

**First Sunday of Creation Care**  
**August 30, 2026 • 10:30am**  
**Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA**

**The Rev. E. Gary Taylor**

At Trinity's school, our stated mission is to build upstanders. We start every opening faculty meeting with a review of that mission, every board meeting, every leadership training, every new faculty orientation. It's part of our daily chapels and our academic curriculum.

It's the why that underpins what we do in one of the ministries that is an important part of the way Trinity Church shapes the world. Over the years, we've worked to identify and define what we mean by an upstander. An upstander is the opposite of a bystander.

An upstander is one who acts when others do not, who does what is right even when it's hard. Indeed, especially when it's hard, for that's when a true upstander makes the most difference. Now, there are moments in life when we genuinely do not know what the right thing is, when competing goods and obligations pull us in different directions, and reasonable and faithful people can look at precisely the same circumstances and reach very different conclusions about what ought to be done.

And then there are other moments which may, in fact, be harder. Moments when somewhere beneath all of our rationalizations and qualifications, we know perfectly well what the right thing is. We simply don't want to do it because doing it may cost us something.

A friendship or someone's approval, our standing in the community, money or time or influence or security, or simply the comfort of remaining silent when speaking would be awkward or dangerous. In those moments, the temptation is rarely to say, I know what's evil and I choose evil. The temptation is more sophisticated and therefore more persuasive.

The temptation to take the easier path. All three of our readings this morning are about people discovering that faithfulness sometimes means refusing the easier path. Not because they are fearless or extraordinarily confident in themselves, but because they've come to believe that God is calling them to something they would not necessarily have chosen themselves.

Let's begin with Moses. When Moses encounters the famous bush which burns and yet is not consumed, God tells him that he has heard the cries of his people in Egypt, has seen their suffering, and intends to free them from Pharaoh by sending Moses. And Moses, who will become the great liberator of Israel and giver of the law, responds not with heroic confidence, but with a prolonged argument about why God has chosen the wrong person.

Who am I to confront Pharaoh? What if they don't believe in me? What if they don't listen? I'm not eloquent. Surely there must be somebody better qualified. Until finally he says what he wanted to say all along, oh my Lord, please send someone else.

There may be no more human prayer in scripture. Moses understands the magnitude of what God is asking him to do and understands something else as well. Confronting Pharaoh will be dangerous.

Challenging entrenched power is dangerous. Standing beside people who have no power of their own and demanding that those who possess it surrender some of it is dangerous. Moses has a family.

He has a life. He has sheep to tend. And perhaps after the extraordinary upheavals of his youth, he's finally found something resembling peace and God is asking him to leave it.

What's important is what God does not say. God does not say, Moses, you're stronger than you think, or believe in yourself. He doesn't even say, don't worry, everything will be fine.

Instead, God says, I will be with you. That's a very different promise and it points us to a deeper understanding of Christian courage because Christian courage is not confidence that I'm right and strong enough to prevail. It's the willingness to act faithfully as an upstander while knowing that we may be frightened, inadequate, uncertain, and therefore entirely dependent on God.

Which brings us to Peter. Immediately before today's gospel, Jesus asks his disciples, who do you say that I am? And Peter gets it exactly right. You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.

And Jesus responds, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church. And then almost immediately, Jesus explains that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be rejected, and killed. And Peter says, no, that must never happen to you.

So, Jesus turns to the man. He's just called the rock and says, get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me.

The rock has become a stumbling block. Perhaps nobody in scripture should give us more hope than Peter because Peter is both of those things, sometimes almost simultaneously faithful and foolish, courageous and frightened, capable of recognizing Jesus as the Messiah and completely misunderstanding what that means. And this is the man Jesus chooses.

Peter does not want Jesus to suffer, of course, because Peter loves him. And if we stop to imagine the scene, we might recognize how terribly tempting Peter's argument must have been. Jesus has already encountered Satan earlier in Matthew's gospel in the wilderness, offering alternatives to the difficult road God has given him.

And now the temptation comes again, except this time it comes from Peter, his disciple, his friend, the man who loves him. Peter is not asking Jesus to abandon God. He's asking him to be sensible, to protect himself, to take the easier path, and not to walk knowingly into the hands of the people who intend to kill him.

Peter's argument is reasonable. It's loving. It may even sound responsible.

And yet Jesus says, get behind me, Satan. The Greek is *hypage opiso mu*, go behind me. And these words are especially powerful because Peter has heard them before.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew first, beside the Sea of Galilee, he said, *duete opiso mu*, literally, come behind me, which we naturally translate as follow me. That's where Peter's discipleship began. Now Peter, with all the confidence that comes from loving someone and believing that you know what's best for him, has moved from behind Jesus to in front of him, trying to lead Jesus away from Jerusalem.

And Jesus uses the language with which he first called him, get behind me. Remember who's following who here. Matthew drives the point home in the very next verse when Jesus says, if anyone wishes to come after me, again, *opiso mu*, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

So get behind me is certainly a rebuke, but perhaps it's also something more gracious. Jesus does not tell Peter to go away, get lost. He tells him to return to his place of discipleship.

Get behind me, follow me again, even if the path is hard, especially because the path is hard. Jesus calls his beloved friend Satan because avoiding the hard path is the real temptation to us all, even perhaps to Jesus himself. If we take seriously the church's doctrine that Jesus is fully God and fully human, and surely there must have been a small part of him that desired not to suffer, not to be rejected, not to die.

The Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis built an extraordinary and controversial novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, around precisely that possibility. In the novel, as Jesus hangs on the cross, what appears to be an angel comes to him to tempt him by a vision of another life, not a wicked life, but a good one. Marriage,

companionship, family, growing old, a safe and easy life instead of the difficult life to which God has called him.

Sometimes the most dangerous temptation is not to choose evil, but to choose something perfectly good and reasonable instead of the more demanding path that God is actually calling us to. Moses says, please send someone else. Peter says, this must never happen to you.

Kazantzakis' angel says, there could be another life, and beneath all these three lies the profoundly human hope. Surely faithfulness does not have to cost this much. Paul reminds us in Romans that for most of us the cost will be considerably less dramatic.

Let love be genuine, he says. Bless those who persecute you. Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

Overcome evil with good. Most discipleship happens not before some pharaoh or upon an actual cross, but in the accumulation of ordinary choices through which we discover whether we really mean what we say we believe. In this season where we celebrate our care for creation, such inconvenient choices present themselves to us every day.

Will we recycle when it's easier just to throw it out? Will we reduce our carbon footprint when it's faster not to? Will we go out of our way to care for the earth or just carelessly use it for our convenience? What happens when the cost of faithfulness seems too high? The best answer we can offer, I think, comes from the baptismal covenant where we make promises breathtaking in their scope to persevere in resisting evil, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, to respect the dignity of every human being. But the church does not invite us simply to answer, I will, as though courage were merely an act of willpower regardless of the cost. Instead we answer, I will with God's help.

This is commitment and humility. I will act. I may be afraid.

I will stand up for what I believe is right, but I must remain open to the possibility that I'm wrong. I will answer the call, but I'm not sufficient unto myself. And suddenly we're back at the burning bush.

When Moses asks, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? God reshapes the question by telling Moses who God is. I am who I am and I will be with you. Christian courage is something different from self-confidence.

It does not require us never to be afraid, never to misunderstand, or never to become like Peter the stumbling block when we'd hoped to be the rock. Peter did all those things and Jesus kept calling him back, get behind me, come behind me, follow. When the road is frightening, when we're uncertain that we are adequate to be the upstanders we are asked to be, and when we find ourselves wishing desperately that God would just choose somebody else, perhaps the most faithful answer we can give is neither heroic nor certain.

It's simply the answer we have been taught to give since our baptism, I will with God's help.

Amen.