

“Do Not Be Afraid: On the Occasion of Beginning a New Ministry at the Church of the Ascension”

- I. Introduction: Our God is a God of love; Our God is faithful. Listen to the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 27: “The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid.” Listen also to God’s words to Abram in Genesis: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” The injunction to “not be afraid” is one of the most frequently repeated commandments in all of Scripture. It runs counter to our human tendency to be anxious and to worry. On some very deep level we human beings believe that by our worrying, we can anticipate problems more effectively, and then solve them proactively. No so, says Paul to his beloved church in Philippi: “It is Christ who has the power to conform all things to himself . . . Therefore stand firm in the Lord my beloved. Stand firm in the Lord.”

Just one week ago, Peg and I said good-bye to our Christian brothers and sisters at St. Christopher’s in Kingsport. We were sent off with a copy of the icon of St. Christopher that hangs in the Narthex of that church. St. Christopher is the patron saint of travelers and with his help and the help of many of you in this sanctuary, we have safely arrived at Ascension, albeit in boxes, but as best we can tell, all in one piece. Thanks be to God.

We are most grateful to be here amongst you. Your reputation has preceded you as a place of dynamic commitment to Jesus Christ and a place of active, diverse Christian ministry. We have been drawn, Peg and I, to this place, however, not only by your faith reputation, but also by your able leaders who have represented you well. In recognition of their faithfulness, their skills, and their efforts, I would like to ask the following persons to stand at this time: Tom Ladd and Mary Mense, the Senior and Junior Wardens, the Vestry, the Search Committee, and any parish staff who might be here this morning. These folks have worked tirelessly, with grace, to bring us together to this point. I invite you to join me in thanking them at this time.

II. Beginnings, such as the one we are experiencing this morning, are filled with hope and excitement. At the very same time we are called to celebrate today, we are also called to begin our dialogue about our shared ministry. It is fitting that I begin right away to share the foundation of my faith with you and offer an invitation for you to do so with me. We are in this together, and we look to hit the proverbial ground running.

A. First, I want to affirm my deep belief that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is an honor, a privilege, and a source of great joy. For me, Jesus Christ is not just, or even primarily, a historic figure. It is my relationship with a living, dynamic, and creative Jesus Christ which draws me to Him. I am at my best with Christ and at my worst without him. I believe that I am representative of many people of my generation and of our sons and daughters who have decided whether or not to become or remain Christians. Our decisions have not been based upon social tradition, family heritage, or even denominational history, but upon the perceived value Christianity might have in their lives. My experience has led me to agree with many scholars who have claimed that in western civilization we have definitely entered into a post-Christian era. In order for our Christian faith to be compelling, it must be engaging and life-changing as it was in the early church.

I know that this is possible. I have seen the extraordinarily dynamic power that Christ can have in the lives of people who are depressed, terminally ill, addicted, or struggling with broken marriages and deep problems. Christ can and does heal us today, just as Christ healed those in need in the first century. In church after church where the power of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, people are coming in large numbers and are allowing God to change them. Once changed, they then go out into the world with a deep passion to serve others. So first, our ministry here must be based on the sure foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ.

B. Secondly, I believe that the only time that ministry really works in a parish community is when it is a joint endeavor. We are in this together. One of the things that has attracted me to Ascension is your commitment to ministry. Even without a Rector, you have continued your many vital ministries, both within and out of the church, all with your characteristic commitment to excellence. Your vestry has re-constituted itself and is developing a plan for Ascension, some of which you have started to implement and some of which remains to be accomplished in the future.

Now you have requested that the Bishop appoint me as your Priest-in Charge at Ascension. I have a charge to keep, and I hope you will help me to keep it. On December 11, 2002, I was ordained to the priesthood at St. Thaddeus Episcopal Church in Aiken, SC, and the homily that night was given by the Reverend Ann Kimball, former Associate Dean of Berkeley Seminary at Yale. She, like me, had become a priest in mid-life and took a particular interest in those of us who were undertaking a similar journey. Her sermon that evening included a strong emphasis upon our commitment to ministry, yours and mine. She concluded by asking me to stand and saying "It's my privilege to offer a charge to you, Howard, on behalf of God's Church everywhere and on behalf of His people and His ministers. . . . Remember that your ministry as a priest, as important as it is, is only part of the total ministry of God's Church. You are surrounded this day by God's ministers. You will touch them in your capacity as a priest in different ways, as pastor, as teacher, and as celebrant. But also be resolved to be touched by them as they minister to you. Without their ministry, yours will be incomplete." I am again, today, surrounded by God's ministers. It is my sincere hope that we will minister well together. I promise you that I will come up with ideas for us, and that I will seek out your counsel. And I promise that I will be open to your ideas and your dreams as well.

- C. And third, it has been my experience that being a disciple of Jesus Christ sometimes requires taking risks that can demand courage. When we are willing to take such risks, God will join us in each step. Let me tell you a personal story about taking such a step. One of my favorite hymns is "On Eagle's Wings." It's a beautiful song that reminds me of God's promise to sustain us as we step out in faith. I first heard this song at my sister's funeral. My sister was three years younger than myself and died from cancer in the late 1980s. We grew up in a family with extensive unresolved grief and as a result our relationship was often conflictual. For the better part of our adult lives, we were estranged from one another. We tried to sort it out, but it was too complicated. Then my sister developed cancer and the disease progressed rapidly. One Sunday my brother-in-law called to say that my sister was in a coma, and if I wanted to see her again, I needed to rush to the Intensive Care Unit where she was in Philadelphia. That very morning I had prayed for God's guidance about all this while kneeling at the altar of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, IN. Making a decision about how to respond to that telephone call was tough. It was a risk to go to her. I wasn't sure that she would acknowledge me, even if she came out of the coma. She might refuse to see me, or be angry that I had come. I had little time to decide whether to let go of my own need to be "right" and to walk into a space where I had little control. I once again called upon God's help and with

God's help I made that trip. There in the Intensive Care unit we reconciled. We then had the next few months together to look back at our family pictures and to remember what we had shared. It was the very best time in our relationship. God has redeemed so much in my life when I've been willing to step forward and with a generous spirit let go of my own need for control.

My friends, this is how it works, this faith journey of ours. God is like the mother eagle who takes her eaglets up into the sky in her wings so they can learn to soar. She lets them go and they fly. She remains just out of their sight. Then when they become fatigued and falter, she swoops down and lifts her young up in her wings. God is like the mother eagle. If we are willing to trust God and fly, we too can soar, and when we tire, God will be there to lift us up. But we must be willing to take risks. When we do, God will sustain us, just like the eagles in that beautiful song. We are being called at Ascension to fly and to soar.

III. Conclusion: Today is the first day of our exciting journey together. There will be many blessings, and no doubt, there will be challenges, and at times we will be required to take risks together. What I hope we remember is that Jesus Christ has called us to be together — to take a step in faith and enter into joint ministry. I suggest that we start by invoking the presence of God's Holy Spirit into our work together and asking the Spirit to help us not to be afraid, to focus on what God calls us to do and to take the risks together that God calls us to take. It is my hope that with the Spirit's help, together we will be Christ to one another and to those around us. It is my prayer that Christ will be in us and between us and around us in this holy space. Amen.