

Sermon for Renewal of Ministry and Welcoming a New Rector Holy Comforter, Richmond  
1/9/16. PJW

I need to start this afternoon with a confession, because it has a loose connection to this service. Several years ago, I tried to break one of the 10 Commandments. The Commandment I tried to break was "Thou Shalt not Steal." I did this when I worked on the bishop's staff in the Diocese of Alabama as the Transition Ministry Officer. It was then that a very interesting résumé came across my desk of a priest in Winchester, Virginia, and I did everything I could to steal her from Virginia to be the chaplain at the University of Alabama. I think her concern about the utter intensity of Alabama football fans (Roll Tide) probably led her to stay in Virginia, my attempt at theft was thwarted, and now you are welcoming Hilary Smith as your rector.

I tell you this story because I'm convinced that the Holy Spirit has brought you all together, Holy Comforter and Hilary. I'm convinced that the Holy Spirit is involved in our lives, in our decisions, and how things turn out in God's world. I don't claim to know how the Holy Spirit works in the world, and in fact Jesus himself said that the Holy Spirit is like the wind – you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. I also don't think that God has a specific plan that has to work out a certain way. But I do believe that God chooses to work cooperatively with us in our lives, within this finite world, to bring about the best possibility that the fullness of God's hope for the world can come to be. Indeed, God chooses the concrete things of life to help us embrace and be embraced by the holy.

Yet while the Holy Spirit's work is clear to us in that Hilary has come to be your Rector, and while this is a thing to celebrate, it's just a small part of what we're up to today. The 1979 Book of Common Prayer calls this service the Celebration of A New Ministry, and for around thirty years our church has celebrated new rectors by focusing on the new ministry of the priest. But in our deepening understanding of how we express our faith through liturgy, the church has developed this service so that it recognizes the new ministry that you all share together with your new priest, and the title of this liturgy tells us what our task is. In this service we are to renew ministry, and that means all of us--Hilary, each of you, me, and even Bishop Ted. We are to renew our ministry, individually and collectively, and in doing so we are acknowledging that God is doing something new, that the fullness of God's hope for the world might become more present through Holy Comforter parish because of your cooperation with the new things God is doing here. And it makes perfect sense that we are doing so in the context of baptism and confirmation, events in the lives of individuals which are meant to give new and renewed life to them in Christ and in Christ's church.

New things. God is doing new things in a place and in a people where not very long ago at all that did not seem possible. It is very much like the situation in which the Hebrew people found themselves in Babylon in the 6th century BC. They had been taken into exile, they were defeated, drained, and in danger of losing their identity. But the prophet Isaiah's message from God to them was one of hope, a vision of the fullness of God's desire for God's people coming to them in the midst of their deep desperation.

"Thus says the Lord," Isaiah wrote,

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the Lord your God"

For the Hebrew people this was not some vague promise. This proclamation meant that something was going to happen, something world changing, life changing, something that only God could do. It was renewal in every sense of the word: renewal of their individual lives, renewal of their community, and renewal of their purpose in God's world. And Isaiah was able to help them understand this by reminding them of the intimate relationship they had with God.

"You are precious to me," God told them through Isaiah, "and I love you." In that relationship with exiled captives 2500 years ago we find the same relationship that God desires for us and with us.

When Christians talk about renewal, we must talk about baptism in the same breath. Baptism is that place where the possibilities of God and our ability to serve God and carry out God's purposes come together. The Baptism of Jesus was world-changing, life changing; it was where Jesus heard these words from God: "You are my Son; you are precious to me and I love you." There are no better words to renew us than to hear from God that we belong to God, that we are beloved.

Baptism affirms that love, and it begins for us a journey into discovering the depths of that love.

Terry Holmes, who was the dean of the school of theology in Sewanee, Tennessee in the 1980s, once wrote this (and I'm paraphrasing): "The Episcopal Church is at its best when our liturgy, our music, our poetry and our life together creates a world of wonder that makes it very easy to fall in love with God." Holy Comforter, Richmond has a long history of creating a world of wonder in a variety of ways, but many of you here this afternoon know that your recent history cannot be described as a world of wonder. I've been working for the diocese of Virginia for 3 1/2 years, and one of the first things I was asked to do after I arrived in Richmond was to consult with the Vestry of Holy Comforter.

What I found was a lot of very faithful people who were concerned about their church. There's no need to go into great detail about this, but suffice it to say that there was a real concern that this church was in danger of losing members, squandering its resources, and losing its focus on

mission and ministry. But it's in these times when God seems to be most active through the Holy Spirit.

How did things change? We're using a word this afternoon that I think is the key. Welcome. We're applying it to Hilary, which is right and good, but welcome is, at its core, trusting in and becoming the hospitality of God.

The vestry of this church could have battened down the hatches, closed ranks, managed money fearfully, lived suspiciously, circled the wagons, gone conservative.

But it didn't. It welcomed God's presence and God's power in the way that John the Baptist welcomed Jesus and the way Jesus welcomed the descending dove. And God took that welcome and did new things.

In late November, my wife and I were privileged to represent the diocese of Virginia at the 25th anniversary of the founding of the diocese of Christ the King, in Johannesburg, South Africa. Our diocese has a long relationship with the diocese of Christ the King, and their bishop and five other representatives from that diocese will be joining us at our annual Council in two weeks. While we were over in Johannesburg, we went with the Bishop on his regular Sunday visitation to the edge of the diocese in a town called Sharpeville.

Sharpeville was one of the early sites of apartheid violence, in which 69 people were shot and killed while running from police after being attacked at a peaceful demonstration. So these folks in this church knew the pain of the long struggle, the darkness of oppression, the feeling that maybe God had forgotten them.

But God had not forgotten them, and we discovered this reality in their celebration of the liturgy that day. It, too, was a service of baptism and confirmation, the church was packed, and everyone was decked out in their best clothes. We were struck by incredible joy in the people, which was most easily seen and heard in their music.

The only accompaniment was rhythm instruments and whistles, and we have never heard such beautiful and unusual harmonies. The service was infused with music throughout, but it was after the Gospel reading when something happened that I will never forget.

The gospel was read, the very formal procession came back up the aisle through a thick cloud of incense, and an elaborately decorated lectern was put out for the bishop to preach. But before he could begin another song started up. It started slowly and rhythmically, and began to build with swaying and the tapping of cowbells and soft drums. The choir was all ages, and included a little boy who could not have been more than about four years old singing at the top of his lungs.

The music got louder and even more beautiful and the choir began to come out into the aisle and process to the middle of the church where the congregation and choir danced and sang

and threw themselves into worship in an authentic and enthusiastic way unlike anything I have ever seen. As all of this was happening, the bishop walked over to where we were standing, and, having to shout to be heard, said to us, "this is how we welcome the word of God."

Maybe we won't do it in quite the same way, but this afternoon, we welcome the word of God and the Spirit of God; we welcome these new members into Christ's body through baptism, and new members into Christ's church through confirmation. We welcome all those new things that God has done, and we welcome those new things that we trust God will work within us and among us to accomplish through us.

We welcome Hilary as your new rector. And while we may not dance down the aisle with cowbells and whistles--although I would not put anything past Martha Burford--may our hearts dance as we celebrate the world of wonder that makes it easy to fall in love with God through the Holy Spirit, the Holy Comforter.

Amen.