

February 28, 2021  
The Second Sunday in Lent  
The Rev. Paula Jefferson

### For the sake of the Gospel

When I was 16, I sang in an acapella choir. We were invited to sing at Disney World, a memorable trip for 20 Pennsylvania teenagers without enough chaperones. When we weren't performing at Disney, we had special VIP passes for the rides. Space Mountain was a fairly new roller coaster. Although I am not a big fan of roller coasters, all of the choir was queuing up to ride. I joined too.

What none of us knew was that the roller coaster operated *inside* a building, in the dark. There were no lights. It was pitch dark....and the roller coaster was creeping upward and upward. I was screaming long before the roller coaster began its descent. The scariest part of the ride wasn't the ups and downs, but the hard turns that went left or right with no warning. Literally, you could not see these turns coming.

#### *Pause*

As I read our Gospel lesson today, I was thinking about Peter's journey through the Gospel of Mark. In Mark, Chapter 4, Jesus is teaching with parables and performing divine signs, like the stilling of a storm. In Chapter 5, he is healing the sick. In Chapter 6 he feeds 5,000 and walks on water. Chapter 7, Jesus heals again, feeds 4,000.

Now we're in chapter 8 where the pieces have all come together for Peter and he realizes that Jesus is the Messiah. And just as Peter "gets it", Jesus takes a hard turn. He tells the disciples that he will suffer, be killed, and after three days, rise again.

Peter must feel like he's riding a roller coaster in the dark—how could anyone see this curve coming? It certainly isn't what Peter *expects* to hear or *wants* to hear.

2021 has been hard. The world continues to battle COVID-19. In America, we have surpassed 500,000 deaths.

Last week, Texans added a new layer of stress. An arctic storm said, "Howdy" in a big, Texas kind of way. Millions of us lost electricity, heat, drinkable water. There was snow in Austin, Galveston, and San Antonio. In Fort Worth, more than 130 cars were involved in one, massive, pile-up, causing deaths and injuries. Our lack of preparedness is evidence that Texans did not *expect* or *want* this kind of arctic storm.

As the ice in Fort Worth melted and we returned to T-shirt weather, local Episcopalians experienced another "new thing". Nearly 13 years ago, our diocese began a protracted break-up. It was complicated, painful, expensive, and it seemed that it would go on forever. But, on February 22, 2021, the divorce was final. More than \$100 Million of Episcopal assets were awarded to the faction who left our denomination. For

Episcopalians (like those of us at St. Martin's) who align with The Episcopal Church of the United States, the outcome was not what we *expected* to hear...or what we *wanted* to hear.

We are standing with Peter...on the backside of a hard curve.

Peter must be on top of the world realizing that he is walking with the Messiah. How will life be different for Jews now that the Messiah is among them? And just as Peter's imagination starts to right all the wrongs in *this* world, Jesus begins to talk about his death. The text says that Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him... he reprimands him.

Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan. You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

So, what *are* the divine things? How do we find those in the midst of our human experience?

Some years ago, I was hiking in the Sequoia National Forest and joined by a forest ranger along the trail. I had questions about these goliath trees and he enjoyed talking about them. Sequoias can live up to 3,000 years...they've been living on earth since Jesus walked on earth.

But it is their method of reproduction that is truly remarkable. Sequoias are among the tallest trees on earth, but they have tiny cones. The cones grow near the crown of the trees, hundreds of feet above the earth. They fall to the ground seasonally, and they lay on the forest floor, dormant, *until* there is a forest fire.

Fire clears the debris of scrub brush living at the base of these giant trees and cracks open the cone. Once it's open, the seeds are released. With the scrub brush gone, the seeds have sunlight, water, and healthy soil to establish their roots and grow.

It is ironic. To begin new life, the sequoia must experience the heat and destruction of fire. There's no Johnny Appleseed needed for this story. The Mystery of Creation regenerates without human intervention. It is a Divine thing.

*Pause:*

On that first Easter morning, a small group of women made their way to the tomb. They were prepared to perform the ceremonial ritual of cleansing Jesus' body—to give him a proper burial. They arrive to discover Jesus' body is missing. It is not what they *expected* or *wanted* to find. They were upset. But what they had discovered changes everything. They had discovered a Divine thing.

Divine things are not buildings, bank accounts, or things we possess. When we hang on to those things too tightly, they become idols. We begin to believe that they bring us security, safety, certainty.

But during the storm, as we lost power, heat, food, water...things we need to survive, something Divine began to happen. Red and Blue tribes worked together to keep Texans warm, fed, and safe. People came together to tackle an outside threat that affected all of us. The tribe-lines were redrawn. In adversity, we remember that we are not just red or blue, black or white, straight or gay. We are people. God's people. Created in God's image. Freed of our cultural labels, we are able to take up our cross and follow Jesus—loving our neighbor.

As Episcopalians grappled with the loss of sacred buildings and burial grounds, people from around the Church chimed in with support and love. Our presiding Bishop sent his prayers and his love to us. We are changed. The Church is changed.

Perhaps our diocese is like a sequoia cone. We've been lying on the forest floor for 13 years waiting for a fire. It has come. It was not the fire we *expected* or *wanted*. But it was the fire we *needed* to begin anew.

We have entered a new era...freed of the baggage of stuff, litigation, ideology, and anger, Christ invites us to take up our cross, plant our seeds of Love and Hope. That *all* who come into our space, may know the welcome of Christ.

The Episcopal denomination welcomes all. Bp Curry once referred to us as "Those Crazy Episcopalians". Yes, by some cultural standards, we probably do sound crazy. We welcome all, regardless of where you are on your journey of faith. We welcome all, regardless of the label society imposes on you. We welcome all, acknowledging that our welcome is imperfect. That we are continuing to grow in our understanding of human flourishing....in our capacity to see the image of God in me, in you, in our neighbor, in the Other.

As Jesus teaches the crowds he says, "whoever will follow me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me". My friends, he isn't inviting to join the country club. He is inviting us to set free the idols in our lives—those things that we think bring us security and safety—and to let God transfigure our lives....not for our own vainglory. But for the sake of the Gospel.