

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for October 7, 2012 ~ Proper 22b
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Your long transition between settled rectors is about to be completed as your new rector arrives November 1. Our time together is drawing to its conclusion. The vestry and I have tried to set the stage for Mother TJ's arrival by completing a leave taking agreement that describes our future relationship. The agreement will be on the transition page of the website for all to read, but basically it says I won't be your priest anymore, but we can be friends for ever. Next Sunday will be my last Sunday with you. For me, it is fitting that we will have a guest preacher and you will be invited to express your consecration to Christ and Calvary Church instead of focusing on farewells.

These eight months have been filled with progress in the work of transition and in preparation to receive a new rector. They have been a blessing to Gay and to me. And TJ's time with you will be a blessing to her. Getting to know you and this beautiful community has enriched and changed our lives in important ways. The same will happen with TJ in her years with you. You have made a place for us and extended generous hospitality to us. And you will do that for TJ as well. You have allowed us to care for you and to guide you through some challenging adjustments. TJ will want to be able to do that also. We hope and pray that our time together has also enriched you and changed you in ways that will make it possible for you to consecrate yourselves to a new era of ministry with your new rector. What an opportunity! What an adventure this is going to be!

I realize that for some of you, none of this change has been appealing. The changes that lie ahead of you may not be any more appealing. At least you've had a chance to practice with me! Christians everywhere, truthfully, have a tendency to become set in their ways and resist change, even when it is inevitable, inescapable, or desirable.

As I was reflecting on this transition last week, I was reminded of something Martin Luther said about the Christian life as one of crossing the Red Sea – a process of movement from slavery to freedom, a wilderness experience in which we live in the in-between time, never having fully escaped slavery, never having fully attained freedom, but moving, constantly moving, toward the new age of freedom. When we are not moving, stagnation occurs and we begin to slip back into forms of slavery.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was, we believe, writing to a group of Jewish Christians living somewhere in Italy, probably in Rome. Undoubtedly, their life together had stagnated. So, the writer reminds them of their ancestors in the wilderness – how they refused to be led to freedom and how they stagnated. Because of this, they were not allowed to enter the Promised Land. If this happened to them, the writer pleads, how much worse it will be for the Christian community if it neglects an even greater salvation, which is brought about through the priestly work of the Church. This is a call to go on to Christian maturity!

A pool of water becomes stagnant when there is nothing flowing through it to refresh and invigorate it so it can sustain life. Our lives become stagnant and we despair when we try to stop the flow and assert our human will apart from the divine will. This is so because we cannot save ourselves in the face of the ultimate fears and mysteries of life. When we come up against that reality, it doesn't take a biblical writer or a preacher to make us believe it. When we find that our hungers are still not satisfied, that our plans are thwarted, that our days are limited, that our health is fragile, that our moments to ourselves don't satisfy us

completely, that our relationships are broken and spoiled and we can't put Humpty Dumpty back together again – that day of stagnation, that day of uneasiness and emptiness will come upon us if it hasn't already and we will have the opportunity to make some important choices.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews calls upon the 8th Psalm for a contrasting image of humanity, which is infinitely better than the state of stagnation and despair:

"What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?
You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
subjecting all things under their feet."

What an amazing responsibility and privilege it is to be a human being! This is a song about the original glory intended by the Creator to be experienced by the human creature. It is marvelous? If you close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself in terms of these words – a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor, given dominion over all things – you will feel stronger, cleaner, and free. Why is this?

It's quite simple. As the poet put it, "God did not intend such magnificence for mice." This is our birth-right. This is the way things are supposed to function under God's administrative policy. These images are familiar to something deep within us. They energize us. They lift us up. They are a beautiful picture of what our lives can be like when we align our wills with the divine will. Think of it! If concentrating on this image – God's image of us – for just a few moments can refresh us so, what might happen if we hold that image in our minds over a long period of time?

When we open our eyes, we have to confess that the contrast can be striking. With the writer, we confess that we do not see humanity ruling over everything now in ways that God intends. But with the writer, we can affirm that we do see Jesus, God's Son and heir, our brother, the new human being, crowned with glory and honor because of his life, death, and resurrection. God's plan is to bring us to the same glory. This is the great hope, which we celebrate today. Because he did it, we can too. If it worked for him, it will work for us. We can become the beautiful, growing, mature, glorious persons God designed us to be.

God does most of the work. That's the hard part for us. We'd rather read a self-help manual and fix ourselves up. But the truth of the gospel and the good news of the gospel is that God does most of the work. The Church is here week after week to remind us of that. What is our part in this ongoing, lifelong process of sanctification?

We have to desire it. Have you ever noticed how much easier it seems to develop bad habits than to develop good ones? We have a marked propensity toward stagnation. In order for there to be growth and improvement over the long haul, we have to desire it with all our heart.

We have to admit that we can't do it on our own. We're really not in control, are we? We are powerless to change ourselves in any lasting way. It is necessary to admit our weakness, admit our humanity, and to admit that we're not God. When we do that, it is an acknowledgement of our need for God's grace to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

We have to believe that One greater than us can transform us. A life without partnership with God is an incomplete life. After we have a burning desire for the abundant life and realize that we can't make it happen all by ourselves, there is a time when we have to wait for God's help. The wait may be interminably long and even painful. It is not hard to give in to the temptation to give up on God before God gets around to us. That's when we need to believe, to have faith, to have confidence, to trust God's promise to come to those who wait for divine help.

Then, we have to turn our wills and lives over to God. I now this sounds like a mindless act, but it's really not. When you go to a physician, you enter into a therapeutic, healing relationship of wills – yours and the physician's. There is a certain harmony there. Our wills, on their own, lead us back to slavery in Egypt, or at least keep us stuck in the wilderness of stagnation.

That is the way of salvation. If you find yourself resisting, saying, "Yes, but the situation is this or that," then you are not yet ready. You still live under the delusion that you can handle it, control it, be a self-made person, that you can reach your full potential (as a person or as a congregation) with only a nodding acquaintance with Jesus Christ. If that is where you are, perhaps you are not desperate enough to let the transformation happen.

But if you are ready, if you have recognized the voice that tells you, "You can do it alone," as the voice of a liar, then receive today what God has to offer. Move on from slavery to all the idols and self-deceits into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

• Desire it. • Admit that you can't save yourself. • Believe that One who is greater than you can transform you. • Turn your life and the life of your Church over to him. Believe that the best years of Calvary Church are not in the past! They are in the future that God is setting before you.

That One, Jesus Christ, is here to meet us at his Table. Whether our attitude is right or not, he is always here. But when we come desiring, admitting, believing, surrendering, when we are as receptive and trusting as children, when we receive him in this way, it is the first step in the journey *from* slavery – to the past, to hurts, to disappointments, to the way we've always done it – *to* the glorious liberty which is the destiny and the inheritance of the children of God. You don't want to shortchange yourself.

I leave you with this word of encouragement as our time together draws to a conclusion during this transition. And I invite you, in the context of this powerful word from the Letter to the Hebrews, to ask yourselves every day, "Who is Jesus Christ and what difference does he make?" There are answers to that question in the Scriptures and in the confessions of the Church. But it is imperative that it be answered again and again in the heart of each disciple and each congregation from generation to generation during our ongoing pilgrimage from slavery to freedom. For it is in that living, giving relationship that the Word again takes on flesh and dwells among the people who live in the mission field at the doorstep of this church.

I remind you one last time – Those red doors open outwards. What happens in here is to equip and empower us to be the Body of Christ out there. We receive Word and Sacrament so that we might become Word and Sacrament in the *region* of Ashland, Kentucky of today and tomorrow, not that of yesterday. And, the good news for Calvary Church is that God still has a unique mission for you that no other congregation in this community has been called to serve in this part of Creation. Freely you have received. So freely give. God will be glorified and that glory will be reflected in your life together!