



St. Paul's Church

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Two Seasons, One Journey

I believe that one of the great gifts of life in the church is the correspondence between the lives we try to manage day-to-day and the collective life we experience in worship, learning and mission together. Especially in the transitions of our church calendar, like the one we are experiencing this month between the end of the season after the Epiphany and the beginning of Lent, we have this gift both in the celebration of the mass and in the time we spend together after our worship in our education hour; it gives us a chance to provide context for the words we hear and the things we profess each week. It lends some ballast to the lives that we maintain day-to-day, much of which can seem out of our control.

If you are like me, this dialogue between the (barely-maintained) order of our individual lives and the discipleship we claim together can be indispensable. As of this writing, I have two members of my family who are ill and I work hard to maintain some sort of balance between the vagaries of the moment and the structure that the church gives me, in its sense of time and order. I look to the progression of the seasons to give my life a sense of balance and to understand that God has a greater purpose than any chaos we are enduring at the moment.

The changes of seasons often bring their own gifts. On February 23, the last Sunday after the Epiphany, we will celebrate our Friends and Family weekend, a time to invite family members and others close to us to come and see the Good News proclaimed among us at St. Paul's. It will be followed by Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, which will bring its sense of preparing our minds and hearts for the great mystery at the heart of our tradition. This year, Lent will come with its own gifts. Among them will be the presence of Shinjoo Cho, who will be playing piano for us for the remainder of the spring. I confess that I am biased in this view, but I believe our liturgies are far richer with live music; Shinjoo has a fine background in this area and her talent will be a welcome addition to our weekly worship.

Our Sunday school following mass is another important anchor to our lives together. I'm grateful to all the people who are giving this project their energy and time; it's important to understand why we do what we do, what these texts written several millennia ago are actually saying to us in our lives as we live them. These classes are also indispensable for building community, getting to know each other better and being able to talk frankly about our lives and discipleship. Whether we are grade-

schoolers, adolescents or adults, we all have something to nourish us spiritually after our worship.

Finally, it is important to see this transition between seasons in the arc of our journeys. We are heading from a time that celebrates the manifestation of this God-with-skin-on to a time of readying ourselves for to the event at the center of our identities as Christians. We will be moving from what theologians call the Incarnational (think "enfleshment") cycle of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany to the Paschal cycle of Lent and Eastertide. It is the major pivot in our calendar; it is important to know that both are necessary for our discipleship to be complete. It is a journey we will make together—the first I will make with all of you—and I do so with a great deal of anticipation. I wish everyone a holy Lent and sense of the sacred journey we are travelling together.

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For God, not man, is the first term of religion: and our first step in religion is the acknowledgement that He is. All else is the unfolding of those truths about His life and our life, which this fact of fact involves. I believe in one God. We begin there; not with our own needs desires, feelings or obligations. Were all these abolished, His independent splendor would remain, as the Truth which gives meaning to the world.

Evelyn Underhill

It is difficult for us to locate ourselves in a world where we are not the center, especially if we have a vibrant life that pulls us in many directions. There are the children or grandchildren, the demands of our work lives, friends and social engagements, all of which we acknowledge as gifts in our lives. It is easy to say to ourselves that our lives would be poorer without them, the more so because we see them often, but Underhill, the early twentieth-century English mystic, points out that the most difficult thing to do is simple profession of our belief in one God. It is because we are so adept at placing things in the space that God should occupy in our lives, simply "the acknowledgement that He is." In an earlier age, we would be better at identifying the idols in our lives, the things we put in the place of God, but the crying of the baby, the report deadline, the feeding of the food-vulnerable make re-prioritizing seem impossible. We make time for God instead of understanding that God is at the center of all our time.

The gift of Lent is that it provides a chance for us to recalibrate ourselves spiritually by offering the time, the habits, even the cravings that we lean on week-to-week, even moment-by-

moment, to the understanding that God occupies the center of us all, as individuals and a community. All that we know, outside of our absorptions with the details of our days, is that God is; in fact, that is God's very name. If we feel we have a hole in our lives, it is because we try to fill it with whatever is available, without admitting that this hole is God-shaped and only God can fill it. We can see the results in our own disordered lives and affections, as St. Augustine would tell us; Lent provides us with a chance to adopt a new and more vital prayer discipline, to give-up our reliance on the things that devour our time and ourselves with practices that place our reliance on the moment-by-moment presence of God as the source of all things. We need God like we need the air we breathe, and the "fact of fact" is that we simply cease to be, unrecognizable to God or ourselves, without that understanding.

To say, "I believe in one God" does not mean assent to a credible proposition; it means that we set our heart by the God at the center of our lives. It is not a sentimental yearning but an orientation of ourselves toward something we need in our lives

that nothing else can satisfy. Lent provides that opportunity, because our idols can be so subtle. Who would tell us that attending to the baby is wrong, even that the television program we have waited for will do us harm? We need to acknowledge the "independent splendor" of God, existing outside all our pre-occupations, because all else is secondary to it. In fact, as we repeat in our Ash-Wednesday liturgies, all else is dust; we need to orient ourselves to something more than the ephemeral.

If you are like me, none of this is easy. It is simply a matter of perspective. I wish you all a holy Lent, not in a spirit of miserable self-denial but in the spiritual vistas that will open for all of us if we take the season seriously. Whether it is an invigorated prayer life or abstaining from something that devours our time, I can promise that this season offers us a soul-stirring experience, with a God that loves us too deeply to leave us with anything but Godself.

Evangelism and Hope

If you are one of those who, like me, hates reading a piece that begins with a definition, I ask your indulgence if only because the topic is so important. One dictionary I consulted on the meaning of "evangelism" called it, "the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness." The idea is harmless enough and it seems unreasonable that Anglicans should be so scared of it; the image of street-corner preachers (a number of whom I knew earlier in my life) has nothing to do with who we are. Our baptismal covenant, however, binds us to proclaiming "by word and example the Good News of God in Christ," to which we respond, "We will with God's help" (BCP 305). The prayer book does not let us off the hook, and neither does scripture, where the writer of 1 Peter tells us to "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands an accounting of the hope that

is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

For me, it is hope that is the heart of evangelism, if only because we proclaim it so effectively already. At St. Paul's, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed and it all happens within a sense of communion with our neighbors that would be the envy of any other parish our size. The proclamation of hope is in the DNA of this church; we don't have to shout it from the street corners. We only have to invite others to come and see, to witness the hope that imbues our work and to do it with reverence and gentleness.

This is where we all come in, those of us who are content to observe thoughtful liturgies and observe time with our friends and others close to us. (As a side note, this is the only parish I have ever served where there is almost no motion in the sanctuary after the dismissal.) It is a practice I have come to love here, watching people who

genuinely love one another, and I would want to do nothing to disturb it. The trouble is that God would like to disturb us, if only to let others know what a jewel St. Paul's is.

Over the next months (and hopefully as an ongoing practice), we will have a committee oriented toward spreading the good news (the real meaning of "evangelism") in a way oriented toward measurable outcomes. It may represent a change in how we think about proclaiming the gospel, but that is all to the good. We can be good Episcopalians/Anglicans while letting the world know about it. All it takes is a witness to our own sense of hope, offered in a spirit of gentleness and reverence. I know that we will be amazed and delighted by the results.

Friends and Family Celebration

Please join us for our annual Friends and Family Sunday on February 23. We will have a special liturgy that day, followed by a meal upstairs. In addition to being our final worship before Lent, it is a chance to bring those who have been away from St. Paul's to join us in celebrating this remarkable worshipping community. Please bring family members, those with whom you would like to share something unique and (especially) those who are looking for a new church community. All who walk through our doors are gifts to us and I am looking forward to meeting everyone who has a connection—or would like one—with St. Paul's.

Annual Meeting Thank-Yous!

I wanted to make clear my deep gratitude to all who attended worked and voted at our annual meeting last month. We have several new voices on our vestry (Emmanuel Stokes, Sheila Morgan and Elaine Horneff), three representatives for our convocation (Patsy Morgan, Jane Ibeneche and Debbie Martin) and Brittany Fobia, Mitchell Morgan and Betty Fletcher as our convention delegates. This parish is indeed fortunate to have such a "deep bench" of talent to draw from, and I am especially grateful for their willingness to serve. Congratulations to everyone nominated and elected!

Diocesan Convention

The Annual Convention for the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey will be held March 7 at the Crowne Plaza hotel in Cherry Hill. Please pray for our delegates Brittany Fobia, Betty Fletcher and Mitchell Morgan (and the rest of the parish delegations) as we vote on resolutions and elect representatives to our governing bodies.

Congratulations, Clare!

Kudos to our own Clare Gutwein, who has been hired as head of the youth convocation of the diocese. Among other duties, she will be responsible for our diocesan representation at EYE this year, which will include several young people from St. Paul's. We honor her talent (apparently, these things run in families) and are proud to have her committed leadership of Christian Education at St. Paul's!