

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher- by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 11, 2018.**

One of the strengths of any religious faith is its rhythm of worship. It is predictable and comforting. It is also predictable and challenging. For those of us who practice the Christian Faith, we know that for every season of joy, like Christmas, there's a season of moderation, like Lent. For every season of jumping up and down, there's a season of falling on our knees. The Church Year has a rhythm, which we happily embrace.

And the reason we do so happily is because it captures how we feel about ourselves. We don't live according to the Church calendar. The Church calendar lives according to us. It reflects who we are. We know certain things about ourselves. We own them. Sometimes we do what we ought not to do, and other times we don't do what we are supposed to do. And the flipside is true. Sometimes we do what we're supposed to do, and sometimes we don't do what we're not supposed to do. That's who we are. We are a mix.

But it is a mix that God loves. When we're good, God loves us. And when we're not so good, God might be disappointed, but He still loves us. This undeserved love is at the heart of our Faith, and thus at the heart of the Church Year.

This week, we move from the Seasons of Christmas and Epiphany to the Season of Lent. From joy to moderation, from celebration to confession, from advanced placement to remedial education. Ash Wednesday is this week. On that occasion we will be reminded that from dust we came and to dust we will return. But we will also be reminded that in this journey that we all will make, we are not alone. God is with us. And not just until death, but beyond. As we came from God, so we will return to God. In short, God is in charge of the dust.

On this last Sunday of Epiphany, as we make this Seasonal transition, we are provided the story of Elijah and Elisha (**2 Kings 2:1-12**). This is a story of transition. And it is a story of assurance. Transition and assurance.

Elijah, the prophet, knows that death is near. It is time, therefore, to name a successor, one who will continue to represent God to the people. Elisha, a disciple, a follower of Elijah, is appointed. Elisha, fearful that he is not ready to inherit Elijah's mantle, postpones the separation. Each time Elijah says, "Stay

here,” Elisha counters, “I will not leave you.” Elisha even requests “a double of Elijah’s spirit.” Elijah recognizes Elisha’s concern: “You have asked a hard thing.”

Eventually, though, the two are separated. Elijah is taken to be with God, leaving Elisha to serve the people. This separation, this transition, is accompanied by the assurance of the one leaving. You and I have had this conversation. We probably had it first as the one being assured, as the one inheriting the mantle. And we may be having this conversation right now, assuring loved ones that they will be okay, that they will find the strength to carry on. This might be a family conversation. It might be a business conversation.

Whatever the relationship, transition is a “hard thing,” and cries out for assurance. This theme is repeated in today’s gospel (**Mark 9:2-9**). Peter, James and John are with Jesus on a mountain top, when Jesus is “transfigured before them.” They are terrified. They’re not sure what this means. Then came a voice offering assurance. “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.”

This they would do, not easily, but faithfully. Without this Divine assurance, following Jesus for the disciples might not have happened. And, without Peter, James and John and the other loyal disciples following Jesus, who knows where we would be now. We owe a lot to the followers, and, of course, we owe everything to the God who spoke to them and assured them that He, God, was with them, and that Jesus, God’s Son, would be with them as well.

St. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians (**II Corinthians 4:3-6**), addresses the challenge of transitioning and assuring. “If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.” He goes on: “In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

Think of your own history with the gospel, the Good News that Jesus died for our sins. Even if you were raised in the Church by devout parents, there came a time when you said to yourself, if not to your parents, “How can I be sure about this whole God business? Some of it doesn’t make sense. A lot of it is too good to be true. Do I really believe all this stuff?”

When we are uncertain about something, especially religion, the world around us probably does as much to reinforce uncertainty as to counter it. Transition and

assurance fight an uphill battle, don't they, especially when it comes to the notion of a loving God?

Well, if Paul was aware of this challenge in the first century, imagine the strength of the challenge twenty centuries later. The fact that the Gospel has made it this far is remarkable. The very survival of the Gospel is evidence that transitioning and assuring have been taking place successfully, despite the odds.

I'm here and you're here because the Gospel not only still makes sense on an intellectual level, but supports us in a manner that the world at large cannot match. We have received the Good News in a variety of ways. From parents, from experiences good and bad, from art and literature, and, yes, from advances in the sciences that, for us, open up possibilities of faith rather than shutting them off.

We are the recipients of the Good News, including the understanding that we have a responsibility to share that News. Transitioning and assuring are expected. And that's okay, because we like to pass on Good News and we like to assure people that this Good News can mean as much to them as it means to us.

At the heart of the longevity of the Gospel is not just our efforts. We are working alongside the very Good News itself. Our transitioning and assuring efforts last a life time, our life time. The Lord's efforts, however, last for ever. Paul writes, "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord."

This qualifier about the nature of our efforts is in fact one of the features of our faith that makes the most sense. If we were just proclaiming ourselves, the Good News would have been forgotten long ago. We can do impressive things when we set our minds to it. But we cannot transition and assure by ourselves. There is simply too much negativity in the world.

We need help beyond ourselves. That's something that believers and non-believers have in common. What's not in common is where this help comes from. From other non-believers? I don't think so. From other believers? Yes, to some extent, of course, but not exclusively.

So, from where? From the Creator of the Universe? Yes. That's our faith. That's what keeps us going. **Psalm 50** reminds us: "The Lord, the God of gods, has spoken."

That's why the seasonal rhythm of our worship is so meaningful. That's what drives us to give thanks and to share and to help the next generation deal with all the uncertainty that life dishes out.

As we note often, we're sitting on a gold mine. We're in possession of the greatest story ever told. We're in touch, through Jesus, with the Creator of the Universe. We have received the Good News, and we have been assured that it is for real. And we know it to be so.

And now, we have been given an assignment. Not forced on us, but offered to us. And that is simply to share this Good News. What an honor to be so designated. What a joy to be so trusted. What a privilege to be given this opportunity. Why would we pass on it? Why indeed?

Amen.