

5 Epiphany and  
My Last Sunday  
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2019

So it ends. So it begins

On my first Sunday with you in 2004, I preached these words,

So we begin. We begin to know each other, to love each other, and to learn how to discern the presence of God in our midst. All of that is hard work, but we do it by building on the sure foundation of the past as we ask the question, "Where is God leading us? And then, we will learn to listen.

And now, dearly beloved, we have come to the end. What God had joined together in 2004, will now be reframed, reconstituted, rebuilt. After today, I will be a part of your past, not a part of your future. Our ministry together will be judged by some to be found wanting. It will be judged by others to be faithful. And we both will go forward into newness without each other---a new journey that is unpredictable because it is unknowable.

Now, you know, we Episcopalians have a unique source of authority.. For Baptists, the source of authority is the Bible. For Catholics, it's the pope. For Episcopalians, it is the former rector. I would add that every rector looks their best when seen in the rearview mirror.

You and I will tend to forget the points of friction, disappointment and hurt. I have just gone through my files. I finally threw away a folder I had labelled "Bad Letters." As I looked at them through the lens of our current community, with its abundant faith, hope, and love, I had a different reaction to them than I did when they were received. I can remember the pain and anxiety they engendered, the ways I felt I was not measuring up to my own and others expectations of myself.

Now, I see them as reflective of new ways God was leading us. Whether it was to renovate the church, or tear up the grass and plant drought resistant ground cover; whether it was to protect the elderly or bless same sex marriage; whether it was to change the liturgy, or change the staffing; whether it was to open wide the doors of our building, or preach on controversial moral issues---we have been the Body of Christ in this place. And we have been led by the Holy Spirit.

Later in this service, the choir will sing one of my favorite anthems, Mendelssohn's "How lovely are the Messengers of Peace," It was the anthem the choir sang when I was ordained as a

priest, almost 41 years ago to the day. The anthem expresses the joy brought into the world by the peacemakers. And I hope I have been one of them.

But this I know, there is always a cost to being a peacemaker. There is a cost to following where God leads. Through the synchronicity of the Holy Spirit, the first reading at my ordination to the priesthood was the first reading we heard this morning from the prophet Isaiah. The passage begins with Isaiah's recollection of the spectacular vision he received. For one disorienting moment in his life, the veil that separates earth from heaven was torn asunder. And Isaiah sees the Holy One in a blaze of glory, the hem of God's robe filling the temple as attending angels cover their faces in awe. Two other angels fly above the scene and cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

Isaiah is slain by this vision. He is reduced to a quivering, humbled mess of a man, acutely aware of his unworthiness to receive such a vision. He knows he is lost, and is living among a whole people who are lost, But the Lord has come to him anyway.

Next, a seraph touches Isaiah's mouth with a hot coal, cauterizing it, healing it, for one purpose only: to speak to the people that they may be found, that they may be healed. The angel, though, gives notice to Isaiah about the cost of the prophet's call. And it is this: Isaiah's words will **not** turn most of the people's hearts in the direction of God. Isaiah's words of life will not have much of an impact. Instead, his life's work will, by and large, fall on ears that are deaf and eyes that are blind until the land is nearly desolate. The only thing left will be a remnant, an oak whose stump is still standing. It may be a depressing vision, short term, but it is a hopeful vision, long term.

Because from that remnant, one holy seed will remain. And it will bear the hope of new life. For us, as Christians, that seed became the One we call Lord and Savior. Jesus was sent by God to another age that was just as corrupt as the one to which the prophet Isaiah was sent. But his life lives on in us.

In the story we heard today from Luke's gospel, the fisherman, Simon Peter, experiences a vision not unlike that of Isaiah. It is a bit more down to earth, but it captures his attention in the same way. Peter is on the shore cleaning his fishing net, when Jesus gets in his boat and asks Peter to take him out a little way from the shore. Then, from the boat, Jesus preaches to the crowd gathered on the shore. When he's finished, he asks Peter to take him further out. "Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch," he says.

Peter objects. He has been fishing all night and caught nothing. But he obliges. He lets his nets into the water and catches so many fish, his nets are bursting. He calls his friends to join them. The fish are so abundant, that both boats are filled. They start to sink from the weight.

Peter, like Isaiah, feels his unworthiness. He says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Jesus tells him "do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." And getting to

the shore, he leaves everything to follow. Peter, like Isaiah, will learn about the cost of listening. But his life is still bearing fruit in our lives.

The call of the prophet, renewed in Jesus and embraced by his Body the church, is to continue speaking and acting---as audacious and costly as it is---as God's representatives to the world, We are to proclaim that this is God's world. This is God's creation. That is why we celebrate. And this is also the same world and the same creation that we have marred. That is why we repent. The world needs the church to keep acting on its prophetic call. Even if we are only a remnant, we must believe in our call. And we must remember what God did with the remnant who stood with Isaiah. And the remnant who stood at the foot of the cross.

Like Peter, we have heard the call of Jesus to put our nets out into the deep water. For over 80 years, this congregation has been faithful to its call to be the Body of Christ. During my time here, I am so proud of what we have done, and who we have been.

You are a congregation of people who have been blessed with brilliant minds and generous hearts. You care for the marginalized, for immigrants, the poor. In your lives you reflect the light of Christ through your work, your activism, and through your relationships. It has been a joy to teach and preach among you. There is not another congregation in this diocese with your gifts. Please do not hide your light under a bushel, but put it out on the lampstand so all can see by it. There are many people out there searching for a church that does not distort the teachings of Christ.

During my fourteen years here, the role I have loved the most is the role of being your pastor. Someone once said that being a pastor is to be "invited into the sanctuary of someone's soul." I have loved being with you as you celebrate weddings, new births, and baptisms---my favorite sacrament of all. I have also been with you in the depths, praying with you when you have had a loss, or been told you have cancer. I have loved visiting you in hospitals or nursing homes, or having conversations with you when have felt the need to confess something that has troubled your conscience. I have witnessed your grief as you've let go of a destructive relationship or buried your loved ones. And you have been with me on my own journey of grief and celebration, of darkness and light. God's love has lifted us up and transformed us each and every step of the way.

And now, it is time for us to end this one-of-a-kind connection, the connection between rector and congregation. It has been a privilege--and very exciting--- to work work with you, collaborating on ministry and mission. But we end only to begin something new. Put out into the deep water, says Jesus, and in our own ways, we will do just that. And be surprised by the ways God will use us to bring his message of peace to a broken and troubled world. We will know the cost, but we will also know the joy. God is working through us, doing more than we can ever imagine.

Dag Hammerskjold wrote: "For all that has been, thanks. For all that will be, yes."

“Holy, holy holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory. “