

The Episcopal Church of All Saints and Ascension
2nd Combined Annual Parish Meeting
Address of the Priest in Charge
January 27, 2019

As is my custom, I hereby call to order the 2nd Annual Combined Parish Meeting of The Episcopal Church of All Saints and Ascension in Northwoods MO. As I've said before, I believe it's entirely appropriate and fitting to have our parish meeting begin during the Eucharist, and to make my Annual Meeting Address be the sermon today, because it's here where we bring everything we have and are, and place it on the Lord's table to be consecrated and blessed for the life and salvation of the world. And, of course, it's here in the Eucharist, that God takes our ordinary and turns it into the extraordinary.

This is almost certainly the last time I will be addressing you as Priest in Charge at an Annual Parish Meeting, and I've given lots of careful thought to what I want to say this morning.

Normally, as in years past, I would give you sort of a "State of the Parish" message, enumerating the various highlights (and sometimes lowlights) of our previous year together as a faith community. While it is certainly true that a look back over the past year would remind us that we still need to work on our merging and meshing as a parish family and, even more importantly, that we need to discern the specific ways in which God is calling us to share in God's mission to this world, I've chosen to look ahead into a future that is mostly unknown and maybe a little bit scary.

We will shortly be electing a new Vestry for the guiding of our parish into a new year. It's unknown what challenges they will face, or what decisions they will have to make in order to insure the future well-being of our parish. Things that are unknown tend to scare us.

This year will also see the calling of a new clergyperson to be your spiritual leader. We don't know who that clergyperson will turn out to be, but surely he or she will bring changes in worship style, leadership approaches, and other things that are unknown to us now. Again, things that are unknown tend to scare us.

Our culture certainly does very little to reduce our fears. I came across an editorial recently in a publication called *The Week*. It had this to say:

“We start a year with a government shut down over a wall --- a wall that is somehow supposed to protect us from the dangers of rapists and murderers, foreign laborers, and Central American children seeking asylum. The reality is that the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States has been falling for a decade. ... in March, 2018, the total backlog of asylum cases stood at about 318,000. With a current US population of 325 million, that means there is one person seeking asylum for every 1,000 residents. ... no matter how you count them, it's not exactly a deluge.

“Yet none of those facts matters, because we seem to live now in a state of perpetual fear. At this point, everybody understands that the wall is a metaphor. It says Keep out, of course. But it also says, somehow with no shame, that we are afraid. Where once fear was something we strove to overcome --- remember ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself’? --- it is now something many Americans embrace. We are a nation on lockdown, rushing to close the doors to every room and nail shut the entrances to the building. Our children practice lockdown drills in school every month”

Well, reading those discouraging words, and realizing that lots of more immediate unknowns, and the resulting fears, are facing our parish in 2019, I started wondering how I might address the topic of fear, and how I might leave you with some words of comfort (although, in case you're wondering, I'm not planning to physically leave you for several more months.)

There are lots of famous “Farewell” speeches that have been given over the years, George Washington's upon leaving office, Abraham Lincoln's upon leaving Springfield, Illinois, to become president, and a lot that are not quite as solemn or dignified as those.

But, in the end, I decided that the best choice would be to turn to Scripture. I found that some people claim, if you include both Old and New Testaments, there are 365 different times where some variant of “Don’t be afraid” is used by God, or an angel, or by Jesus, to reassure someone. In other words, you could compose a little prayer book with one of these “Don’t be afraid” quotes from Scripture for every day of the year.

Well, that’s pretty interesting, but I don’t know if it’s actually true or not. What I DO know is that, in the Gospels, Jesus frequently says something like “Don’t be afraid” to reassure his disciples. Whether it’s when they’re together in the boat in the midst of a raging storm, or when the apostles see Jesus coming to them out of the mists walking on the water, or when the risen Jesus appears to them when they’re behind locked doors for fear of the authorities, Jesus first says, “It is I; do not be afraid,” or “Peace be with you; be calm; it is I.”

Of course, in John’s account of the Last Supper, which in his Gospel is really an extended “Farewell speech,” Jesus explicitly tells the apostles gathered around him, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

So, following Jesus’ lead, my message to you, sisters and brothers, and even *more*, my prayer for you, this morning is that you *not* be afraid, that you have peace in the midst of unknown and even scary things. Even when the culture around us is building walls and locking doors out of runaway fear, I pray that you can be at peace and *be not afraid*.

I don’t want you to get the wrong impression, to think that I am wishing for you a life free from stress or anxiety. No, Jesus never says anything like that. Bad things, scary things, will still come our way, but the “Don’t be afraid” part is reassuring because Jesus will be with us as we walk through and face those scary things. Jesus’ final words to the apostles in Luke’s Gospel are, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Sure, you’ll be cursed and scorned. You’ll face scary things, maybe even be killed because of me. But I’ll be there, right with you, to support you and help you, and enable you to conquer any and all evil.

Ultimately, this coming year ought not to be a time of pain or stress; it should be a time of excitement and joy at the prospect of new and different life, of new and different leadership, and of new and different opportunities to answer God's call.

These past Sundays in the Epiphany season, our Scripture readings have focused on God's calls to all sorts of people, including Jesus.

Jesus and those disciples didn't know how their calls would work out, and we don't know how it's going to work out for All Saints and Ascension. All we know is that we do have God's call to share God's mission, and that we have God's promise through Jesus that we won't have to do it alone. "Fear not," Jesus tells us. "I will be with you to the end of the age."

Participants in God's mission: that's who we are and who we can continue to be here at All Saints and Ascension. A community, a place, where we choose the extraordinary over the ordinary. Where we choose the hard over the easy. Where we choose to follow the call of Jesus in creative ways. Where, ultimately, we choose Resurrection over rolling over and dying.

Be not afraid!

AMEN.

Some statistics concerning the Priest in Charge during 2018:

- 52 Eucharists celebrated; 1 Eucharist assisted.
- 48 Sermons preached.
- 135 Daily Office services officiated.
- 1 Baptism administered.
- 4 Burials officiated.
- 28 Hospital Visitations made.
- 6 Pastoral Visits made.