

Lent II

*Sermon by Rev. Anne Fowler, rector of St. John's in Jamaica Plain, Mass.
March 18, 2007*

“Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing. See, your house is left to you. “ Luke 13:32

I think most of you know by now that something is going on in the larger Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Communion.

Very often people come to St. John's from other traditions, which they have not found hospitable or nurturing, and respond to our community with surprise and gratitude. You feel, at last, welcomed. You feel, finally, that you have found a spiritual home. And then you start reading in the news or on line about the Anglican Communion, and all at once the bloom is off the rose.

Usually I advise people, including myself, to avoid reading or thinking too much about the Anglican Communion. On the one hand, the goings on internationally often seem irrelevant. On the other, getting too absorbed in those goings on can make me crazy. Put those two hands together and it's not a recipe for mental health.

Here's a short word about the polity, the organization we're talking about.

“There is no worldwide Anglican Church. There is an Anglican Communion of churches whose roots go back 500 years to the reformed Church of England and who are all “in communion” with the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Episcopal Church is by far the most democratic of all the 38 provincial churches of the Communion. We have a bi-cameral polity that requires bishops, clergy and laity all to have a say in the decisions we make as a church. Most of the other Anglican churches are governed by their archbishops and bishops. The Primates are the leaders of each of these churches. Our Primate is the Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, the first and only woman Primate.” (thanks to John Gibson of Integrity for this description)

The issue on the table right now is the Episcopal Church's position of the blessing of Holy Unions of same-sex couples, and our consecration of an openly gay bishop living in partnership. The Primates, at their recent meeting in Tanzania, gave the Episcopal Church a deadline of September 30 to respond to their demand that we stop blessing and refuse to consecrate another openly gay bishop.

What will the outcome be? The speculations range from nothing much, to the Episcopal Church's making a break with other Anglican Churches on this issue, to the chance that the Episcopal bishops will decide that we should take a giant leap backward and elevate the unity of the Anglican Communion over justice and inclusivity.

We will have a chance after the liturgy this morning, for anyone who is interested and can stay, to discuss these scenarios and any others, and their implications. I hope many of you will be able to join me in the Guildroom then.

This week my childhood friend James Woodman emailed me from Portland to tell me that his mother had died. Many of you will remember James, who graciously played the organ for us on Christmas Eve a year ago and, as Sam said, got music out of our organ that Sam had never heard before. And James has been a generous contributor to our capital campaign on more than one occasion.

I will go to Portland on Tuesday to attend Katherine Woodman's funeral. I will have to miss a meeting here that I wanted very much to attend, and to rearrange some other appointments, but for James's sake, and probably more for my own, I need to be there on Tuesday.

I will be returning to St Mary's Church, in Falmouth Foreside: to the parish where my grandmother, my mother and I were all married, where we were all baptized and where my daughter was baptized, the church where I celebrated my father's memorial service, with James Woodman playing the organ (where James learned to play the organ) the church where I will celebrate my mother's when the time comes.

In the midst of all the confusion and anger and fear and uncertainty that I've heard and read about and experienced in the last couple of weeks, I will be returning to the church of my childhood, to where it all began for me. I will refresh myself with the living waters of memory.

But the Episcopal Church is no longer the church of my childhood: a church where God was male (as a child I had a picture of God as the old man with a beard floating in the sky like a low cloud, with his head over our house and his feet three miles down the road over my Grandmother's, which was very near St. Mary's) A church where priests were all male and certainly not all straight but certainly closeted, a church where children did not take communion until we were confirmed.

On the other hand, St Mary's may be in some ways still the church of my childhood. Someone was talking recently about not wanting to attend a parish that was filled with rich white Republicans. And St Mary's may be that— may still be that. Surely it was when I was a child, as were so many Episcopal parishes in the 1950's. In fact St Mary's is probably now richer, if not more Republican, than it ever was.

In the 1950's all that didn't matter to me. St Mary's was where I learned about God and Jesus, and later, as a teenager, where I learned about the bible and Christian ethics and morality, where I learned to be a leader in the Church. And where I somehow got on a path that I have walked ever since, trying in my own small way to change the Church, to make the Church a place of sanctuary and healing, a home for those who have not found a home elsewhere.

When my first husband and I divorced I was no longer so welcome at St. Mary's. And when I was ordained, the rector whom I'd grown up with, who went on to become a bishop, would send me no good wishes because he did not recognize my orders as valid. I have not been back there except on an occasional basis and while I will return on Tuesday, I won't stay. I don't belong there any more. I have moved on, taking my ministry with me. And my ministry is what it is not simply because of that early formation in love and grace, but because of those later experiences of judgment and rejection and exclusion.

I have moved on from the church of my childhood. As we all must. As I have prayed about all this recently, it has come to me that for many of you, arriving at St. John's may seem at first like finding the church of childhood, the ideal church of childhood— a church of comfort, safety, security, and harmony. A church that nurtures and holds and reassures and heals.

I am glad for anyone who has that experience. I want St John's to be that for everyone. But of course, that experience can never last in its pure form. Life in community, in the church, can't be that way all the time. We all have to move on from the church of our childhood, and if we don't, or can't, or won't, our spiritual development will be arrested. We will be stuck in an endless loop of nostalgia and bitterness, sentimentality and resentment.

And maybe some of what I'm saying here could be applied to the Episcopal Church, USA. For all of us now alive, the church of our childhood is the church of the Anglican Communion, and that, frankly, is the church of the British Empire. And maybe, just maybe, we don't belong there any more. Maybe it's time to walk into our adulthood, into our own future, to claim fully the church that we have become and that we yearn to be.

Now I want to be very clear that if the Episcopal Church should find ourselves separated from the Anglican Communion we will not be separated from the Anglican tradition. In fact, we will be adhering faithfully to the Anglican tradition, a tradition based on the "three legged stool" of Scripture, tradition, and reason. The Primates who have asked us to cease and desist from our sacramental inclusion of LGBT persons base their theology solely on the Bible and the Bible's prohibitions of homosexual behavior.

Well, what about the Bible, then? You all know what I will say about that. The bible is not a blueprint for living. The bible is not a rulebook. The bible is a record of the great story God's love and promise, of God's salvation, a record up to a point, a point 2000 years ago. The story is not over. God is writing it every day, and we are writing it with God. The Bible is central to that story, it is a well of living water for us, but it is not the only well, not the only water, not – to switch metaphors– not the only leg of the stool.

What about reason? Reason, as we understand it, includes science and experience, both of which witness, to me and to the majority of Episcopalians, that to discriminate or exclude anyone because of sexual orientation is to disregard contemporary understandings of

sexuality, to dishonor the marvelous diversity of God's creation, and to violate Jesus' commandment to love on another as we ourselves are loved.

And what about tradition? Tradition, to Anglicans, is not static, not fixed, not closed. Tradition evolves. Tradition is the instrument of God's ongoing revelation. And that tradition, and that revelation, have moved the Episcopal Church further and further into awareness that until all of us are included, fully included, in the sacramental life of the Church, the body of Christ is broken indeed.

That's what I mean when I say that if the Episcopal Church should find ourselves separated from the Anglican Communion we will not be separated from the Anglican tradition. See, Jesus says, your house is left to you. The Episcopal Church is our house. God has left it to us, we inhabit it, and it is up to us to make it, and to keep it as a house of many mansions.

We are about to say the Nicene Creed, as we do on the first Sunday of the month. We will say, "I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." As Anglicans, as Episcopalians we say that we participate in the catholic tradition, and by that we generally mean the sacramental tradition. But catholic with a small "c" means "all embracing" and that is the church I believe in, the church I belong to, the church I have worked to bring more fully into being.

Several of you have asked me, in the last week, "is it going to be all right?" It's perilous to predict the future. But I think it's going to be all right. I hope it is. I took it as a sign when I read in Jim Carroll's column about Jerusalem earlier in the week. To give up hope is not an option. That is what Jerusalem displays. Hope is a political act. Hope is a choice. Hope is an act of resistance, and an act of peace.

And you know, I promise you that I will do everything I can to make it all right, that is, to make sure that there will be no going back. How can I, how can we, go back? For me there's no going back to a church where I could not bless any and all of you in your love, where I could not bless my friend James Woodman in his love.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, cries Jesus, How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing.

Well, my dear friends, we are willing. We are gathered here under the wings of a loving Jesus, those all-embracing wings. It's not the church of our childhood, of any of our childhoods. It is the church where we embrace one another in the name of love and justice, the church of resistance, hope, the church of hope.

Amen.