

“Change: Challenge and Constancy”

- I. Introduction: Change and challenge. Today we are entering into a time of transition. This is the first Sunday of a new liturgical year. Our Gospel readings will change to Matthew, so we will hear the story of Christ through the particular perspective of the early Jewish Christian community. We have also changed from the long “green” season of Pentecost into the four-week purple season of Advent. Our Advent wreath has returned, tonight we will come to a beautiful service of Advent Lessons and Carols, and because St. Andrew’s Day was Friday November 30th, we are privileged to have the blessing of the tartans today at Church of the Ascension. There are other signs of transition today as well. This morning we are voting for five new vestry members and have our annual parish meeting during the Sunday School hour, during which we will hear reports about the health of this parish. I don’t know about you, but I find change both stimulating and challenging. Change in our liturgy, in our seasons, and in our observances allows me to be drawn again and again to the complexity and richness of who God is. Each time we experience a different liturgical season there is the possibility of discovering new and fresh meaning in familiar gospel passages. Today I hear Christ reminding me that he does and will again come to me in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. He will both break into my life in this very present moment and break into my future in ways that he has promised. I am sometimes prone to let my excitement about his advent grow cool. Anticipate my coming, be prepared, Jesus tells me today.

Change also challenges me, particularly when that change is painful. This week while away on the coast of South Carolina, I had such an experience of painful change when we received an unexpected call from England, letting us know that a very close friend of ours for 25 years had died from injuries she received on holiday in Italy. We had been planning a way for her to come and meet you here at Ascension sometime during the next year. We were shocked, grieved, and very sad. We had hoped that our friend Muriel would be with us and we with her for a long time.

- II. Change and Constancy. How do we as Christians cope with the steady stream of changes that occur in our lives and in our church? First and foremost, all change in this life must be understood in the context of God’s constancy. God is constant in ways that transcend the passage of time and the changes we experience over time. God strengthens us as we live through the changes in our lives; God teaches us through these changes and perhaps most importantly, God walks through our changes with us.

Because God holds us through our changes I can confidently say the open sentences of Burial Service both to myself and others: I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord. Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he die. And everyone who has life, and has committed himself to me in faith, shall not die for ever. [*And it continues*] For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord, and if we die, we die in the Lord. So then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's possession. (*Book of Common Prayer, p. 491.*)

- III. God's Constancy at Ascension. God's constancy is also the foundation of our corporate life as the Body of Christ here at the Church of the Ascension. On this day of our Annual Meeting I want to share with you my perception of how God has been communicating God's constancy since I arrived here at the Church of the Ascension on March 1st of this year.
- A. First, I have seen God's hand at work in helping us reaffirm the foundation of our faith. I believe that we have been relearning that the core of our mission here is to proclaim the message that "Jesus Christ is Lord." Subsumed in that message is our affirmation that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully human, and that he was crucified, died, was buried, and three days later rose from the grave and conquered death. Our proclamation of the Risen Lord places us squarely in the tradition of the early church and sets the foundation upon which our mission as a church is built. We are followers of Jesus Christ in this place. And we are also people of the Book. For us as the Body of Christ in this place. Holy Scripture is the Word of God through which God's Holy Spirit speaks to us and guides us.
- B. Second, I believe that God has been creating an opportunity for the Church of the Ascension to remake itself as a revitalized, dynamic community of believers who are in mutual ministry together and whose responsibility it is to support one another in living out the ministries that God is calling us to undertake. We are moving away from a clergy and staff driven model of ministry to a model of shared ministry. This requires that we all discern our gifts and respond to God's call to each of us, and then encourage one another in our ministries.
- C. Third, I believe that God has been teaching us about unity and diversity at Ascension. A year ago Ascension, to the best of my understanding had become embroiled into a nasty clash of wills. It was difficult for the Holy Spirit to operate in that environment. A win-lose, up-down mentality had emerged that hurt the soul of this community. Labels were freely used that did not reflect the complexity and depth of who I have come to know you to be. We have a range of views on many topics, as did the early Christians, but in my experience right now we agree on far more than we differ. Our differences should not frighten us or worry us. Quite the contrary, our differences can actually strengthen us if we do not lapse into

judgmentalism. There is much we can learn from one another; we can be teachers to one another as long as we are willing to share our ideas and to listen and remain open to the views of others.

D. Lastly, I think that this year God has been teaching Ascension about its larger identity with the universal, Catholic church. We are Episcopalians, we are Anglicans, and our heritage is rich and unique. We emerged from the Western Christian Roman Catholic base and have been blessed by such theologians as St. Augustine who wrote in the fourth century that the unity of Christ's church was to be carefully safeguarded and protected. And we are guided by generations of theologians who have identified the core beliefs of our faith, such as the Trinity, the Divinity of Christ, and Holy Scripture. These core beliefs have long been understood as the requisite essentials that define what it means to be a Christian. There are other beliefs that theologians call *adiaphoria* – areas where we can differ and still be in communion with one another. Our particular tradition, the Anglican Church, has a long history of incorporating a range of views on many subjects while still maintaining its unity. Do not misunderstand what I'm trying to say – it is critical for us to affirm our core Christian beliefs. And it is also critical for us to move on with ministry, as we have in this church, focusing on the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, not defining ourselves in negative contrast to another church but rather in positive commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

IV. Conclusion. This is the bottom line: Jesus Christ is Lord; Jesus Christ is alive and real in this present moment at the Church of the Ascension. If we keep our focus upon Christ, just as we have placed Christ in the center of our vision in the window above the chancel, our continued spiritual well-being and growth is assured. If we take our eyes off Christ and become too focused upon ourselves, then we could begin to stumble or wander.

I recently shared with the vestry my belief that we are entering into a new phase of our joint ministry. I would call it “the work phase.” I believe that we know what we need to do – to hire more permanent clergy, strengthen those inreach and outreach program areas that have suffered from reduced attention in recent years, and move forward to shore up our physical facilities. And I believe that our programs should have sufficient variety to attract a range of parishioners as well as draw un-churched people into Ascension. As the outcome of our stewardship campaign thus far indicates, we are ready to move forward together. I invite your full participation in Ascension's transition and I encourage all of us to remember that in the midst, the very center of all the challenges of change, we know that we can rely on the constancy of God's faithfulness to us and the constancy of God's love for us. Thanks be to God.
Amen.