

A Sermon Delivered by
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Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

The Day of Pentecost
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On this Day of Pentecost, I find myself in a very privileged and unique spot, sacred space if you will, standing here in this pulpit where I gave my very first Episcopal sermon. Hopefully it will not be my last as an Episcopal priest – especially since I have been called to be the Executive Director of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation and undoubtedly will encounter many homiletical challenges ahead. As most of you know, I came to Saint Peter's in 1967 as a seminarian, was ordained here right where the Paschal Candle stands, and I now leave in 2009 as an interim. You can look at this in several different ways I suppose. One approach is to suggest I have moved sideways about 8 to 10 feet in the past 40 years from the beginning of my ministry until now. I call that my "leap of faith." Another way, presumably, is to measure the quality of my sermons then, and their effectiveness now. That might tell you a lot about how theology has changed, and whether I have become more conservative or liberal over the years. Or still another more significant measure might be the degree to which I have deepened my faith and grown in my relationship to God over time.

Whatever! You can do the math; and you can select criteria for review that fits best. For myself, I don't know if the span of time from 1967 to 2009 represents professional success or not, and I'm not sure how I will fare on that "dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed," to quote the 1928 Prayerbook, or what the final verdict on my clerical performance will be. But I admit, I DO like the symmetry of St. Peter's in my life. It helps to provide the vocational bookends for my 40-plus years of parish ministry.

In many ways, today tends to signify "last days" - last day of the month, last day of the Easter season, last day of my work here at church, and last time for me to splash a new candidate for baptism with living water; mindful that baptism is actually an everlasting event.

While it's obviously my last day on the job; fortunately there are other days ahead and my wider work in ministry is not done. Though it's been a challenging time, I actually like the fact that I have been in transition during these past few years, and God willing, I will continue to be in transition until I am required canonically to step down from active ministry – yet never will I cease from ordained service to Christ's people.

Here's my point – I'm not really different from any of you. We all have a ministry that we were commissioned to uphold in our baptism, and we're all in transition to some degree or other. The constant in our lives is Christ's ministry that we share in common, and each of us respectively must find the way to make our journeys in faith significant and relevant. Yet when we participate as the wider body of Christ, we are all in this together.

Having said that, I do marvel at the pace and speed in which the recent transition in ministry here at Saint Peter's has occurred. It is illustrative of life in the 21st century. In particular during my watch, the time has been marked by a flurry of activity and a welter of change. Recently I tried to itemize the occurrences that have taken place since I spoke to the vestry just last September about coming on board to complete the interim work that needed to be done.

When I arrived last fall and began my duties, my first clerical act was to accidentally set off the fire alarm in the sacristy because I didn't know the code. It was not a particularly auspicious beginning, but I somehow got past it, and learned to get along rather well with the altar guild, whose members were very forgiving of my liturgical shortcomings. At that time in 2008, George W. Bush was the president of the United States, and as a nation we were at the tail end of a lengthy presidential campaign that had come down to two rival candidates in the Democratic party – a black man and a white woman - Barack and Hilary. Isn't it interesting how we take license as Americans calling candidates for highest office by their first names? Each was vying to be first-of-their-kind as president of the United States.

Right after Barak Obama accepted his party's nomination, which occurred in Denver's Mile High stadium decked-out to look like the Greek Parthenon; the Republicans stunned America by offering a female vice-presidential candidate from Alaska – a riveting choice. The fall campaign as I'm sure you remember was heated, saturated with ads, and at times quite dramatic. And it even came to town, right across the street. I joined with thousands of

others on a bracing fall morning gathering at the High School football field, in fact on the 20 yard-line, close enough to audibly hear Barack Obama's voice as he delivered his stump speech. I confess, it was moving, humbling, yet remarkably liberating to be in the presence of a person who at that time, if elected, would be the first African-American to occupy the White House. Martin Luther King, Junior's famous words from the civil rights era raced through my brain: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we're free at last!" Politics and religion aside, it was a once-in-a-lifetime moment for which I am grateful simply because my affiliation with Saint Peter's made it possible. Unanticipated blessings can happen when you least expect them. Christians call that the grace of God.

And just to round out the timeline in the wider frame of reference: as the fall progressed we witnessed another unimaginable moment. "The 0-2 pitch, swing and a miss! STRUCK HIM OUT! The Philadelphia Phillies are 2008 Champions of baseball!!" as the late Harry Kalas intoned after the final out. Who can forget that? The World Series meant that I got a "value-added item" at the Fall Rummage Sale with this Phillies cap; which by the way, I'll likely bequeath to Emily Richards when she arrives so she'll be clear on her sports loyalties.

Then as autumn wore on and winter arrived, we moved through the national election and inauguration, and before we knew it we were caught up in the first 100 days of a new administration in Washington determined to change America. We heard from a whole new group of legislators who sought to refocus our vision, reconfigure our nation's direction, and bail us out of a severe economic crisis.

As Pennsylvanians we found that politics suddenly got very local when Arlen Specter declared that he was no longer a Republican, but a Democrat; and overnight we had to refigure our political calculus. Even closer to home, Saint Peter's own Cheryl Austin courageously made a bi-partisan bid to become the first African-American female judge on the bench of the Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas; and election results showed her to be the top percentage winner of all the candidates on the May 19th judicial primary ballot. So I've put her campaign button on my Phillies cap for Emily as well.

By way of summing up, then, in terms of where we are at present; fortunately, we are coming off the tail-end of the H1-N1 swine flu

pandemic; a scare that prompted us to look at our liturgical practices and to rethink some of the potential health issues involved in coming to church where, of all places, we might be told to wash our hands, avoid the kiss of peace, handed hospital masks, or have to take some other preventive health measures. The Worship Committee never imagined, I'm sure, that it would be forced to deal with issues such as these.

What an amazing period of time this has been for me, to share with all of you, so much "life together" to borrow Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book title which several of us studied together during Lent.

And right now, at this moment, we are in the very midst of what it's all about – a liturgy of baptism, occurring on a major feast occasion, involving the wider community of faith. I can't think of a better way to finish my formal ministry here at Saint Peter's than by baptizing still another new member of the church, marking him as Christ's own forever, in the context of renewing our own baptismal covenant. As a holy and ancient sacrament we all share and participate in this joyful event.

Now it's time to press on into the future, and do so with confidence. So let me end this morning's sermon by citing a passage that one of you sent to me in response to a previous sermon I gave earlier this spring. It is a quote from a religious person speaking to a secular audience about faith. Please listen carefully...

If faith were rational, it wouldn't be, by definition, faith. Faith is belief in what you cannot see or prove or touch. Faith is walking face-first and full speed into the dark. If we truly knew all the answers in advance, as to the meaning of life and the nature of God and the destiny of our souls, our belief would not be a leap of faith and it would not be a courageous act at all. It would just be a prudent insurance policy. I'm not interested in the insurance industry. I'm tired of being a skeptic. And I'm bored by empirical debate. I couldn't care less about evidence or proof or assurances. I just want God.

I too, "just want God" – as I suspect all of you "just want God" as well. So my parting comment is simply this. If you really want God, you will FIND God in Jesus Christ – Jesus of history, the Christ of faith.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

William Sloan Coffin, CREDO, 2004

The Rev. Caroline B. Edge; Needham, MA

Eat, Pray, Love: Elizabeth Gilbert

Martin Luther King, Jr. – “I have a dream...” speech