture, really looked at both testaments, when that question just has to come up. Jesus speaks of a God, a Father, who has compassion and patience with his flawed, but struggling children, a God who really wants us to live with at least some of that compassion and love in our lives.

The Old Testament God has been likened to a computer: all rules and no forgiveness.

The strange fact is that the earliest Christian community, the first generation of the church, had only what we could call the Old Testament – no epistles, no Gospels, just memories of Jesus, what He said and did. What words did they have to describe Jesus? What language did they have to speak of God? They had only the Old Testament to tide them over as they developed their understanding of what Jesus had said, their understanding of God.

That Old Testament God was not at all open to criticism or suggestions. The Book of Numbers has the story of twenty-three thousand people of the Exodus dying because they deviated and worshipped Baal, a Canaanite God. The people who complained were beset and killed by fiery serpents. There was no appeal, no apology, no repentance.

Luke's Gospel story this morning seems to lead to the same end. The master, God, has a fig tree, Israel or maybe all of us, that has been tended for three years, the time of Jesus' teaching and preaching and healing, and it still hasn't borne fruit. God says, "Cut it down." Thus far it sounds like that Old Testament God. But the gardener, Jesus, intercedes, asking a little time, just one more year of efforts to save it, us.

Luke does have Jesus say, "Unless you repent, you will perish," but he adds that there is always time to amend our lives.

Some years ago I had a parishioner who was tragically estranged from her daughter. I don't know what had happened in the past to separate them, but the mutual coldness was profound. I knew both the mother and daughter, a strange and sometimes awkward situation. The mother died. I was in intensive care giving her the last rites of the church when she flat-lined. Minutes later, as the prayers were concluding, the oscilloscope came to life; she came to life. She lived one more year; in that year she and her daughter were reconciled and became family again. She had a lifetime and a year.

Paul tells the Christians at Corinth that life is filled with moments of stress and even pain but that God also supports us, gives us strength and courage to make our way through those times. God gives us the path, the way out of the bleakest moments and darkest places. Does that mean we are off the hook? No, indeed. We still need to repent.

Repentance means, literally, turning around. This Lenten season is the time for repentance, for personal reassessment of our relationship to God and to each other and, quite simply, for trying to do better. That is what the compassionate, loving God of the New Testament asks.

## The Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 10, 2013

Joshua 5:9-12 Psalm 32 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We must never forget that Jesus was an excellent story teller. His teachings and parables were all before crowds of people who were used to hearing stories. There was then, and is today, a very rich tradition of stories in Jewish culture. There are folk tales, of course, and really good jokes. Torah, the Law, was meant to be recited as were the books of the prophets and the psalms, not read but spoken. They may have heard a story before, but that didn't matter; it was all in the delivery, and, apparently, Jesus was really good.

Jesus loves to draw on old themes in his stories. He knows that his listeners will make the connections with tradition. So we have the story of the Prodigal Son coupled with the reading from Joshua. Basically, it's the same story.

Joshua tells of the Jews, who had lived in Egypt for generations, entering Canaan, the Promised Land of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The "shame of Egypt is erased"; the provision of miraculous manna ceases, and they finally enjoy the abundance of the land.

At this point we should recall that the "shame of Egypt" was the fact that the Jews had gone to Egypt in the first place, generations before, to escape drought and famine. They had gone voluntarily. The shame is that in going, they had shown a lack of faith in the future which would actually be a lack of faith in the ability of Jahweh (JHWH) to get them through the crisis, to feed them and protect them.

To complete the shame, they had stayed in Egypt far longer than necessary. Apparently, they overstayed their welcome. Finally, their situation had been enslavement by the Egyptians.

When they are freed and finally return to Canaan, they must wonder what sort of reception they will have. Will their God punish them for their ancestors' lack of faith?

They are welcomed by JHWH, completely forgiven and fed as though they had never left; the shame is erased.

It is interesting that recent Israeli research says that the story involves only the people of the tribe associated with the patriarch Joseph, not all the Jewish people. Some, perhaps many, Jews remained in Canaan all the while, maintaining their culture and worshiping JHWH while the Joseph tribe was in Egypt.

So we come to Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son. There are three points of view here. One is the father. He has waited and watched for the day when the son will return; he has never lost hope. When the son does appear he is overjoyed, welcomes him back with gifts and a feast.

One is the son. He makes his way home knowing that he has strayed far from his father's care. He is ashamed and fearful of his father's wrath. He apologizes and vows to be a good, faithful son.

One is the other brother, the one who has stayed with the father, serving him. He has been obedient to the father. Now, he sees the

errant other son arriving and being treated as though nothing had happened. He is angry; he is hurt.

You can see Jesus watching the faces of his listeners to see if they grasp the real meaning of the story. It's a mixed crowd. Some are descendants of Joseph; they find reassurance in the reconciliation with the father, with JHWH. The others, the majority, are not of Joseph's tribe. They find reassurance that God knows and values their faith and dedication. The word is reconciliation; the one who has strayed and the one who has stayed are reconciled to the father and to his family.

That is a powerful message of Lent. Reconciliation is available and accessible to all in the eyes of a compassionate and loving God. God's love has no limit: it's never exhausted and never diluted. When we wander off thinking we can manage our lives without God, he waits patiently. We need only take the first step toward home, sincere repentance, a desire to turn our lives around. He forgives us and feeds us.

### The Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 17, 2013

Isaiah 43:16-21 Psalm 126 Philippians 3:4b-14 John 12:1-8

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We can picture the scene, a small house in a small village just over the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem, the home of Jesus' friends, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

It's a very small house, one or perhaps two rooms. It's crowded; Jesus and His followers are guests. We have been there before when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. The family routine is as it was before — Lazarus as host, busy Martha as hostess serving their guests, and Mary once again at the feet of Jesus in humble adoration.

The room is filled with the dust of the road Jesus and His disciples have traveled. The travelers' feet, Jesus' feet, are covered with dust. It would be customary to offer water to bathe those tired, dusty feet, but this time, as though on a premonition, Mary bathes the feet of Jesus with an unction called nard, the unction used to anoint the dead.

For Jesus, the road from that familiar house of friends leads to Jerusalem, the cross and the tomb. That's the premonition.

Then there's Judas. Judas complains about the use of "costly nard" as an ointment. Judas thinks the nard should be sold and the proceeds given to the poor. John tells us that Judas really wants to keep the money himself. John tells us Judas is a thief.

Perhaps that was true, or perhaps Judas is much like one of my parishioners in a parish far away, long, long ago; we'll call him John. John was a very generous parishioner who supported every outreach project. I was impressed; one day I complimented him on his generosity; he replied "Oh, I'm buying my way into heaven." I thought he was kidding; he wasn't. Apparently, John had missed the point.

Perhaps, Judas like John had missed the point of all that Jesus had taught him for three years. What is the point?

First, that before all else, we are called to a recognition, an acknowledgement, of the presence of the grace of God here in this world and in the lives of His creation, in our lives. That recognition and acknowledgement is expressed in many ways; it is best expressed here, together in community, before the altar. From that recognition, in gratitude and profound humility, flow our acts of charity and compassion, our hearts and hands are His in this world. What we do we do in His Name. But He comes first.

Jesus is the presence of God. Judas and the disciples and Mary and Martha and Lazarus were blessed with Jesus' physical presence; He was standing there in that small, crowded room.

We, too, have Jesus' presence here in the bread and the wine, His body and blood, in the Eucharist. We celebrate Jesus' presence here, at the altar, we receive Him in bread and wine, and we take Him with us out into the world; but first we come here to receive Him, to be strengthened by Him and to be guided in how we might serve Him in this world.

It's true: as Jesus says, there will always be the poor, the disadvantaged, the needy, and the sick in this world. It has been for some two thousand years the call of the church to comfort and feed and clothe and console them. Perhaps that call is stronger today than it ever has been and so, too, is our need to come together in worship and prayer so that all that we do will be in His name.

# The Second Sunday of Easter

April 7, 2013

Acts 5:27-32 Psalm 118:19-24 or Psalm 150 Revelation 1:4-8 John 20:19-31

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

How would you feel if came into a room full of your friends, finding them all laughing and excited about something and realizing you were the only one who missed whatever it was? Worse still, what if the subject of their excitement was the sudden reappearance of your best friend, your teacher, whom you knew to be dead and buried? What if you were the only one who missed it? We must remember that this happened on the evening of Easter Day, the day of Resurrection; it was all fresh in Thomas' mind.

So here is Thomas who has gone off somewhere. First, when he returns, he's confused, then disappointed, then angry, angry with himself. He blurts out, because he's angry, "Well, I don't believe it; I want proof! I want to touch the wounds of His hands and His side." And so he goes down in history as "doubting Thomas."

Actually Thomas has been perhaps the most faithful and courageous of them all. When Jesus sets Himself on the path to Jerusalem and certain death, it's Thomas who says they must go with Him and die with him – hardly the words of one who doubts. If anything, Thomas may be the realist among the disciples, a realist with a touch of the pessimist. Jesus knows Thomas very well.

One week passes; the disciples apparently remain together, perhaps in fear, perhaps in grief, and Jesus appears again. Jesus offers Thomas the very confirmation he needs.

The recognition and acknowledgement is enough. It doesn't say that Thomas ever actually touched those wounds. The proof lay in the presence of Jesus; the proof for Thomas lay in the offer, and Thomas says, "My Lord and my God!"

How significant is the reply of Jesus to Thomas: "You believe because you have seen me; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

That would be the crowds that formed around Peter and John as they spoke of Jesus in the temple, crowds who knew of Jesus only through their words. That would include the seven churches in Asia in the Revelation to John, churches in a remote province filled with people who had somehow heard of Jesus and believed what they heard. Perhaps they first heard of him from pilgrims who had been in Jerusalem and present at the event that we call Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And, of course, that would include us, you and me.

In at least one way, we are all a bit like Thomas; we all need recognition and acknowledgement. We all need to know that He knows who and where we are and cares for us.

A short story: Many years ago, when I was just finishing the preparation to be ordained, I had to meet with the Diocesan Commission on Ministry, at Honey Creek on the coast just south of Brunswick. I met with them and was approved and, mid-afternoon I started home; we lived in Augusta at the time. As I started home, it began to rain.

The drive went up to Savannah on I-95, then west on I-16, then on a two-lane road through Statesboro. It began to be dark; the rain turned to sleet and ice; and I seemed to be the only car on the road. Little by little, the road became iced over. I was totally absorbed in driving; I may have prayed, I may have cursed, perhaps out loud. Then this voice said, "Do you seriously think I have brought you this far to abandon you on a road in Georgia?" I suppose that voice was in my head, but it seemed very real; I felt safe and protected and somehow at peace.

Perhaps that is what Thomas felt when he said, "My Lord and my God."

## The Fourteenth Sunday of Pentecost

August 25, 2013

Jeremiah 1:4-10 Psalm 71:1-6 Hebrews 12:18-29 Luke 13: 10-17

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I retired about a year ago. This past year has been one of changes and adjustments. One of the adjustments, probably the most difficult after all these years, has been that I don't celebrate every Sunday. Happy and I attend other churches, see other priests and deacons at work, and listen to other people's sermons. That part has been really interesting.

We recently were at a church where the priest began his sermon with the question "Why are we here?" A rhetorical question, apparently; I don't think he really expected an answer, which is good because nobody volunteered. So he listed a number of reasons: worship, healing, family tradition, fellowship, pure habit.

He did not say fear – fear of a demanding, vengeful, all-powerful God that would consign them to the flames. I'm not entirely unfamiliar with that thinking, which may be why, at age 13, I found the Episcopal Church and fell in love with it. That fear would not have been a very Episcopalian response, really should not be a Christian response, but is very biblical, Old Testament biblical; of course, you and I know there is only one God in the Old Testament and the New. The great

difference is in how people see God, how people said that God presents Himself.

The Old Testament God presents Himself with fire and smoke, whirlwinds and the blaring of trumpets. This not a God to get close to. Make a sacrifice and keep him happy. This is a God of power and majesty, remote and mysterious. This is a God that is likened to a computer: all rules and no forgiveness. Even a cursory reading of much of the Old Testament will tell you that that is a fair description of the state of the world in that historical age, a dangerous, treacherous world in which the very strong were honored. In much of today's world, that is still true.

Actually, Jesus was born into that world.

The God of the New Testament presents Himself in Jesus, a human being among human beings, living a human life but different. In Jesus, God speaks of such things as charity and compassion and love. That is new. In Jesus, God finally sacrifices Himself in an ultimate act of love. In Jesus, God challenges the rules with which the world has surrounded Him, barriers the world has erected.

In the Gospel this morning, we read about a collision of the thinking of the people of two testaments, those two ideas of God. "Come back some other time," say the Temple regulars; the rule says that there is no work on the Sabbath, and that includes acts of healing and compassion. That's the rule. Break the rules and we're all in trouble.

Jesus lives in a New Testament world; He breaks rules. Jesus proclaims that love and compassion must come first. That is God's will. Jesus proclaims that God wants not to punish, but to forgive; not to harm, but to heal. Therein lies the division, the break. It's a new age, a new understanding, a new world.

It's important to remember that. In this reading from Luke all the critics of Jesus are of the Old Testament. They are in church, in the Temple, to avert disaster, to appease God.

Those who follow Jesus are of a new age. We are in church to celebrate and to give thanks. We have received a promise, not a threat, a promise of God's sacrificial, unqualified love for His people, given to us in Jesus.

# The Eighteenth Sunday of Pentecost

September 22, 2013

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 Psalm 79:1-9 1 Timothy 2:1-7 Luke 16:1-13

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Do you remember Bishop Harry Shipps? He was the Bishop of Georgia before Henry Louttit. It's a few years ago now.

Bishop Shipps was, and is, a tall, ascetic-looking man, very reserved and dignified; he really looks like a Bishop.

He used to tell the story of his trip to the Holy Land with two friends, Father Munn and Father Gunn, all three being very High Church Episcopalians. The trip was actually a tour for clergy, Southern Baptist clergy; there was a bus full of Southern Baptist ministers and three very Catholic Episcopalians.

The group made one-day excursions to all sorts of holy places in the Jerusalem area; in each place, the Southern Baptist clergy would sing Southern Baptist hymns, noticing, of course, the silence of the three Episcopalians, Munn, Gunn, and Shipps. To be inclusive, Munn, Gunn, and Shipps were finally asked to lead the group in one of their Episcopalian hymns. Not being musically inclined, the three sang the Magnificat from the Episcopal Evening Prayer Liturgy, probably in Latin. They were not asked again.

Bishop Shipps also told of walking with the group in Jerusalem and being accosted by a man selling vestments. The man approached him and said, "For you, priest, very special low price." Harry thought that was very nice of the man; he bought the vestments. Later, he said, the thought came to him, "Of course for me, priest; who else would buy this stuff?"

"A very special price," which brings us to this morning's Gospel.

Are you familiar with the term *Baksheesh?* It's a Persian word meaning, politely, a tip, and less politely but more accurately, a bribe. *Baksheesh* is a common practice in much of the world, even today. Some additional amount is added to any bill or transaction. It is simply expected in business or in dealing with governments. We Americans have difficulty realizing that an amount quoted in much of the world is not a real price; hence we don't haggle. To the rest of the world that haggles we are wondrously naïve. Apparently, Bishop Shipps didn't haggle.

So in this Gospel what does this corrupt manager really do? He simply quotes the real bill, dropping his own personal surcharge; he drops the *baksheesh*.

The owner is happy; he is receiving what he is actually due. He isn't losing a thing.

The debtors are happy; their bills have been reduced to what they actually owe.

The manager is a hero. Such is "the way of the world."

At this point, you might see Jesus shaking his head, distressed and perhaps a bit disgusted at that "way of the world." It's a world in which dishonesty is the norm; it's expected. A world in which corruption is rampant and people are routinely cheated.

This is one moment when Jesus is actually sarcastic telling his followers, in essence, that's the way it is, get used to it. If you and the faith are going to survive, and you are called to survive and you are called to bear witness to that faith in this world, you will have to do so here and now in this life; you cannot turn your back, no matter how distressing reality may be.

But Jesus knew that "the way of the world" could be very seductive. Of His closest companions, one, Judas, would be seduced away by thirty pieces of silver. Who knows how many others fell away? The grand temptation was, and is, to put one's self first, to serve ourselves before we serve God.

At a stewardship program, a very astute friend once observed that to see the priorities in our lives truly, we need just see what check we write first every month. There was much coughing and shuffling of feet.

Jesus simply calls us to make a decision about those priorities in our lives, a very personal decision. Do we serve ourselves, or do we serve God?

Jesus tells us that we cannot truly serve two masters, we cannot truly do both, and we, Christians, are called to serve God.

Third Sunday of Advent December 14, 2014

> Psalm 146:5-10 Matthew 11:2-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Are you enjoying retirement?" I have lost count of the number of times I've been asked that. I'm sure it's sincere, well meant – I should be pleased that people care – but what is the honest answer? If I say, "No," I'm being rather hard and rough on them; if I say, "Yes . . . ." The answer is really "sometimes." Or perhaps, it's getting better. That just calls for some speculation on their parts. Usually they change the subject.

I must say the Episcopal Church is very, very good about retirement. The Church Pension Fund, to which most priests belong, has an excellent retirement program, including an all-expense-paid weekend conference for people about to retire. Happy and I attended a conference some years ago at the Hyatt in Savannah – in itself that wasn't bad.

Part of the conference – one of the presentations – was a retired priest and his wife telling us, in a small group, "what it's really like." Their question to us was, "What do you want to get out of retirement?" Sounds simple, does it not? I must confess I had never really thought about it, not for thirty years in a collar. I had to admit that I would like to regain my spirituality – my personal spirituality. The golfers and travelers in the group looked on aghast, the unspoken question being, "What the hell have you been doing at the altar and pulpit for thirty years?" Maybe it just crossed your minds.

To explain, or perhaps ease your minds, the word is "personal" – personal spirituality. What we have shared lo these many years is what some call corporate spirituality – Common Prayer. It's liturgical and historical and musical and scriptural, and I've been in love with it since I was 14 years old when I was invited by the son of the chaplain to an Episcopal service in the chapel at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and knew I was home. It has been an essential part of my life for a long time.

But then there's that personal spirituality – call it "faith." Faith is existential, based on experience. It is very, very simple – the assurance of the presence of God in your life. Personal faith demands silence and introspection. Without that personal faith our corporate faith can become a hollow exercise, a social requirement.

Personally, I can't remember any "aha" moment – the words are those of Jim Griffiss, a professor at Nashotah – that changed my life or that was the basis of my faith. But I do know how quickly that faith can be diluted and marginalized, submerged in the values and demands – the noise - of our lives.

#### T. S. Eliot wrote the text of a play called *The Rock* in 1934. He asked:

The endless cycle of ideas and action,

Endless invention, endless experiment,

Brings knowledge of motion but not of stillness;

Knowledge of speech but not of silence,

Knowledge of words but ignorance of The Word.

All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance;

All our ignorance brings us nearer to death.

But nearer to death is no nearer to God.

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

<sup>&</sup>quot;Choruses from 'The Rock,'" T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909 - 1950.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952, p. 96.

John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, "Are you the one?" That's Matthew, Chapter 11. But in Chapter 3, face-to-face meeting Jesus at the Jordan, experiencing his presence, John absolutely knew the answer. John said, "I need to be baptized by you, but do you come to me?"

In John's gospel he says, on seeing Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world . . . . this is Him of whom I said 'after me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me." And John states, "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven and remain on Him . . . . this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."

Something happened to that personal, experiential, existential faith; something happened between chapter 3 and chapter 11. Something happened to that faith caused by the presence of Jesus. Now John seeks knowledge – confirmation of his faith through information— and he has lost that knowledge of Jesus, and in losing it, has lost the wisdom he gained in their encounter.

Jesus wrenches John back to that first personal faith — that experience-based wisdom. Jesus says to the Disciples, "Tell John not what I say but what you see":

Blind men see again Lame men walk Lepers are cleansed Deaf men hear Poor men are evangelized.

Martin Buber, a Hasidic Jewish philosopher of the first half of the 20th century, wrote, "The dominance of the managerial, technological way of being in the world can shut out the light of heaven." In other words, the perceived need for information, history, data on Jesus can make us blind to His presence; and that will be darkness indeed.

Personal faith, personal spirituality, is not shaped by information; it is shaped by that presence. Of course, the shelves of bookstores are

filled with writers who don't believe that. They have, one hopes, well-intentioned advice and guidance to shape your faith. Actually, at best, they can reflect on their own faith. They haven't had your experiences; they haven't lived your life.

To contradict Saint Anselm – and it's high time someone did – faith is not looking for understanding; faith is a matter of the heart, not the head. Jesus calls John back to that first moment when they met at the Jordan, back to that recognition, that sense of His presence that needed no words, no information, to confirm it. And so Jesus calls us.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, another Jewish philosopher somewhat better known, said, "Confronted by things of which we cannot speak clearly, we should remain silent."

Good advice.

#### Second Sunday of Epiphany January 18, 2015

Psalm 40:1-11 John 1:29-42

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Some years ago an Episcopal seminary that shall remain nameless, although some do say it is the very best Episcopal seminary, conducted an unofficial survey of the seminarians. It was rumored, but never proven, that the faculty also participated. If so, their results were never made public.

It was a simple survey: just three questions. The results were quite revealing. I know you are all thinking, "Gosh, Father Peter, can we take the survey, please?" And so, very well, here it is:

Question 1: Name the Seven Dwarves in Disney's "Snow White." (A: Doc, Sleepy, Grumpy, Happy, Sneezy, Bashful and Dopey.)

Question 2: Name Santa's eight reindeer:

(A: Donner, Blitzen, Comet, Cupid, Prancer, Dasher, Vixen, Dancer)

You see where this heading, don't you?

Question 3: Name the Twelve Apostles.

That was, and is, of course, a trick question. The answer would be that it depends on which Gospel you're reading. Some names are

consistent, at least in the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). "Synoptic" in Greek means that they can be seen together. All three mention Simon, called Cephas or Peter; Andrew; James; John; Philip; Bartholomew; Thomas; Matthew; James, the Son of Alphaeus; and Judas Iscariot.

But then, depending on which gospel you read, there are Thaddaeus, who is also called Lebeaus, in Matthew and Mark, but not in Luke; Judas Son of James in Luke, but not in Mark or Matthew; Simon the Cananaean in Mark and Matthew; and Simon the Zealot, who might be the Cananaean. Then, if you add the Gospel of John, you have Nathanael of Cana.

The problem is that all the lists, all four gospels, are correct according to their sources and their purpose. All the gospels rely on the memory of those who were there, people who actually saw and heard and remember, or think they remember, the events of which the gospels tell.

Each gospel was written for specific groups. Mark, probably the earliest, was written to record the memories of a fast-disappearing generation of witnesses. It is journalism, fast-paced; it constantly says *kai euthus*, Greek for "and immediately." Matthew was written for the Jewish community of Christians and speaks of Jewish history and traditions without definition. Luke was written for the Greek community of believers. He explains Jewish custom to a Gentile, pagan community.

Today we have the Gospel of John. Some say it was the earliest written; some say the last. In reality we have to see it as parallel to the Synoptics. It is thought to have been written for the Community of the Beloved Disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved, the community centered on John. It's not a biography of Jesus; it assumes you know all that and are now ready to see those events as spiritual, so there are no fishing boats to be abandoned when Jesus calls in John's Gospel, rather a continuation of the events of

Jesus' baptism and anointing with the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel the Baptizer is already converted and convinced of Jesus' divinity and proclaims it to his own disciples, two of whom follow Jesus. They are Andrew and another unnamed disciple, generally thought to be John, of course.

It's interesting that in John's Gospel, Jesus calls only those two, Andrew and probably John; it's Andrew that first brings Simon Peter to Jesus. Later, Jesus calls Philip who calls Bartholomew. Bartholomew is thought to be another name for Nathanael of Cana, which would explain Jesus' presence at a wedding feast, the site of His first miracle. The only other names mentioned are Thomas and James. John presents a different memory, a different telling, no less true than Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The real question posed by any list of Jesus' disciples is "Who were they?" What do we actually know about them?

We are told that Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. We are told that Matthew was a tax collector and then . . . ?

Perhaps that's the point. The vast majority of those who followed Jesus and the twelve are merely the inner circle of a far larger following, who are to us nameless. They are people touched by the word or the presence of Jesus in their lives and who committed themselves to His service; the names of some of them have come to us without explanation, the names of most are unknown and perhaps unimportant.

What is important is that they inspired others, who, in turn, inspired others, who inspired others, until you and I, sitting here tonight are their successors in faith. You and I were, in turn, inspired by some person, some moment, some sense of His presence in our lives. We seem to be now as we were then, except for that commitment and dedication that has transformed us and enriched us. That is what you

and I share with those first ones, known and unknown, who answered His call to follow Him.

There is a deceptively simple hymn written by a young English mother named Lesbia Scott. She married a military officer who later became a priest – it can happen. The songs she wrote to sing to her children were collected and published in 1929 in *Everyday Hymns for Little Children*. One of her hymns that speaks to us most eloquently has been a part of our hymnal since 1940; we sing it on All Saints Day. An attempt to drop it from the 1979 Hymnal, because it lacked "profundity," met with an overwhelmingly negative response. The tune in our hymnal, "Grand Isle," was written specifically for it.

Unfortunately there has been a local tradition to alter verse two to read that "one was slain by a fierce wild priest"; we will not go into that this evening.

It's that third verse that says:

They lived not only in ages past,
There are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is bright with the joyous saints
Who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in schools, or in lanes, or at sea,
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
For the saints of God are just folk like me,
And I mean to be one too."

#### The Second Sunday in Lent March 1, 2015

Psalm 121 John 3:1-17

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Who was John? Who was the author of this fourth Gospel? From the very earliest times, the latter half of the second century, some very significant leaders of the Christian communities have asserted that the author was actually John, Son of Zebedee, a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, one of the first to be called to follow Jesus.

Such revered figures of the early church as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus, all subscribed to that identity. On the other hand, other equally significant figures such as Ignatius and Justin Martyr disagreed.

There was also disagreement about where the Gospel was written. The three great centers of the earliest Christian communities, Antioch, Ephesus, and Alexandria, were all proposed to be the site. When it was written, Jerusalem had been laid waste by the Romans, and the Christians had been dispersed to those cities of the eastern Mediterranean in which Greek was a common language.

All of which probably tells us that the writer can best be called Anonymous, a resident in a city of the Christian Diaspora, writing for a Greek-speaking, Hellenistic community, retelling the story of the synoptic gospels not as a biography of Jesus but as a proclamation of the unfolding of God's plan of salvation for His creation.

Whoever John was, he had a wonderful command of the Greek language. It is truly improbable that an Aramaic-speaking fisherman could use the words with such subtlety and effect. Greek is a very subtle and flexible language. Words have second and third meanings according to their context. A difference of a single letter can change the meaning of a sentence.

Case in point: Nicodemus is not a Hebrew or Aramaic name; it is Greek, really clever Greek. Remember that the great majority of the earliest witnesses of the Gospel heard the Gospel spoken rather than reading it. Hearing the Gospel proclaimed in community was one of the purposes of the earliest Christian gatherings. A Greek-speaking congregation, on hearing the name "Nicodemus," would hear two joined Greek words, *nike* and *demus*.

The word *nike* means "victory." *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* in the Louvre is technically a *nike*. The word *demos* means "the body," (or "the populace"), hence our word "Democracy," meaning government of the body. Together they would mean "victory of the body." That would not be lost on those Greek-speaking early listeners.

Nicodemus is introduced as "a Pharisee . . . a leader of the Jews." From that we can assume that he is a member of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, the political and religious figures associated with the Temple who were the self-appointed overseers of Jewish affairs. There were many Sanhedrins in Israel; none were really official.

The Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was in the hands of a group called Sadducees, not Pharisees. The Sadducees, including the high priest and Temple authorities, represented the interests of those who supported Rome, the wealthy and politically powerful, who had a great interest in maintaining things just as they were. Jewish custom and religion were subordinate to accommodating Rome. It is probable that some Pharisees were in accord with the Sadducees, but apparently some, call it a liberal minority, recognized that such a policy was destroying the Jews' relationship to God and could only lead to the destruction of Israel.

Israel's relationship to God had a cyclical history. In the books of Genesis and Exodus, they were very close to God as God formed them into a people and led them out of bondage in Egypt to the land He had promised. Then, again and again, the people of Israel fell away, following other gods and putting their faith in earthly powers. Of course they would fail, disasters would follow, they would repent and attempt to return to that first relationship, and they would fail again, never quite as close again, slipping farther and farther away.

Nicodemus was one of that minority of Pharisees as were, apparently, Joseph of Arimathea and others, seeing clearly that the pattern had to be broken, that a radical change must be made in Israel; they are seeking a way to save Israel, seeking a way to restore Israel to its first relationship to God. Perhaps the way might be found in the teachings of this Jesus.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. If he were identified as a follower of Jesus, his position on the Sanhedrin would have been compromised, and, if he found what he sought in the teaching of Jesus, he would not have been able to help him before the council. He saw clearly that the teachings of Jesus and the policies of the Sadducees were inevitably in conflict. Later, he attempted to help Jesus, calling the Sanhedrin not to condemn Him without a trial. Still later, it is Nicodemus who brought the costly spices for the embalming of the crucified Jesus. Apparently he had found what he sought.

At this point he was asking questions. He sincerely wanted to understand Jesus. Once again the Greek-speaking listener would enjoy the subtle use of words in this interchange.

"No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." The words are *genethe anothen*, "begotten," not born, from above. One may see the Kingdom because it is God's will, God's volition to reveal it.

"No one can enter the kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit."

Being born of water is the baptism of John, the repentance of sin and turning back toward the renewed relationship with God. The Greek word used for the Spirit is *pneuma*; it is also the word for wind. First, there is a turning away from a life of self-indulgent sin, then a surrender, a submission to the wind, a surrender to the breath of God blowing over you and filling you, a surrender to the Spirit – surrender, belief, salvation.

Finally, Jesus assures Nicodemus that he, Nicodemus, would see the symbol and example of perfect surrender and submission to the breath of God. The Son of Man, Jesus, would be lifted up, hypsothenai, sometimes written doxasthenai, meaning glorified, just as the healing bronze serpents were lifted by Moses to redeem the people of Israel in the desert. In Wisdom 16:6 and following, those serpents are called symbolon solterias, symbols of salvation. In His crucifixion, Jesus will be both sacrifice and symbol.

Lifted up upon the Cross of His crucifixion, lifted up from the tomb in His Resurrection, lifted up to the throne of God in His Ascension, Jesus is the way and the symbol of change and salvation for Nicodemus, for Israel and for us all. That is what Nicodemus is cast as seeking; that is the "victory of the body."

The dialogue being ended, the writer summarizes it in what is known as "The Gospel within the Gospel:"

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have everlasting life."

#### The Fourth Sunday of Lent March 15, 2015

Psalm 23 John 9:1-41

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A man born blind in a world grown dark. He has never known what it means to see light.

The world in which he lives had once known what the light means. They had known the presence of God in their lives, lived according to His wishes and His commandments. He had been their God and they had been His people.

But they had drifted away, following other gods that seemed to promise them a comfortable present rather than a bright future. They had flirted with idols of all sorts. Now they have one idol that takes the place of God in their lives: it's the Law; it's Torah.

The man born blind hears the voice of an unseen Jesus; he feels the touch of the hands of Jesus gently spreading a cooling mud on his eyes, a mixture of dust and the spittle of Jesus. He hears Jesus say, "Go and wash in the pool of Siloam." He goes and washes as the voice has sent him, and light suddenly, immediately, enters the man's life, penetrates the darkness in which he has always existed.

He has no idea whose voice he heard or whose hands had touched him. When asked "Who did this?" he can only say, "He is a prophet."

In scripture a prophet is not one who predicts the future: a prophet is one who speaks for another, specifically for a deity. The man with sudden sight knows that his sight is from a divine intervention. God in Jesus Christ has drawn very, very near.

Our memory goes back to the second chapter of Genesis and the second story of Creation. God forms Adam, forms mankind, from the dust of the earth, mixed with the mists to form a mud. Mankind is shaped by God and is made complete by God's breath of life; the man born blind is made complete by the hands and presence of Jesus.

It is a case of the light shining in a dark world. The Jews with whom the man has existed all his life cannot accept the thought that the pitiful blind man has been made whole. It must be a mistake. It must be someone who looks like him.

The Pharisees cannot accept that God would show such favor to a man they considered to be a sinner. His blindness must have been a sign of God's disfavor to the man or to the man's family. Perhaps they are all sinners. Any affliction or deformity was a sure sign of that.

As for this Jesus person, He is obviously a sinner. If the man's story is true, this Jesus made mud on the Sabbath; He performed an act of work on the Sabbath, something clearly against the Law Code of Torah. They need look no further than the letter of the Law on which they base their faith to dismiss the man born blind and Jesus with one stroke. Their world grows darker.

It can be a dark world today. There are a great many Pharisees today, in and out of the Christian churches, that base their faith entirely on the written words of the Bible, without knowing the subtlety and complexity of those words, without really understanding their meaning. I might add that for some reason they are drawn to conversing with Episcopal clergy. Tragically, they, like the Pharisees in our readings, judge the world. Theirs is a cold, dry, rational world

that admits of no sudden infusions of light by the presence of the Divine.

The light, the spiritual presence of God in Jesus, actually filled the man born blind long before he washed in the pool of Siloam. It filled him with the first sense of Jesus' presence, the first sense of His touch. "Faith is believing in things you cannot see." In his Second Letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says, "We walk by faith and not by sight." It is faith that sends him to do as the unseen Jesus had said. It is faith that opens his eyes to the world. It is faith that empowers him to speak to the Jews and the Pharisees.

It is his faith that calls him to say "Lord, I believe."

Palm Sunday March 29, 2015

Psalm 31:9-16 Matthew 27:11-54

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It would appear to be a grand parade; some sort of triumphal procession! There is Jesus, the wonder-working rabbi from Galilee, mounted on a little colt riding into Jerusalem like a conquering hero, and the crowd shouting as He rides past. They wave branches cut from the trees along the roadway; they throw their coats and cloaks and branches to the ground before the plodding colt and its rider, smothering the dust and cushioning the hoof beats, and shouting louder and louder.

Jesus must hear them cry out, "Hosanna!" Jesus knows what they are shouting, and He knows why. They are shouting, "Hosanna," nothing more. It's a Hebrew word that means, "Oh, help me, I pray!" It's a supplication to one who has healed the sick, cleansed lepers, and raised the dead.

The early church misinterpreted the word "Hosanna" to mean a call of praise, and the writers of the four Gospels added words to that effect:

- "... in the name of the Lord."
- "... Blessed is the coming Kingdom of David."
- "... Behold your king is coming."

This last is taken from Zechariah 9:9: "See, your king is coming to you, his cause won, his victory gained, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey."

- "... Peace in heaven, glory in the highest."
- "... Hosanna in the highest."

"Oh help me, I pray, in the highest" makes no sense.

The crowds are there to see a miracle worker. They are crying, "Heal me; help me; make me happy!" It's not politics; it's not religion. It's personal. This Jesus is the man to take care of all their problems, no matter what they are, or so they've heard.

And so, after a few days when it seems to them nothing has changed in their lives, they turn against this imposter. They don't need to be prodded by Pharisees or Sadducees or Jewish revolutionaries to cry, "Crucify Him!" The devil doesn't make them do it. They are disappointed, and they're hurt, and they are angry. So, they vent their anger by demanding that this man who they think has dealt with them falsely, dashed their hopes, should be punished. Jesus should pay with his life.

But for the moment, there's a parade. It's not a very long parade, just from the gates of the city to the doors of the Temple, just a few blocks of city streets, but it has been a long, long journey. Perhaps the path to the city had begun when Jesus was a child in the midst of the elders at that same Temple, knowing Himself to be in "His Father's House." It had certainly begun at least three years before on the banks of the Jordan when this same Jesus had been baptized by John, and the heavens opened, the spirit descended like a dove, and He had been designated by God Himself as His own beloved Son.

The path had led through the wilderness of temptations, down dusty roads through the villages of Israel, Judea and Samaria, preaching and teaching, pausing in their synagogues and in the homes of the sick and the sinful, moving, always moving.

There had been pauses in the journey, moments of rest and restoration in a garden or on a mountaintop, but they had been few and far too brief. This entry into Jerusalem is itself a brief moment in the long journey as Jesus enters the final hours of God's unfolding plan. His path now takes Him to an upper room and a last supper with His disciples, to another garden, to an arrest and mock trial to hear those same people who cried "Hosanna" in the streets now cry, "Crucify Him!" The word crucify is too gentle, too civilized. In the Greek the crowd cries, *Stauroson*; it's rasping and explosive and violent.

The path leads to Golgotha and to the Cross.

You and I are invited to walk those steps with Jesus as the events of Holy Week call us to be with Him. They are difficult steps to take; it will seem as though they take us into a descending spiral of darkness. It will seem as though the forces of evil hold sway. On Maundy Thursday we will be called to be with Jesus at the celebration of his last supper, to be with Him as he goes out to the garden. With His departure the church itself will be stripped of His presence as the altar cloths and candles are removed, and we too depart in darkness as the darkness closes in. We will be called to be with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane; to be with Him before the Sanhedrin in the travesty of His trial and to be with Him before Pilate on Good Friday; and, finally, to be with Him at the cross itself in the moment when evil will seem to have won out over all that Jesus means to the world.

This week, Holy Week, is meant to be experienced. We are meant to take that walk, breathe that dust, hear those crowds, to look into the eyes of a threatened and angry high priest and into the eyes of a confused and ultimately weak Roman Governor. We are meant to feel the weight of the cross and pain of the nails and the release of death. It's not history; it's not only scriptural. It must be our experience to walk with Him.

If we take that walk, if we are a part of each day of Holy Week, the full sense of His suffering and of His sacrifice for us will become so very clear. If we take that walk, the lights and music and colors of Easter Day will be all the brighter, and we will feel the real significance of the Easter proclamation, "He is Risen!"

The Third Sunday of Easter April 19, 2015

Psalm 116:1-3,10-17 Luke 24:13-35

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This reading is to be found only in Luke. It would seem that Luke had unique sources from which to draw his Gospel writings.

This "Walk to Emmaus" rings true. It is a simple, straightforward story without embellishments, without quotations from the Old Testament. It has such a sense of truth that it has been speculated that this is the first, the original story of the Resurrection appearances of Jesus. If that is true, and it might well be so, it would stand as the first and earliest example of the liturgy of the Eucharist.

But what about the "Last Supper," you heretic, you may ask. Actually, the standard by which scripture has long been judged is consistency between the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. They don't agree in details, except on one point, and that is known as the shape of the liturgy.

In 1945 Dom Gregory Dix, an Anglican Benedictine, published a book – actually the foundational book of liturgy for those of us of a High Church, liturgical, "smells and bells" persuasion.

The book is titled *The Shape of the Liturgy.* If you really want to know what we are doing up here at the altar, I commend it to you. What,

you may ask, has that got to do with the Walk to Emmaus? I shall tell you.

Dix writes of many things liturgical, but his basic point is that the liturgy, by which he means what we call the Eucharist, has a certain form and, more important, has always had that form. It had that form in an upper room in Jerusalem when twelve disciples shared what was probably a Passover meal with Jesus. It had that form in a lodging on the road to Emmaus when two men were seated with a stranger sharing a meal. It had that form at every Mass or Eucharist for two thousand years. It had that very form here, a few hours ago.

And what exactly is that form? It's a simple progression of acts; take, bless, break, and give. The synoptics are consistent on that point.

At a table somewhere on the road to Emmaus. Jesus reached out for and took bread.

Jesus blessed that bread in the presence of His companions. Jesus broke that bread before their eyes.

Jesus reached out and offered that broken bread to them. Not a word was spoken.

At every Eucharistic celebration, bread and wine are brought to the altar in the Offertory; they are taken and placed upon the corporal by the deacon or priest. The priest pronounces a blessing for that bread and wine, invoking the Holy Spirit to be upon them. The priest lifts the bread, the host, and breaks it in two, elevating the broken bread so that all present may see it. At every Eucharist that broken bread is given to all who are present.

This is what Dom Gregory Dix called an *anamnesis:* not a commemoration, but a re-creation of the one sacrifice of Christ, making Him present.

Dix tells us that in this story of a walk to Emmaus, it's the action that reveals Jesus. The action predates any words of institution. It's the

action that's fundamental to experiencing the presence of Christ. It's the action that opened the eyes of two travelers to Emmaus; it's the action that opens our eyes at every Eucharist.

The two on the road to Emmaus were immersed in the events that had taken place in Jerusalem. Their expectations had been dashed and they were in grief. They had lost their leader and teacher, the one who had become the focal point in their lives. All their hopes had gone with him. In their preoccupation and grief, they fail to recognize, fail even to see, Jesus in their presence.

The scriptures that we call the Old Testament are not sufficient to reveal Jesus. They serve only as a prologue to the two on the road recognizing Him. Their 'hearts burn within them" as they hear the scriptures opened and explained by the stranger. What scriptures?

We need not look far, no farther than Psalm 22. It is a personal lament of one who seeks justification. The psalm includes such lines as

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

"He trusted in the Lord. Let Him deliver Him."

"My mouth is dried out like a potsherd"

while Psalm 69, verse 22 says,

"They gave me gall to eat and vinegar to drink."

Psalm 22, verse 16 says,

"They pierce my hands and my feet,"

and verse 17 says,

"They cast lots for my clothing; they divide my garments."

Psalm 39, verse 3 even says,

"Did not our hearts burn within us?"

Perhaps those, and others like them, are what Luke refers to as the Scriptures Jesus opened to the travelers.

The New Testament is filled with quotations from the Old Testament. It is presented in the language of the Old Testament because it was the only spiritual language the writers knew.

Happy and I had a wonderful friend and mentor on the faculty at Nashotah. Father Hunt was a brilliant Dominican scholar who left the order to marry and who became an Episcopal priest. He was a great bear of a man with a deep, rumbling voice. He taught us Hebrew, Latin, and Old Testament. When asked in class if the Old Testament really referred to Jesus, he replied, "When I get to Heaven, I will ask God if He really meant Jesus. If He says, 'Yes,' I'll be very, very surprised."

The point is, of course, that the travelers didn't understand the scriptures that He opened to them until Jesus revealed Himself in the breaking of the bread, not before. Only then was he really present to them, and only then could they begin to comprehend God's love in the flesh of His Incarnation and God's sacrifice for that love in the Crucifixion.

The Seventh Sunday of Easter May 17, 2015

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35 John 17:1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

These few chapters of John's Gospel have been called "Jesus' Farewell Discourse." It's a long and somewhat repetitive series of instructions and words of encouragement to His disciples as Jesus approaches what He knows to be His final hours with them. All this takes place in the upper room at what we know to be His Last Supper.

But this chapter, Chapter 17, is different. It has been called "The High Priestly Prayer." I am not sure in what sense it is "high" or "priestly," but it is a prayer in the sense that prayer is supplication.

I cannot imagine how many times in the past 30 years I have read this passage from John and missed the point.

I have been reading it incorrectly, without really considering its context. It's just been another long, repetitive, rather confusing bit of the Discourse on which I personally have had difficulty making a sermon.

Then, this time, perhaps because I have had much more time to reflect on its meaning and significance, I came to a realization that this isn't just an end to Jesus' "Farewell Discourse." This is not preaching or teaching; this is a plea, a passionate plea to The Father

for His disciples in His impending absence. It's heartfelt; there is urgency in His words. Now is the time.

It should be read in a staccato burst of short sentences; it should be read with the emotion of Jesus' loving care for his people. He knows their limitations, and He knows their strengths. He knows they may scatter like sheep when He's gone. He knows that their faith may falter, and He begs for God's care and protection for them.

It should be read this way; remember that this is a dialog between Father and Son. Pause as though Jesus' pleas are receiving an answer, but feel the emotion as Jesus feels time slipping away.

"Father, the hour has come . . . glorify your son."

Glory is the sign of the presence of God, His visible manifestation.

In Hebrew, it is called His *Shekinah*. It's God's glory, His presence, that speaks to Moses from a burning bush. It's His glory that is a pillar of fire protecting the Jews, God interposing Himself between the Jews and the pursuing Egyptians in the desert.

It's God's glory, His presence, on a mountaintop that transfigures Jesus and is reflected in the blinding brightness of Jesus' person. It's God's glory in the form of the flames of the day of Pentecost that will touch and transform those same disciples He is pleading for. To be glorified is to be taken into God's presence, to be sheltered and protected. They are glorified.

Jesus Himself is a visible manifestation of the presence of God. He says, "I glorified you on earth, finishing the work you gave me to do. Glorify me in your own presence with the glory I had in your presence before the world existed." Take me home.

"I made your name known to those you gave me. They were yours, you gave them to me . . . they have believed that you sent me."

Here and now, in my presence, their faith is strong. They have seen my works and heard my words; they have seen the crowds clamoring to be near me, but when the crowds cry against me and the powers plot to destroy me, what then? When I am no longer with them, what then? Then doubts will arise and memories will fail and the world will overwhelm them. Peter will deny me; Thomas will doubt me; Judas will betray me.

"I am no longer in the world, but they are; I am coming to you." They are not coming to you."

"Protect them."

"I protected them; I guarded them; I have given them your word."

They have been faithful, and "the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world even as I do not belong to the world." (But they are in this world.) Father, give them courage and strength and faith, above all faith. Only faith will "Protect them from the evil one."

And then the most poignant words of all: "Righteous Father, the world does not know you but I know you and these know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

You realize, of course, that Jesus' plea is not just for a small group of followers long ago. It's a plea for us all. It's a plea that you and I will have courage and strength and faith today, in this world in our time.

## Wednesday Evening Homily

The Feast of Alcuin May 20, 2015

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 39:1–9 Psalm 37:3–6,32–33 Titus 2:1–3 Matthew 13:10–16

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"Their hearts have grown dull – their ears are hard of hearing – they have shut their eyes – so that they may not look with their eyes or listen with their ears. And understand with their heart."

Perhaps that's a good description of the state of Europe in the early Middle ages – the 8th century – the time of Alcuin, the one we honor this evening.

Successive waves of invasions by Germanic peoples over several centuries had demolished the culture of the Roman Empire. The philosophy and history and literature of Rome had been destroyed or survived only in isolated monasteries, largely forgotten by the people whose very lives were precarious. The practice of reading and writing itself had been lost except for a very few.

In the 8th century, there occurred a rebirth of interest in finding and preserving the works and wisdom of the past. It's called the Carolingian Renaissance after the emperor Charlemagne. Charlemagne sought the revival of the state and culture of Rome, and to do so, he recognized that those things must be restored.

Charlemagne recognized that knowledge – learning for all and not just a privileged few – was essential.

He called on Alcuin, an English Deacon already well-known for his writing and his teaching, to establish schools in the empire. Alcuin accepted the task. He established schools accessible to all in the cathedrals and monasteries. He established "scriptoria" writing centers where the surviving ancient writings were copied for greater availability. Much of what we know of Roman writing is due to his work.

Alcuin is said to have invented cursive script – what we used to call longhand writing – to facilitate copying those works. He worked with Charlemagne to simplify and standardize liturgy, preserving many ancient prayers.

In short, Alcuin was not a martyr to the cause – not a colorful figure – but one whose work we have in our hands this evening.

The Fourth Sunday of Pentecost June 21, 2015

Psalm 45:11-18 Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For reasons known only to themselves, the editors of the Lectionary have chosen to omit verses 21 to 24 in this reading from Matthew 11. Here they are:

"Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you it will be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

"And you Capernaum, will you be exalted in heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

Now let's go back and read the poetry of verse 17: "We piped to you and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn."

Who were the ones who did not dance or mourn? It was the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum and many, many more, who heard John's call to repentance and did not repent and who heard Jesus' proclamation of God's love and forgiveness, shrugged,

and went on their way. They were the "children in the marketplace" who simply would not respond. It was all irrelevant in their lives. They were absorbed in the simple process of making their way in this world, perhaps paying lip-service to God on the special feast days once or twice a year.

Of course, we have no one like that today.

How can a vibrant religion such as that of the Jews have become so marginalized, so irrelevant to so many Jews? Perhaps it was fatigue; perhaps it was generations of disappointment waiting for the Godpromised Messiah that would usher in the golden age; and perhaps it was a creeping cynicism that said religion just might not be the way to truth and beauty and happiness.

Then again, perhaps it was confusion as to whom to believe. Jesus and John were not the only prophets in Israel. There was a host of prophets, all of whom claimed to be speaking for God; none of whom agreed on exactly what God was saying. They all had some sort of following; Jesus encountered them.

The real problem was not with competing prophets. The problem that John and Jesus attacked was that the official religion of the day came to the people through the filter of its interpretation by Scribes and Pharisees. They were the ones who read from the giant scrolls of Torah in the synagogues; they were the ones who then told the people what they had heard, what to think. They had enormous control over the lives of the people of Israel because secular and religious life were inextricably entwined.

It all might have worked had those authorized to read and interpret been selfless servants of God. Rather, they had become a privileged elite. They had a vested interest in remaining a privileged elite.

The "wise and understanding" Pharisees condemned both Jesus and John. Why? Because their actions were dangerously emotional; they

were not officially sanctioned. They were not licensed to preach. They were out of control.

The Pharisees' minds were closed; perhaps it was right to say that God has "hidden these things" from the wise and understanding" and revealed them to those with open minds, people for whom micromanaged religion that is pervasive of culture is a burden.

The interpretation of the Law, with its myriad rules, imposed on Israel by the Pharisees, is the heavy yoke on the necks of the people. It had nothing to do with taxes; that was the yoke imposed by Rome. It had to do with proper behavior and strict observance of the myriad laws that had been constructed through the Pharisaic interpretation of Torah.

Failure to observe those laws would mean public disgrace, censure, ostracism, and even death by stoning, organized by the wise and understanding. It was a punishment-based culture into which, interestingly enough, John's call to repentance fit quite well. John has been called, correctly I think, the last prophet of the Old Testament.

Jesus proclaims the New Testament, a different understanding of the people's relationship to God. It's not new: it's a very old understanding, a very old idea of what God expects of His people. It's the original understanding that has been submerged in laws and rules. It's an understanding that was a covenant, not a contract.

God had said, "I will be your God; you shall be my people." It's an unconditional relationship that does not depend on the behavior of Israel to be true. What did – what does – God ask of Israel? What does He ask of us?

Jesus peels away centuries of interpretation to return to the one basic ancient expectation placed by God on Israel. This is what God asks:

"You shall love The Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself"— just two commandments, not so difficult or demanding.

This morning at the 10 o'clock service I recognized that our own Molly Stevenson was one of five deputies from the Diocese of Georgia to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church being held in Salt Lake City. I would make an observation that is perhaps germane. The convention is ten days of about a thousand people voting on policies and rules for the Episcopal Church. At their very best those rules and policies for the Episcopal Church are an expression of the teachings of Our Lord. Jesus Christ.

In His every word and act, loving God and loving our neighbors is the yoke that Jesus carries for the people of Israel. He carries it for you and me now, and He invites us to share it. His yoke is easy; our burden is light.

### The Ninth Sunday of Pentecost July 26, 2015

Psalm 85:8-13 Matthew 14:22-33

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If you simply read Matthew 14 up to verse 21, you have the charming story of the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, "besides women and children," who apparently didn't eat much. The story is particularly significant because it is an early statement of the "Shape of the Liturgy": take, bless, break, and give.

If you then go forward to Chapter 15, you find that the story continues with the apparent fact that all that the Pharisees get out of witnessing that miracle is "they do not wash their hands when they eat."

It's pretty obviously one story, which means that Chapter 14, verses 22 to 33, are in the wrong place. Actually we should say 22 to 36; there are two verses about Gennesaret that have nothing to do with the narrative. Those verses could be inserted anywhere. The question is, what do we do with verses 22 to 33? Where do they belong?

Pick up those verses and take them to the 28th chapter of Matthew, to the very end of Matthew's Gospel.

First, in Chapter 28, an angel tells the women at the tomb, concerning Jesus, "He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him. Lo,

I have told you." Then Jesus himself tells them, "Tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

They do go and they do see Jesus when they have gone to Galilee, to the mountain to which He directed them. They see Him, and they worship Him; but Matthew tells us that some still doubted.

This is the point in Matthew at which Jesus gives the disciples the "great commission:" "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

That is the end of Matthew's Gospel as we have received it, but there has long been a scholarly opinion that this is the point at which verses 22 to 33 of Chapter 14 were originally to be found. The journey of the disciples to fulfill the Great Commission begins in a boat on the Sea of Galilee.

This makes us wonder how this really unrelated sea story found its way to Chapter 14. Picture a scribe in a dusty, poorly-lit room, seated at a table with a huge pile of handwritten pages in Hebrew or Aramaic, sorting his way through the pages. A gust of wind ruffles and rearranges the pages, a moment's distraction breaks the scribe's train of thought. It could be that simple.

The light is bad, the room is warm and stuffy, the scribe nods and his eyes grow heavy; he finds he's copying the wrong sheet of paper. He thinks, "I could erase this; that's a lot of work. What if I simply don't put it at the end of the gospel. Who's to know?"

Another good question is, "Why is this story placed in Chapter 28, at the very end of Matthew's Gospel?" The answer to that has to do with when and why the gospel was written at all, and for whom. We must remember that Matthew writes for a Jewish-oriented Christian community, the very earliest church, shortly after the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. The Christ-followers had been expelled from the Jewish community and the synagogue. Their roots, their world, and their identity were destroyed in a way that the Greekbased Christian communities never experienced. They were on their own and completely vulnerable to persecution.

They were in a metaphoric boat on a metaphoric sea in a metaphoric storm, without their captain.

To continue the metaphor, the disciples are the early, Jewish-based Christian community making its way in a strange and often hostile world, torn by the winds and tossed by the waves of the reality of being sent out to proselytize a world they neither know nor understand. Jesus, the one on whom they relied and from whom they drew both strength and comfort, seems to be elsewhere, far away.

Mathew tells us that the events of this passage take place in "the fourth watch" of the night. That is the last watch before dawn, often the darkest watch of all after a troubled and sleepless night. The exhausted disciples see someone walking on the sea, fail to recognize Jesus, and cry out in fear – actually, in the Greek the word is *ekrasan*, scream – "It's a ghost!?"

Jesus reassures them that He has never left them, telling them, "Take heart, it is I." Actually, in the Greek the words *ego eimi* mean "I am," God's traditional proclamation of His presence. It's a statement that no matter how far they go or stray, they are always in God's presence and His protection.

Peter represents those who doubt. His faith is mercurial. "If it is you" prefaces Peter's need of confirmation, proof that it is Jesus. Even when Peter has that confirmation and is actually walking on the sea, he succumbs to personal doubt and sinks into the waves. Peter represents those whose faith is ephemeral. He fully believes in Jesus, yet he demands some sort of confirmation, some proof. His faith alone is not strong enough to sustain him in the trials of the world,

and he begins to sink, submerged by the waves. They are the ones who, in a crisis, real or perceived, are quick to cry, "Lord, save me!"

Every priest is familiar with the type. They appear at the church, desperately in need of attention, guidance, and consolation. They become involved in every available activity, have all sorts of ideas to improve the church, and then disappear. They may reappear months or years later, but most often not at all. I used to say that I worried about some people when they did not come to church; I worried about some people when they did.

Consider the story as metaphor. The disciples are that early church, as well as the church today, navigating through the battering experiences of making their way in an unfamiliar world. The church is beset by all sorts of issues, some of which have little or nothing to do with the Great Commission for which it embarked in the first place.

Perhaps you've read *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. Screwtape is the Senior Demon giving advice to Wormwood, his nephew and tempter-in-training. Wormwood is here on earth; his mission is to undermine and defeat Christianity. Screwtape gives him all sorts of advice, the most effective one being that to draw people away from "the Enemy," that is God in Jesus Christ, the most effective course is to "distract them with issues."

I was reminded of this a few years ago when I was a deputy to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. It was a contentious convention, dealing with such topics as women's ordination to the Episcopacy and a motion to remove the "Filioque" clause from the Nicene creed – that is the clause that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father. In the midst of it all, we received a very serious and impassioned motion to boycott Arizona Tea because there was a picture of an Indian on the label.

It is all too possible to listen to Wormwood and to be distracted by issues, many of which seem terribly important. It is all too possible to lose sight of why we are here at all.

It is all too possible to lose faith in what seems to be an absent Jesus and to wonder what on earth the Holy Spirit has in mind; to be ready to abandon ship and return to ways that are familiar, easier, smoother, and less stressful. The shore – any shore – can be very inviting. The Disciples, and you and I, are in desperate need of the presence of God in Jesus Christ, particularly in the midst of their, and our, darkest hour. His presence is there. If we pay attention, we will see His outstretched hand, and if we listen very carefully, we will hear Him say, "Why do you doubt?"

The Eleventh Sunday of Pentecost August 9, 2015

2 Samuel 5-9, 15, 31-33 Psalm 130 Ephesians 4:25-5:2 John 6:35, 41-51

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

You may have noticed that the three readings each Sunday, and sometimes the Psalm, usually have a common thread. Apparently, somewhere in the process that created the Prayer Book and the Lectionary, someone gave thought to such things. That is to be commended. Then there are weeks such as this when the thread is really hard to find.

In the Old Testament reading we have the sad story of the fate of Absalom, the son of King David, who raises a rebellion against his father. Absalom is smart, good-looking with great hair – that's important – compassionate with the people of Israel, and terrifically popular.

He and his army actually drive David from Jerusalem into exile. David regroups, and his army, in turn, defeats Absalom; and Absalom, fleeing on his mule, is caught by his great hair in the branches of a tree. David's military leader and his soldiers find him suspended there and despite David's orders that Absalom be spared, kill him. Naturally, David is sad.

That's really all there is to that story. I was hard-pressed to find a relevant moral to speak of except, perhaps, the readings in the Old Testament are not for the faint of heart, so I turned to Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.

Paul is, as always, full of morals. In this instance he seems to be dealing with some real division in the Christian community at Ephesus. Forming a Christian community in Ephesus might be called Paul's crowning achievement. Ephesus was a city in which all sorts of gods were worshipped. Paul has found that all pagans are not the same; they do not necessarily like each other. Paul's key words are falsehood, anger, evil talk, bitterness, wrath, wrangling, and slander. Clearly, all is not well with the Ephesians. Thank heaven there is nothing like that in Christian churches today.

In the first reading, there is a story and no moral; in the second there is a moral and no story. So let's talk about bread.

Literary friends tell me that all good stories contain an element of tension, of conflict. There is that element throughout the New Testament, particularly in the four Gospels. The tension is always between Jesus and the Jews, be they Pharisees or Sadducees or the members of His own synagogue at Nazareth. The tension is that the Jews are absolutely unable to understand what on earth Jesus is talking about. They simply cannot communicate.

At least part of the problem is that Hebrew, which the Jews understood, is a very concrete language. The word "tree" means a tree; the word "bread" means a loaf of bread. When Jesus uses the word "bread" in this reading, they can see it only in those terms.

So when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty," or, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," He loses them completely.

Actually they know about bread coming down from heaven. That bread was "manna," a mysterious bread-like substance that rained down upon the Israelites in the desert in their Exodus from Egypt long before. It was physical bread to sustain their physical bodies, no more. And they ate the manna, and they lived out their lives, and they died, and that was that.

Jesus tells them that He is not speaking of a physical bread. He tells them that if they had paid the least bit of attention to the prophets of Israel, they would know that he speaks in spiritual terms. God now gives them that spiritual bread, a bread that will sustain them here in this life and in a life eternal; that bread is to be found in the presence of Jesus. He is the embodiment of that spiritual bread; if they believe in Him, partake of Him, they will have that.

The bread of life and the living water, the body and blood of Jesus, are never depleted, never less.

We are about to partake of that spiritual bread.

In the bread and the wine that will be consecrated, we receive the "bread of life" and the "living water," just as Jesus promised.

#### The Thirteenth Sunday of Pentecost August 23, 2015

Psalm 149 Matthew 18: 15-20

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There is an Anglican Church in London, rather close to the British Museum, named All Saints, on Margaret Street.

It was constructed in the 1850's in what is called the "High Victorian Gothic style"; it is spectacular. The architect was William Butterfield, a major force in reviving the gothic; All Saints is his masterpiece. Rather than using stone, Butterfield used alternating courses of colored brick. He filled the interior with brightly colored murals and gold, all illuminated by stained glass. It is transcendent.

All Saints was, and still is, the mother church of the Anglo-Catholic movement in the Anglican Church. The movement remains an alternative to the sterile, highly verbal liturgy of what came to be called Low Church or Broad Church, with the Anglo Catholic church providing a complete experience of worship involving all the senses – sight, hearing, touch, and smell.

The liturgy is in the Anglican tradition with organ music, vested choir, vestments, and incense, all within the framework of the *Book of Common Prayer*, not a Roman Catholic Missal.

From 1908 to 1934, All Saints' rector was Father Henry Falconer Barclay Mackay. His parishioners affectionately addressed him as Father Henry Falconer Barclay Mackay. Mackay was the personification of the Anglo-Catholic ideal, tall and ascetic, always seen in cassock and berretta, with a superb liturgical style and a memorable voice with which he preached spiritual, scriptural sermons, sermons that remain profoundly moving to this day.

If Mackay had a fault, as some priests do, it was in his inability to relate to the everyday affairs of some of the parishioners of All Saints. Not that he was unsympathetic or not pastoral; his experience simply did not include such things. His biographer said, "I am not aware that Mackay bore fools gladly; I am not aware that he bore fools at all."

If you had just celebrated a beautiful liturgy and given your best and most elevating sermon and were standing in the narthex greeting parishioners and were admonished for the lack of blue crayons in the Sunday school, you, too, might be rather sympathetic with that. But I digress.

I've been working on that for years, and I believe I am getting better. At least, I hope it's not quite so obvious. Happy need not restrain me nearly as often. My memory goes back some years to the Baccalaureate service for our older son, Bill, at Evans High School near Augusta. We were seated in the school gymnasium, crowded on bleacher seats on a warm, Georgia afternoon. The keynote speaker was the Chairman of the Columbia County Board of Education, John Pierce Blanchard.

To give him credit, Mr. Blanchard had guided the county education system through the turmoil of desegregation in the sixties, at peril to his life. However, he remained a profoundly conservative man, a pillar of the Baptist Church, and a Biblical literalist. He began his address with the words, and I quote, "In the year 500 BC, when Moses wrote the Bible." Happy restrained me.

I do not understand biblical literalism. Put another way, I don't understand a willingness to simply accept someone's idea or opinion about the scripture without looking at sources and translation – discovering what words mean, why words were written, by whom and for whom. It's all there in the text waiting to open our minds to layer upon layer of meaning. All it asks is a bit of scholarship, a bit of independent thought. Which brings me to Matthew 18:15-20. It's about time, you may say.

We don't know who wrote the Gospel attributed to Matthew. A school of thought linking it to the disciple Matthew, the tax collector, has no real basis and is quite improbable. Some say that it was written in Edessa in Syria based on the presence of a sizable Jewish Christian community there. That is possible. We really don't know when it was written, only that it appears to have been written after Mark's gospel. The entire New Testament appears to have been written after Mark's gospel.

"Why" and "for whom" are answered in the text itself.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to understanding scripture is the idea that we have received it exactly as it was first written. Actually, the scriptures, particularly the Synoptic Gospels, were edited, added to, subtracted from and rearranged for centuries as the Christian movement, the Church, grew and confronted new concerns and new needs — concerns and needs that demanded new ideas and postures. What better way to justify new ideas than to claim them to be ancient, claim them to be based on the very words of Jesus? Some of Jesus' words are actually thought to come from the "Q" for *quelle*, the German word for "source," a document lost long ago, if it ever existed. Other words were additions, mistranslations, and scribal glosses to the texts. Others were obviously added to convey a message. This passage of Matthew is message-conveying.

Matthew's Gospel is generally acknowledged to have been written for the Jewish, Hebrew-speaking community of Christians in Palestine. This has been based on the writer's assuming that the reader is familiar with Jewish custom and tradition, just as Luke and John feel the need to explain such things. Accordingly, Matthew was the foundational Gospel of the very first, the original Palestinian Christians who were closest to Jesus and to the sites of His ministry.

Curiously, those Christian communities did not grow while Christianity was growing and thriving elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin, in Greece and Italy and France. In a guidebook to the Holy Land composed in the early fourth century, only three Christian villages could be identified. One hundred years later, there were many such villages, and by the sixth century, Christians were actually in a majority, the result of permanent settlement by pilgrims and the conversion of pagans. The Jewish Christians were a minority, submerged in their own land. Matthew 18:15-20 is a reaction to their loss of contact with their cultural roots as Christianity became more western-centered and "Gentilized."

The Hebrew scriptures, what we would call the Old Testament, are called the Tanakh, part of which are the five Books of Moses, called Torah, the Law and the Prophets. In addition, there is a body of writing called the Talmud, sometimes called the Oral Torah. It consists of the teachings of many Rabbis, 6200 pages of teaching. The Talmud is a compilation of two traditions. The Mishnah is a Palestinian legal code, a collection of Rabbinic traditions redacted by Rabbi Judah Hanisi in the third century CE. The other body of writing is the Gemara, written in Babylon in the fifth century, a summary of Rabbinic debate over the Mishnah ("Rabbi Hillel says, but Rabbi Issac says"). It is probable that the material in the Talmud had been in an oral tradition for many years before it was codified and written.

All of which is significant because this reading from Matthew is a restatement of the Talmud. The question of dealing with a church member who sins (in the early codexes it is "sins against God") is from the Mishnah, Sotah 1-2; the assurance about two or three being gathered together is from the Mishnah, Avot 3:2. How and why did

material from Jewish writings from the 3rd and 5th centuries find their way into the Gospel of Matthew?

The "how" is quite simple. A scribe put them there.

The "why" is just as simple. The Jewish Christian community in Palestine was in grave danger of disappearing. Centuries of tradition preserving the actual roots of Christianity and its earliest associations with the ancient traditions of Israel were in danger of being lost.

"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven," is actually a statement that the Jewish Christian community continued to be empowered to speak and act in God's name.

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them" is a powerful assurance that no matter how marginalized the community may become, however submerged in a sea of newcomers to the faith and to Palestine, in times of change and division and turmoil, they are always in the eye and the mind of God; and He will be present with them.

A splendid reassurance, then and now.

## The Seventeenth Sunday of Pentecost September 20, 2015

Psalm 80:7-14 Matthew 21:33-46

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

To really understand the significance of this passage from Matthew we have to go back a few years – 800 years, actually.

In approximately 740 BC the prophet Isaiah wrote:

Let me sing for my beloved, my love song concerning his vineyard;

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;
He built a watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;
He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

And now inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured;

I will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting. He expected justice but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry.

There are at least three writers under the name of Isaiah. This is from the first Isaiah, the writer of books 1 through 39, called "proto-Isaiah." This is a warning.

At the time this warning was written, there were two separate kingdoms of Jews. The Northern Kingdom, called Israel, was made up of ten of the original twelve tribes. The Southern Kingdom, Judah including Jerusalem, consisted of the remaining two tribes.

Massed on the northern approaches to Israel were the armies of the aggressive kingdom of Assyria, with obvious designs on expansion and conquest. Isaiah writes of Israel as the vineyard of God; it is about to receive punishment and destruction for failing to be what God had intended. Instead of grapes it had produced "wild grapes." The Hebrew actually means "sour fruit" or "stinking fruit."

The destruction of Israel was inevitable. The nation was destroyed, and its people were carried off in slavery. Isaiah's warning was actually for the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They were now to be the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts, His "pleasant planting." God was no more pleased by Judah than He had been with Israel. He saw strife and bloodshed; He saw no righteousness. He warned them, "Now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard." They were deaf to his warning.

In less than one hundred years, Judah, too, was destroyed, this time by the armies of Babylon, and the people were carried off in slavery to Babylon.

The writer of Mark read and saw the relevance of this passage in Isaiah to his own time. The Jews were in much the same situation as they had been more than 700 years earlier. In many ways they had failed to be, and to do, as God commanded, and the agent of their punishment, the armies of Rome, were massed against them. Foremost in Mark's eyes were their rejection and crucifixion of the Messiah whom God had sent to lead them to righteousness.

Writing in the 60's, thirty years after the crucifixion, Mark made additions to Isaiah. In the 70's Matthew followed the writing of Mark; in the 80's or 90's Luke included the passage in his gospel.

In this metaphor the landowner is God; His vineyard is the nation of Israel, the homeland of the reunited Jewish people. The Jews do not own Israel; they are tenants on the land, living there by the grace of God. God has leased it to them at the price of their faithful obedience to His laws.

In time, the Jews forgot that they were dependent on the grace and good will of their God, and they rebelled against Him. They rejected the "slaves" or "agents of God," by which Matthew means the prophets; they ignored them or drove them away, wounding or killing them. Prophets in the Old Testament sense were not ones who predicted what was to come; they commented and tried to correct the short-comings of the day. They were there to open the eyes of the short-sighted Jews to their impending destruction. Generally speaking, they failed.

Finally, God sent His beloved son, Jesus, a last attempt to offer a path back to restore their relationship to God. Jesus embodied what it means truly to follow God's commandments. He was killed by Jews with the complicity of the Romans.

Jesus was killed for a variety of reasons. To the Romans, he was a potential threat to the security and peace of their occupation of Israel. To the Jews, it was His presence as a sign and demonstration of what truly being God's chosen people would demand of them. He was the living reminder of how far astray they had fallen. He reminded them that they were, in fact, leasing the land of Israel from God.

Again, their failure to listen to a prophet, as the Jews considered Jesus, led to their destruction, and the city of Jerusalem and the Temple and the nation disappeared under foreign rule; the "wretches were put to a miserable death."

So we come to the last few lines of this reading from Matthew. Once again, Matthew follows the Gospel of Mark. Mark himself follows an earlier writing, lines 22 and 23 of Psalm 118.

We really don't give the Psalms the attention they deserve. They are not simply filler between readings from the Old and New Testament. They were very significant to the culture and worship of the Jews. They reflect a broad spectrum of Jewish life, from personal and communal joy to fear and anguish. There are songs of praise to be sung in the Temple at Jerusalem, and there are individual laments.

Seven hundred years before Mark wrote his gospel, the psalmist wrote in Psalm 118, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our sight." The psalmist's reference is obscure; it might be a reference to the building or rebuilding of the Temple.

Mark plainly sees it as a reference to Jesus. Jesus had offered the Jews a new "temple," a new center for their faith, building a new Israel in which a renewed sense of righteousness was to be the foundation. Jesus, in His words and His actions, was the cornerstone of the new Israel, and He had been rejected.

We, as Christians, see Jesus is the cornerstone, not of one nation but of a new world, a new righteousness, a new relationship with God for Jews and Gentiles. The warning of the Psalmist and of Mark and Matthew has as much relevance today as it did then.

The focus, in the face of ephemeral issues and distractions, must be on the solid cornerstone that is Jesus Christ.

All Saints' Day November 1, 2015

Psalm 34:1-10,12 Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have good news and bad news. First, the bad news. We will never be angels. If, in fact, you have made plans, envisioned yourself in a white robe with golden wings and a halo, signed up for harp lessons, that sort of thing, I'm sorry, but you might as well cancel. It's not going to happen.

On the other hand, you will be saints; in fact, you already are saints. "Who, me?" you may ask; "Yes, you!" That's the good news.

Lest there be some confusion about being a saint, it's important to realize that there are two sorts of saints. There are saints with a big "S" and saints with a small "s."

We know the names of many saints with big S's. We have special days for a lot of them: Apostles, associates of Jesus himself, such as Peter and Thomas and Andrew, and Mary Magdalen; they all have days in their memory. Even Paul, who was a self-proclaimed "last of the Apostles," has a special day. Martyrs of the early persecution of Christians have special days; so do some martyrs who are quite recent. Then there are founders of great religious movements and orders: people like Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Benedict, Saint Dominic, who founded the Order of Preachers, and Ignatius Loyola of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits.

The list also includes Martin Luther and John and Charles Wesley. One might ask, "How did they get in there?" but, of course, I won't.

The Church is adding new names all the time, several at every General Convention of the Episcopal Church. There has long been a book called *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* that lists the names and special days of observance for Saints. When I was a new priest, it was about one-half inch thick; now it's at least an inch thick, and there is an additional book called *Holy Women, Holy Men*. Many of the names are new to us, unknown but significant to the life and history of the Christian community.

It's those new names that might give us hope to join the "big S" category, upward religious mobility, so to speak, but, in the meantime, we might ponder what makes us small "s" saints in the first place?

Many, many years ago in the early 50's of the last century, I was, briefly, a Boy Scout. We were living in the Washington, D.C. area, Arlington County, Virginia, to be precise. My father was off at a war in Korea. When he returned, we moved, ending a not very promising scout career.

Actually, I have no idea how I came to join the Scouts; perhaps it was at the suggestion of a friend, Billy Holzhauser, a friend from Woodrow Wilson grammar school. Somehow I joined a Scout Troop in the Embassy district of Washington, based in a large Methodist Church near Rock Creek Park. The troop was full of the sons of the embassy staffs; it was colorful, a mixture of nationalities and cultures, and some very strange food on camping trips. What, exactly, is a pomegranate?

My patrol of eight or ten boys met in the Yugoslavian Embassy under the watchful eye of a man with a huge, soup-strainer mustache. He looked like a Balkan bandit or probably a guerilla leader with Tito. Needless to say, we were a bunch of 12-year-olds on our very best behavior. But I digress.

The reason I mention this has to do with the Scout Motto:

"A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent."

Easily recited and easily remembered. Even I can remember it after all these years.

"And where, pray tell, is he going with this?" you may well ask.

The answer is that this evening's reading is the Christian equivalent of the Scout Motto. It should really begin with the phrase "A Christian is . . . ." These are the Greek translations of what were probably Aramaic words.

A Christian is "blessed." The Greek word is *makarios*; it means happy or fortunate in the sense of the well-being that the gods enjoy.

Christians are blessed because they are poor, meaning despised, oppressed, or, strangely translated, pious. The phrase "in spirit" is a gloss; it was a later addition to the word "poor."

A Christian is in "mourning," meaning in poverty, or need.

A Christian is "meek," meaning mild or gentle, humble in spirit – not timid.

A Christian is "hungering," in the sense of being empty and longing for something; the words "after righteousness" are glosses from a subsequent translation.

A Christian is "merciful" meaning to have pity, to show sympathy.

A Christian is "clean" or "pure" in heart, having no desire for falsehood.

A Christian is a "peacemaker," seeking and pursuing peace, loving his or her enemies.

A Christian is "persecuted for righteousness' sake," the expectation of anyone whose life is so profoundly in conflict with the accepted standards of the culture in which he or she lives.

Consider the standards of the day. The culture promoted and applauded a person who was rich in material things, was proud in spirit, a hedonist, an aggressor, a pragmatist, merciless and sated, self-satisfied.

If we could read the beatitudes in their original form minus the glosses, in Aramaic, we would find that they have a rhythm and they rhyme, much like the psalms. They are to be remembered, perhaps memorized. They are a catechism, and to be acted upon.

A Christian life is more than simply observing commandments. It is summed up in the Beatitudes. The commandments contain the "shalt nots" of Christian behavior; the beatitudes are the "shalls." Together they form a complete statement of what is expected of us all.

The First Sunday of Advent November 29, 2015

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 Mark 13:24-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This Sunday we begin the season of Advent. The name is from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning coming. Unfortunately, it is yet another faulty translation from the Greek word *parousia*, which means Second Coming, the end times and the coming of Christ in power and glory, to send out the angels to gather the faithful from the ends of the earth.

By dropping the "second," the story, or at least our interpretation of the story, changes the season from one about preparing for a giant, cataclysmic event that will take place at the final Day of Judgment to a story about the baby Jesus and the wonderful events surrounding His coming into the world. It's such a charming story, so sweet and tender. It is also easier to think about what has been than what will be. It is easier to think of beginnings than ends. Consequently, we say that we live in the "between time" with very heavy emphasis on the joys of Christmas.

The early church was concerned with ends, not beginnings. It had the recent experience of the presence of Jesus and the wonders He had performed and the words He had spoken. It had the recent experience of His end, the final drama of His crucifixion and Resurrection and Ascension, with the final promise that He would return.

The early church was concerned with where He went, when will He be back, and what should we do in the meantime. Their concern is with the *parousia*.

We begin Advent with the Disciples – Peter, James, John, and Andrew – sitting with Jesus on the Mount of Olives. They have just left the city of Jerusalem; now they are looking back, admiring the view. Jesus warns them that, in their time, not a stone of that city will be left in place; it will all be destroyed.

The Disciples are shocked, asking Him when will it happen and what will be the signs that this catastrophe is about to occur. Jesus replies that only The Father knows when it will be, but the signs will be plentiful and terrifying.

All the Synoptic Gospels speak of those signs. Matthew tells us that as in the days of Noah and the Flood, all will be swept away. It will be sudden. Two men will be working in a field; one will be taken, one left behind. Two women will be grinding; one taken, one left behind. It will be sudden and unexpected as though a thief will break into the house.

Luke tells us that there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. There will be distress and perplexity; men will faint with fear and foreboding. The heavens themselves will be shaken.

There will be false prophets, false messiahs, claiming to come in Jesus' name. There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be earthquakes, famines, trials and persecutions. Families will be divided and there will be hatred for Jesus' sake.

(Actually, that part should get our attention).

The "desolating sacrilege," the "abomination of desecration" will be put up in the Temple, a final affront to the God of Israel. We all know people who would say that is clearly a reference to integration, women's ordination, gay bishops, guitars in the sanctuary.

All these things are just the preliminaries. Then, Mark tells us, "The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from Heaven; the powers of Heaven will be shaken. Heaven and earth will pass away."

Then comes the Son of Man. All these things will happen before this generation will pass away.

All of which leads me to believe that Advent might be an appropriate time for some quiet contemplation and preparation, time for a little soul-searching.

As you may know, I was Rector of Saint Francis of the Islands on Wilmington Island near Savannah. An island is generally a small, compact community. There was a Roman Catholic Church, Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Lutheran Church, and Presbyterian Church on the island. One year the Presbyterian pastor came up with the idea "Opening the Doors of Christmas." We were all supposed to put up our Christmas decorations and, on a Sunday afternoon, be open for the community to visit, and be suitably impressed and perhaps convert on the spot. Unfortunately, the date selected was the First Sunday in Advent.

The other churches outdid themselves in trees and lights and music and punch and cookies. The Baptist church wrapped everything not breathing in blinking white lights. Even the Roman Catholic Church had trees in the sanctuary, although they didn't turn on the lights.

The Episcopalians didn't play. We decorated for Advent with candles and purple hangings and quietly played Advent hymns. There was an air of calm in the church. The visitors were not pleased, except for the Lutheran minister who said, rather wistfully, "You Episcopalians are the only ones left who understand Advent."

I took that as a compliment.

Palm Sunday March 20, 2016

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 Mark 11:1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Here is a strange question. What would have happened if the events of this day had never taken place? What if there had been no palmwaving and cloak-spreading, no cries of Hosanna? What if Jesus had never come to Jerusalem; just continued to walk the dusty roads, to visit the little villages, and to climb to mountains of Galilee? What if Jesus remained simply a prophet?

Picture an aged Jesus, a beloved old prophet, on His yearly round of visits to those villages, teaching the same message, preaching the same words, healing the children of the children He had healed. He would have become part of the yearly routine — "Here comes Jesus; it must be July." His words, His great sermons and teachings, would become routine; and slowly, very slowly, they would lose their power and their significance. There would be no more Sermons on the Mount or Sermons in the Plain, no crowds of five thousand. Even His healing ministries would become expected, not the source of wonder.

The palm-waving, the cloak-spreading, and the Hosanna-crying do occur. We need to recognize that there is nothing spontaneous, nothing out of control about these events; they are all part of the trajectory of Jesus' life, a part of the unfolding plan of God for His

creation. They are the culmination of the Incarnation that had been proclaimed to shepherds and Magi. It is all one.

When I retired as Rector of Christ Church, we moved from the Rectory and I vacated my office; I gave away a lot of books. We simply did not have space for them in our retirement home. Some of them were given to people who might make use of them, some to the library, and some I left for a successor. I really miss them. Most of those books are on the shelves in the hallway of the Gabard Building. I am slowly liberating them, with the rector's permission, of course. One of the first books to be liberated was one I purchased from the bookstore at Nashotah House, my seminary.

Nashotah House began in the lake district of southern Wisconsin, just west of Milwaukee, in 1840. It began as a mission to the Indians of the region; however, one night, the Indians simply vanished, or so the story goes, and the Episcopal priests found themselves with a mission to the Scandinavian farmers in the area. Undaunted, they carried on

Much of Nashotah has changed very little over time. It is a physically beautiful campus in the midst of farmland, situated between two lakes. *Nashotah* is an Indian word for "twin lakes," perhaps the only reminder of the departed tribes. The Chapel of Saint Mary the Virgin was built in the 1850's in a Romanesque style; it is filled with Oberammergau-carved wooden saints and stained glass, uplifted with the haunting scent of a century and a half of incense. The liturgy is magnificent.

The campus itself is called the "garth." It's shaded by huge old elms. In the middle of the garth is a bell tower housing Michael, a huge bell that chimes the time for seminary services and events. On the east side of the garth is a cloister, housing for single students, with a covered walkway to the chapel. On the north side is a classroom building, and on the south side is the library. The library was built in the 1890's in the Gothic style, all gray stone with heavy mullioned

windows and a few gargoyles on the roof line. The library's lower level houses the "stacks," a wonderland of books and a rare book room. Over the years quite a few graduates have bequeathed their libraries to the House. The scent of old books is wonderful.

A short distance to the west is the seminary bookstore, a real bookstore selling real books. Having visited the bookstores of several other seminaries, I can truly say that is not always the case. The bookstore at Nashotah is a paradise for browsers.

One of the books I bought at the Nashotah bookstore, and retrieved from the Gabard Building shelves, was a commentary on the gospel of Saint Mark, part of the International Critical Commentary series. The writer was The Rev. Ezra P. Gould, STD, professor of New Testament Literature and Language at the Divinity School of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, long since defunct. The first impression was in 1896. Nashotah House always strives to be current. Perhaps it was the spell of ancient elms, historic architecture, saints, and stained glass that influenced me to buy it.

It's unusual to find a nineteenth-century book of commentary on the gospels that isn't written by a German theologian. They absolutely dominated the field, and, it must be admitted, their scholarship was superb. English and American theologians, whose scholarship was equally superb, were completely overwhelmed. Professor Gould's work is an example of that sort of excellent scholarship that went unrecognized for years. He makes full, creative use of translation from the Greek and, of most interest, gives a different interpretation of the events of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Gould points out that Jesus had told his Disciples that He would go to Jerusalem to meet His fate, to die, but He enters Jerusalem to be greeted by people who hail Him as the coming King of Israel, the successor of David. Jesus accepts that acknowledgement, even though He had denied it before. Once that claim of kingship is made and acknowledged, Jesus proceeds, as always, with His spiritual

work. There is no change. In Mark He simply enters the Temple, looks around, and leaves; no great scene of driving out money-changers and livestock.

It is the unfolding of God's plan.

Jesus is consistent in what he does and absolutely inconsistent with the worldly concept of kings. Jesus must have known that any Messianic claim of kingship made in Jerusalem would provoke and pose a threat to the Jewish leaders and to the Romans and would mean certain death, but His death would mean the establishment of the ideal that been given witness in His life, a proof of how God would have us live. Jesus' faith and trust in God are absolute, and He would use only absolutely spiritual means in the accomplishment of His end; hence He makes no resistance in the Garden of Gethsemane and is silent before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate.

Everything points to the fact that Jesus deliberately used the enthusiasm of the multitude for the purpose of His entry into Jerusalem, making it the means of the proclamation of His messianic kingship. It was necessary that He be proclaimed, publicly, as king, not just a prophet. Then, by simply remaining the Jesus of the dusty roads and tiny villages, with no change to His persona or His actions, by failing to act as a king would be expected to act, Jesus revolutionizes the idea of kingship: "He who desires to be first, let him be least and servant of all."

# A Prayer in Thanksgiving for Fr. Peter Ingeman

Delivered as a homily on Wednesday, June 6, 2007

By The Reverend Deacon Patricia Marks

Dear Friends,

On this day twenty years ago, the Christ Church family celebrated the ordination of Peter Ingeman. Seven years ago on Sept. 28th, when he came to us as our Rector, we again joined together in covenant, rejoicing in the gift of a faithful pastor, a patient teacher, and a wise councilor. So tonight as we celebrate the anniversary of his priesthood, I ask that we pray together in thanksgiving and in blessing.

Dear Heavenly Father,

We give you thanks for calling Peter to the priesthood, for nourishing us from the riches of God's grace.

We give you thanks for his loving and supportive ministry and for his selfless dedication to the church.

And we give thanks for Happy, for her generous heart and open hands. As she has shared her love, so shower her with your love and blessings. And we pray especially for Peter: May the Father of life pour out His grace upon you, may you feel His hand in everything you do and be strengthened by the things He brings you through.

May the Son of God be Lord in all your ways; may He shepherd you the length of all your days, and in your heart may He receive the praise.<sup>1</sup>

We pray that His grace will abound and shine through everything you do; that the fullness of His love be shared through you.

May His Spirit comfort you, and make you strong, and may in your heart He give you a song.

This is our prayer for you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

1 From the Celtic Daily Prayer Book of the Northumbria Community: https://www.northumbriacommunity.org



