

Be Firm in Your Faith

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Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life. In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

As most of you know, I am planning on moving out of New York City. This will be a new journey for me and my husband. A new place to live, a new community, new customs, a new diocese, and a new church. For young people moving away from home this could be a scary and intimidating situation, whereas older people like myself and my husband -- Oh boy, help me Lord. It is far from being scary and intimidating, at least for me, but my husband probably is on pins and needles because he's really going to a strange place. But I must remember at all times, that wherever I may be, that I am also on a spiritual journey with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and God my Father that will continue throughout my lifetime and will also continue throughout your lifetime.

If you don't know it or don't suspect, we are all on spiritual journeys. We may not think so, we may not know so. Mother Emily and I were talking in the Parish Hall just before we robed for the service, and I said to her, "So when did you know?" And most clergy when you ask them that, they immediately know what you're asking, and she said, "When I was in high school." And I said, "Oh, mine came after college." And we knew that we were asking each other, when did you know that God was calling you to ordained ministry. And God might be calling some of you to ministries that right now, you haven't figured it out.

Some of you might be called to be Eucharistic ministers, singers, ushers, lectors, on different committees in the church – the Vestry. All of those things are ministries, and when you say "yes" to being on one of those things, you are saying yes to God. Sometimes Christians may feel as if their spiritual journeys have taken them to an unknown place – just like if I were to join the choir, that would be an unknown place for me! – and for the choirmaster. Where all the signs are in a strange language, and they just can't seem to figure out where they are or where they're supposed to go. As much as they attempt to discern the signs in their lives, they find themselves feeling more and more confused while trying to navigate in a strange land. For new Christians sitting in the pews, reading the signs and navigating their new surroundings they can become very tricky and confusing. That's why it's very helpful to them that when you see new people come into the church, to offer assistance to them, ask them do you know how to read the bulletin, this is what we're doing, we stand here, we sit there, so that they can become familiar with the Episcopal Church. This is especially true with all the conflicting religious messages coming at them from every direction. But whether a new convert or a lifelong Christian, the spiritual journey is wrought with signs along the way requiring translation. I know for myself I have to call my mentor quite often to say I need help with this or what do you think of that or how should I approach this, and usually after talking with him for a while, when we get off the phone I know that he really didn't tell me anything, we just talked about it and then I came to my own conclusion. But he's a great mentor.

Making things even more troublesome are modern day self-proclaimed prophets who incessantly talk about the end of time. They use scripture to weave fanciful tales of horrific proportion, which if accepted as truth without a discerning heart, can derail people in their journey.

To a similar degree, Jesus' disciples were confused by the signs of their times. Israel was under Roman rule. Contemporary prophets routinely spouted end of time predictions and the Jews were desperate for a messiah who would reinstate the Davidic line and establish Israel to its former glory as an independent kingdom. Now we must remember that they were looking for a savior to come riding in on a white horse and a flaming sword, cutting down every Roman that he or she saw and what they got was this poor man in raggedy robes, coming up saying "You must love your neighbor". And a lot of them were like "Are you kidding me?" In the midst of all the confusing signs and false prophets, Jesus warned his disciples and his believers today to stand awake, to stand firm in your faith with God. Do not let anything shake your faith that you have in God. Be firm. Be strong. This implies being alert and cognizant of what is happening in our surroundings also, living in a constant state of readiness and anticipation. It does not have or suggest that believers should be poring over Scripture in a vain attempt to find a prophetic interpretation for every single event in history or in the news. Much time and energy has been wasted on end of time books, movies, and prophecies. Now is the time to focus on proclaiming the good news in Christ by being His hands and reaching out to those in need.

When I was in Savannah Georgia about two weeks ago and I was going out with my sister-friend and we were going out doing stuff, one day we drove from her community and we passed this bridge, I saw all these tents under the bridge. And I said to her, what are all those tents under the bridge? Is that where the construction workers can rest during the day? And she said, "Oh no, dear, that's where the homeless live." And I said, "Are you kidding me?" And she said, "No this is where the homeless are living." And I said "Wow, what happens when it rains, what happens when the weather turns a little chilly or cold?" And she said, "They still stay there." I said "Well, when I come back, we have to do something. I don't care if it's bringing them boxes of food or clothes, but we must do something." So, she agreed and we're working on a plan to think of something to do for those people living under the bridge. So please pray for us in our endeavor, that whatever we decide to do we may succeed at it.

As the church enters into this Advent season, the world is a race to read the signs of the times in an attempt to make sense of all that is going on. The news media is rife with reports of increased terrorism, nation rising against nation, a rise in religious extremism and intolerance, political and religious leaders are under continuous scrutiny as reports of indiscretion and malfeasance surface. The crimes seem to be taking over the streets. Diseases such as COVID indiscriminately kill and people are being pitted against each other in a continual competition for limited resources while those who are vulnerable in society suffer the most, like the people in the tents under the bridge.

When looked at a whole, we can ask what does all this mean? It is no wonder that some begin to interpret all these events as signs of the end of time. Misguided religious zeal and emotional negativity are rife and dangerous in times such as these. People begin to lose hope, and an insidious spirit and intellectual apathy set in. In the midst of suffering and despair the world longs for some cosmic event that will wipe out all that is wrong in a single stroke. In the midst of doomsday prediction and those who warn that Christ's return is just around the corner, despite the confidence of some who say Christ's second advent is imminent, Jesus clearly states that no one knows the time of his appearance, neither the angels in heaven, nor the son, only the Father.

And I can hear Jesus now, saying “when, dad, when” and God saying “it’s none of your business. Go outside and do something.’

Part of remaining alert in these times is a Commitment to continue study of scripture and life of his story, teachers of the church, developing critical thinking skills and seeking a discerning spirit. The church is firm in her belief in the return of Christ Jesus, but exactly when or how this culminating cosmic event will take place is a mystery, Scripture does not give a clear explanation, however it does provide signs that help navigate life’s journey, with the help of the Holy Spirit to the Lord’s second Advent. Until Christ’s return, the church is reminded to remain awake as it diligently carries on the ministry of the Lord. The church learns from the past, while maintaining a confident faith in the future, all the time tending to the work of the Kingdom of God today. You may say, “What do you mean the work of the kingdom of God today?” Whatever we do in the name of God, in the name of Jesus, we are doing the work of his kingdom. Mother Emily whatever she does in this church the singing of psalms, the little gifts that she gave. All of those things are doing the work of God’s kingdom, being on different committees – God’s kingdom, handing someone a dollar bill outside – God’s kingdom, buying somebody a hamburger because they are hungry are doing the work of God’s kingdom. Remember what Jesus told all of us, which I’m not going to go into because we’ll be here all day, but remember whatever you do in God’s name, you are doing it for his kingdom. Now is not the time to be caught sleeping while the master is away but to be busy about managing his affairs. The people of the world may be driven by fear and anxiety, but believers can be confident that God will strengthen them to the end.

My stepdaughter lives in the Bay Area of San Francisco and over these past few days when we were all together we were talking – we always talk about everything – and she brought up the fact that one night she got off work and it was dark out and she remembered that she had parked her car in this alley. And she’s walking with her bag and this couple started walking behind her. And she said she could hear them talking a little bit, the man whispering to the woman, and the woman saying to the man “No, no, no I don’t think you should do that. No, don’t do that.” And the man whispered to the woman, and the woman walks ahead, and the man starts following her. So, she said she continued walking and she went into the alley where her car was, and she didn’t go to her car. Most of us would be running for the car – I know I would. She crossed over to the other side of the alley, and with her bags in her arms, she just turned around and looked at him. She didn’t say anything, but she had this “what do you think you’re going to do to me?” Having that confidence, having that strength to do that – to her -maybe not to all of us, but to her – was a sign that God was with her. Where else would she get the strength to turn and say that to someone who meant her harm. And we are all so happy that the man just looked at her for a second and turned around and walked out of the alley. Thanks be to God!

This advent presents us with a unique opportunity for the church to stand in the gap and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ through word and deed. Now is the time to be diligent in proclaiming the word of God in word and deed. If believers are to interpret any message from the signs of the times it is that God’s grace is sufficient to sustain people even in the worst of circumstances. My stepdaughter, our Patty, our Patricia, our Patricia Castanada Diaz, our adopted baby had God’s grace sustaining her in that circumstance.

One thing I want to say to all of you, you can’t buy God’s grace. You can’t do anything to get God’s grace. You can’t say “well I donated \$25 million to charity so I know God is gonna give me his grace.” Or you know, “I really went out and helped the homeless today and got my hands dirty and stuff.” But

guess what, you can't buy God's grace. "I spoke to my neighbor that I really don't like that much, so maybe God will give me his grace." Nothing you do can give you God's grace. You know why? Because God has already given it to us as a gift. And if he's already given it to us as a gift, we can't do anything to try to get it because we already have it. Amen?

Mary and Joseph lived in times equally or even worse than the times we live in today. It may be helpful when we're in the midst of bad times to think of St. Mary. Think of Mary telling her parents she's pregnant. Image the uproar that caused. Can you imagine her mother looking at her and saying "Come over here? What's wrong with you? Look at you. Are you pregnant?" and Mary saying "Yes, Mom" and her saying "You will bring shame and dishonor on this family? How dare you! Who's the father? You tell me right now, who did this to you?" Now Mary probably thought, "If I say God, they will think I'm crazy, so the best thing to do probably is to keep my mouth shut." So, her mother probably said to her, "You know what, since you've decided to bring dishonor on this family, you go to your cousin Elizabeth. Out in the boon docks where no one can see you. Just go to Elizabeth." Can you imagine a young teenage girl pregnant, having to go with a relative way out in the boondocks somewhere? Taking that journey by herself probably. But when she got to Elizabeth, she was happy. She was happy because not only was she traveling on a journey to Elizabeth, she was also travelling on a spiritual journey with God.

Think of Mary travelling to Bethlehem with Joseph after Joseph finally said, after listening to the angel, "OK I'll marry her, even if she's pregnant by somebody else. Don't know who, but she's pregnant. But I'll still marry her." Travelling to Bethlehem, she must have been, what, 9 months pregnant? Sitting on the back of her donkey? Have you ever seen an ornery donkey? Oh my God, they're so ornery. They can start bucking all over the place. They can stand still and decide "I'm not moving anywhere." You know, just ornery. And she being 9 months pregnant. Those of us who have carried babies to the 9th month, we all know that by the time the 9th month comes in we want to say "Don't look at me, don't touch me, don't talk to me. Just leave me be so this baby can come out of here." And here she is sitting on the back of a donkey trying to get to Bethlehem with Joseph. How rough is that? Think of Mary when you're having hard times. Giving birth in a stable surrounded by nothing but animals. And you may say "Well why didn't they just go out, have Joseph build a little tent or something and that way they could go, and she could be there." But isn't it better that she was in that stable because at least she was in a town, she may not have known anyone in that town but at least she was in a town if they had to go get help? Being in the desert, they were subject to robbers, so being where they were was good even if she was surrounded by animals. And the animals looked at them – "What in the world?!"

So, we need to think of all the things she went through. Think of her when she had to flee with Joseph to Egypt with a newborn infant in her arms. How tough can that be, and being on the same donkey's back? Think of a young teenage girl who's a new mother and practically a new wife living in a foreign land, a new beginning for all of them. Mary's pregnancy is an example, is an example of standing firm in her faith. Standing firm and not letting anything deter her from her faith in God. And Jesus' birth and life is a miracle of God's love for all of us.

In the meantime, the church has a job to do until Jesus returns. Whether he returns today, tomorrow or in a hundred years, today is the day of salvation for all of us. If one looks closely at the signs of the times, they point to the one who holds all the answers to all the ills in this world. Jesus' mission to the church remains as clear today as when he first sent his disciples into the world. It is also worth stressing, that for Christians, the day of the Lord is now. Can you imagine if we all, all the people in the world, did

what God wanted us to do, can you imagine the world that we would be living in. We would have loving communities all over the world. No one would be afraid to walk down the street. No one would be afraid of not having enough food to eat. No one will be afraid of saying Oh my God, it's winter and I don't have a warm coat to wear. No one would be afraid of saying we can't afford to get sick because we can't afford to go to the doctor. Because everything will be taken care of because we will be taking care of each other. Jesus arrives in our lives through the empowerment and conviction of the Holy Spirit. So do not wait until the end of the world to respond to his presence and promptings. Do so now! May the church be faithful in proclaiming God's love for all creation. All creation. Even the hermit crab in my granddaughter's room. And labor tirelessly in proclaiming God's justice and righteousness until Christ's return. Amen.