

“Vaya con Dios”
“To Send And To Bless”

- I. Introduction: This is a bittersweet time that transcends my understanding. But it is God’s time. In recent years we have been in such times before, you and I, Caroline. We have been a bit like nomads, moving from one place to another, with the music and words to “Here I Am, Lord” bouncing around in our consciousness. Why is it that God fashions our lives and our ministries with so many changes? Why do the changes so often take us in unexpected directions, to unanticipated places with beginnings and endings that sometimes seem downright crazy? Oh, how at times I have yearned to have more influence over my life and my ministry, only to later learn that God’s plan has always been superior to mine. It has been for us to discern and follow, and for the Holy Spirit to lead and comfort. But how nice it would be at times to know where God is leading! Or would it?
- II. Not knowing. Today’s Gospel is the story of the Transfiguration. I wonder what Peter, James, and John were thinking as they walked up that mountain with Jesus. I wonder if they were the least bit prepared for the experiences they were about to have – to see Jesus in conversation with Moses and Elijah, to witness the change in Jesus’ appearance to dazzling white, and then to hear the voice of God. The text says that they were frightened and that Peter wanted to start a building project: It’s natural -- we try to hold onto our epiphanies and mountaintop experiences. But these epiphanies of ours come and go as the ruach, the Spirit of God, comes and goes. And so it was that the three apostles had to make their way back down the mountain to resume the lives they knew. I wonder -- did they grasp the power of the experience they had just had? My belief is probably not – not in any coherent way until later after the crucifixion and the Resurrection. This is suggested by the chronology reported in the text. Both before and after the Transfiguration, Jesus told his disciples that he was going to die and rise again. Their response, as reported in Mark:9, is to argue about who will have the favored position in Christ’s Kingdom. We can judge the apostles, but in so doing we also judge ourselves. It often takes us a long time to catch on to what God is doing.
- III. In fact, it appears to me that “not knowing” is often a critical and necessary part of our formation process. The “not knowing” allows us to follow the urging of the Holy Spirit in faith and to discover the deep truths that God wants to reveal to us. I must

admit that for me, not knowing is sometimes hard to accept. Caroline, you and I came to Ascension at approximately the same time. With our Deacon, Amy, we dug our heels in and went to work together. Caroline, you shared with me your excitement and surprise about being here at Ascension, your hope that we could help Ascension experience a rebirth, and especially your love for children and young families. We sat week after week dreaming together, strategizing together, and praying together as if the future was endless for our shared ministry. How sweet it was for me to have you as a partner in ministry and how much I have been touched by your passion, your honest searching, your faithfulness to God, and your openness to the process of your own formation. I do not pretend to know why events have taken the turn they have. I continue to be in a place of “not knowing.”

- IV. Knowing. But there is one essential thing I know very clearly – God is in charge of all of this -- of our formation, of our calls, and of our ministries. And I know that God often chooses to reveal things to us retrospectively – perhaps God wants us to make important discoveries ourselves rather than receiving special delivery letters in which they are all spelled out for us ahead of time.

At the same time, there are several other very important things that all of gathered here tonight know, and these must be witnessed to. First, Caroline, you have been an incredible blessing to this community. You have inspired us, you have challenged us, you have motivated us, you have helped us dream, and you have encouraged us love again. God called you here for a season; that season has ended, just as God’s is calling you to another place. Second, our love for you and Chris and Aidan does not depend on your physical presence here. It is undeniable – we will miss you (we already do), but the deep affection we have for one another will remain constant. It is in fact my hope that in God’s wisdom and in God’s time it will be possible for you to minister with us at Ascension again. God, please register that as a request.

- V. There are two experiences I would like to share that are helping me with this transition. The first has to do with what seemed at the time to be a random co-incidence, but I quickly came to understand that it was a gift from God. At the time this co-incidence occurred, the winds of change were blowing in my ministry, and while sitting in a doctor’s waiting room, I eyed this journal. It is the winter 1991 edition of a journal entitled Weavings, and even then it was old. This edition was dedicated to the theme “Passing Through the Land.” The receptionist said that it had been there a long time and was mine to take if I wanted it. The first article is titled “Traveling On” by Roberta Bondi. She describes how incredibly hard it was to move from Atlanta, GA to South Bend, IN for a job change, and how keenly aware of she was of what she was leaving long before she knew what she was going to. I quote:

When we stay in one place too long, we run the risk of holding too closely to the safely familiar centers of our existence. Our everyday life and the assumptions about the world implicit in it become opaque to us. We lose sight of what happens on the edge of our communities, where the vulnerable whom God calls us to love might actually live. Moving gives us, at least temporarily, the possibility of being “strangers” in some important respects like the early monastics, so that our eyes also can be opened to see our own social and cultural engagements in a new light. When we are vulnerable, we can see the vulnerabilities of others. Becoming strangers enables us to gain a new vision. (p. 12)

I remembered the second experience while thinking about the way we will end our service this evening. We will create a space in front of the altar and invite the congregation to surround Caroline, Chris, and Aidan for a laying on of hands as we share the sending forth liturgy. While in seminary, I and several other Episcopalian students joined a gospel choir, directed by a talented African American musician. One night we sang at a church in one of the most gang-ridden areas of New Haven, CT. At the end of the concert, we asked all the children and young people to stand in the center of the church. The choir and congregation sang and prayed over these young people, asking for God’s protection of them in a very dangerous world. The presence of the Holy Spirit was profound. Tonight we will pray for the same presence of God’s Spirit and for God’s blessing and protection of the three of you.

Again from the 1991 issue of *Weavings*, we have two complementary prayers for you and your family, Caroline:

In Mexican culture a phrase used in bidding farewell is “Vaya con Dios,” or “Go with God.” English provides a somewhat different farewell in the words “God go with you.” *Vaya con Dios* suggest the traveler accompanies God, who leads the way; these are words of sending: “Go with God.” “God go with you” invokes God to accompany the traveler, as on a journey already determined as necessary; these are words of blessing: “God go with you.” Together these two indigenous farewells express both what we need for our own journeys of faith and what we have to offer others for theirs: to be sent and to be blessed; to send and to bless. (Escamilla, 1991:44).

Amen.