We gather together once more in the shape and pattern configured in ancient tradition handed down to the church and dutifully practiced by this diocese for well over a century. We do so as friends and fellow believers in faithful obligation to our call as a diocesan family. We do so in the season of Epiphany, a season that shines the light of our incarnate Savior, overriding any evidence darkness.

We gather with the words of a hymnal standard ringing in our ears, beckoning us to serve the risen God, and we gather at a time that many are shaken to their core by the events of the current time. How can we go forth in ministry with the obstacles in our path? With this hymn and bearing in mind Jesus’ call ringing in our ears; it is far more important that we ask, how can we not?

In Judaic teaching and belief, the beatific vision of heavenly glory is analogous to Zion’s earthly presence. We see, revealed through these words, a shared mission between earthly followers and messengers of the heavenly realm. The term “Zion” is featured prominently in Old Testament tradition and used by Jesus in Matthew (21:2) and John (12:15) as he comforts the daughters of Jerusalem. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion,” he says. In this tradition, Jesus is identifying with the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, as he prepares to move forward to the inauguration of the paschal mystery: his betrayal, suffering, impending crucifixion and subsequent resurrection, “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion” he says, “Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt” (John 12: 15).

Jesus, in identifying with Zion, is engaging prophetic language to recall the city where the Holy of Holies resided. Zion was the city conquered by King David from the Jebusites (2 Samuel: 5) and firmly established as David’s City. Later, it became the site of the first temple raised by Solomon in 957 BCE. Its strategic location atop a hill overlooking the surrounding region made it the ideal location to fulfill a critical two-fold purpose: first as a haven offering protection and defense from Israel’s enemies, and, secondly, to be visible from a distance so that it could live prominently into its prophetic, iconic role as “light to the world.” Judaism held the City of Zion sacred, for it was for them the place where the Divine Presence rested. It was, and is now, popularly known as the City of Jerusalem, distinguished by the term “Holy City of God.”

We can, therefore, appreciate why the prophet Isaiah, very early in his prophecy pondering the impending exile, predicted that disobedient Israel will one day return to Zion and hear from Yahweh, for his holiness resided on that mountain (Isaiah. 2:3). By their reconciliatory action, other nations shall follow suit in recognizing Yahweh as supreme over all the others gods worshipped by their surrounding neighbors. However, when we read Isaiah 51:16 we will notice that the Isaiah prophetic tradition pushes Zion’s boundary further into the national life of Israel,
“I have put my words in your mouth, and hidden you in the shadow of my hand, stretching out the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, “You are my people”.” Zion became embodied in a people for God’s mission. That mission was the vision of peace, which will become a universal phenomenon.

From this scanty historical overview, we are drawn in some degree into the mind of the hymn writer. For me, it was obvious that when Mary Ann Thompson penned the words, “O Zion, haste, thy mission high fulfilling to tell to all the world that God is Light that he who made all nations is not willing one soul should fail to know his love and might...”, we can hear the echo of prophetic summons in the air. The purposefulness of call is particularly true as we listen to the words of the refrain. In them, we can hear her heart racing to tell the Church that the mission of God beckons a spirit and attitude of urgency to proclaim the good news. And that this message is so universally poignant that it would be a catastrophic failing if we delay. Listen to the refrain: “Publish glad tidings: tidings of peace, tidings of Jesus, redemption and release.”

As we gather here for the 128th Annual Diocesan Convention, I am convinced that there are no truer prophetic words for this season than those of Mary Ann Thompson. The mission of the Church, the vision and vocation of New Testament Zion, which we Christians now inhabit with the Divine Presence, insofar as our peculiar tradition is concerned, is interpreted by many as being in a “crisis moment.” This crisis seems to be exacerbated, even as Zion summons from us the heart for mission, the spirit of “sent-ness.”

Ironically, it is doing so during a time in which the Church seems to be drifting from the mooring the apostles set. Some believe that unless certain critical pieces are in place, the mission of God ceases or, at the very least, is severely impaired: why begin anything when we are missing motivated people; rightness of time; adequate funds and the likes - all shrouded in a spirit of fatalism? With others, unless the church continues to maintain the status quo, or the idyllic view of discriminate inclusivity, the work of mission and ministry stops. It is held hostage by those who believe that, unless the Church follows the path of my interpretation, I shall have nothing to do with it.

As much as many would rather the mission of the church be defined by their standards, the reality is that good news of the Gospel is forever good news to all God’s people, and this will remain the primary motivation in Zion’s call, “…tell how he stooped to save his lost creation, and died on earth that all might live above.”

God’s mission is shaped by God’s agenda, and in God’s agenda, we are all to be nourished at the table of grace through love. No one is turned away. This is the imagery Jesus introduced in the Gospel of Mark (2:15-17) when he addressed the scribes and Pharisees, reminding them that his mission was also to those society had labeled as “beyond grace.” His mission is, first and foremost, to invite his followers to learn the discipline of co-existence. In line with this view, how much more helpful can Isaiah’s imagery that follows the text be?: “He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2: 4)
Thankfully — and I believe I speak for most, if not all of us — we in this diocese see each other through this lens; we advocate the best for the future for each other and our beloved diocese. But the Zion we share in should move beyond self and venture deeper into familiar and, yes!, in some unfamiliar territories trusting that the Divine Presence will be there. Let us not forget that the Corpus - the body- we share in was birthed from the depths of the earth into the light of eternal life and victory.

Friends, we are struggling with undoubtedly challenging times across every strata of societal life. Families within this diocese and across the nation wrestle with uncertainty about tomorrow. Jobs have been lost, regular income gone. Accumulated and invested income for many has disappeared. The very fabric of our foundation is severely threatened. Consequently, communities of faith, whose survival and viability lean heavily on the generous stewardship of members, will naturally manifest serious misgivings as to how far they can risk traveling into the arena of uncertainty.

The early church followers were overwhelmed by the same thoughts and realities besetting each of us now. Even as we are tested, so is the church, as one of its greatest strengths, if not its most precious gift, you - the body of believers. Every faithful member who has dutifully and religiously pledged time, talent and treasures to their beloved Savior through his Church, does so because of wholehearted, unconditional and unselfish belief in the ongoing mission of God’s Church. On the other hand, some have tightened their fists while others are showing signs of wavering in faith.

Whichever impulse may characterize your approach, I challenge you to see your place at this moment as integral to the prophetic imagination of our God. In times like these we need to hear the angel’s words to the evangelist John on the Island of Patmos in Revelation 19: 10, “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” The prophetic voice of the church is more profoundly and collectively needed in these times; a voice emboldened by the holy lamentation, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4: 13). Brother Paul’s one passion in life was to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus. He welcomed heartbreaks, disillusionments, tribulations, for one reason only, because these things kept him in unmoved devotion to the Gospel of Jesus. As renowned international author and speaker Dr. Wayne Dyer once said, “When you change the way you look at things the things you look at change.”

Regardless of the prevailing time, do know that your commitment and tenacity of faith is the reason we gather in this 128th Annual Diocesan Convention, granted in some level of trepidation, yet overwhelmingly optimistic about the future of the diocese. We are called and have responded to the work of preserving our heritage, new and old opportunities for mission that truly scare us.

And though we may feel strangled by the events of the present, we do have a conquering alternative, a window with a view into a future distinguished by hope in anticipation of a better tomorrow. The people of God continue to be defined by the paschal mystery, in which darkness was conquered by the victory of a new day; the dawn of a glorious morning radiating its penetrating rays across a world, once broken by sin now redeemed and reconciled to God and itself.
We are motivated by this divine formula, and the more we are defined by the gospel of transfiguration, a gospel that points us to a world beyond ourselves, the more capable will be our languished spirit to rise above the realities troubling our hearts. We do so in a spirit of grace that does not deny obstacles, but moves forward in spite of them, trusting in Zion’s mission. The paradigm of life changes when confronted by the resurrection, and we recall the words of a newer hymnal standard, “Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all fear is gone.”

Zion’s mission is about God’s Big Picture in which each of us is called to stroke our brush on this enormous canvas. And the completion of this divine project won’t be distinguished by symmetry of effort; rather it will be characterized by inevitable messiness. However in this messy conundrum, the question will be asked, “Did you stroke your brush on God’s Big Picture?” You see, you and I are the embodiment of Zion!

Canon Stockard reminded me a few days ago that the prophetic voice of the church isn’t necessarily one of doom and gloom, but also of encouragement and hope. We witness both strands in Old Testament prophecy and New Testament affirmations. My beloved in Christ, Zion is much more than a city set on high. It is the foundation of life, a living breathing community of faith. The redeemed community worships in spirit and in truth moving ever so gingerly, in that knowledge that the Church, as the organism of God transforms boundary and wall, and rises over insurmountable obstacles, because in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, “its architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11: 10).

Dr. Paul Avis of the Church of England reminds me in his book, “The Identity of Anglicanism,” that part of our Anglican distinctiveness is that we are privileged to serve in a Church that, despite its shortcomings and painful history, continues to live out its vigilant character as the Church Militant — Church Triumphant — Church Expectant. Wisdom reminds us that the Church belongs to Jesus, and so is this diocese gifted to us by God and entrusted to us as a heritage to our children.

My prayer is for a convention that, while wrestling with the business before us, would be bold and courageous enough to recall, that it was hewed out of a past that hadn’t any chance in the world to go beyond Calvary. Look where we are today! Zion’s mission is our birth right to protect, defend and turn over to the next generation stronger than when we inherited it.

Finally, an old legend recounted by C.F. Andrew tells us that when Jesus returned to heaven, an angel asked, “What have you left behind to carry out the work?” Jesus answered: “A little band of men and women who love me.” But what if they fail when trial comes? “Will all you have done be defeated?” “Yes,” said Jesus, “if they fail, all I have done will be defeated?” “Is there nothing more,” the angel asks. “What then?” Jesus quietly replied, “They will not fail.”

With a confidence like this then, as we face tomorrow, we can triumphantly declare, “We will not fail. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.”