

June 25 2023
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7, Year A, Track 1
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 21:8-21
Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

So let's briefly discuss the seasons of the church year. In the six months prior to the Day of Pentecost, we had five liturgical seasons, which covered in sequence Jesus' anticipation, birth, manifestation, death, and resurrection. On the Day of Pentecost, we turned from the season of Easter to the season after Pentecost. This one season will last about six months, until the first Sunday of Advent, which this year falls on December 3. The overall theme for it is often summarized in a single word: mission. It's about the mission of Jesus. It therefore must also be about the mission of us.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the season after Pentecost and the season after the Epiphany are called Ordinary Time. We may be in Ordinary Time, but for quite some time, life has felt far from ordinary. Smoke from fires in Quebec isn't ordinary. An ex-president under felony indictment isn't ordinary. A post-pandemic mental health crisis among children isn't ordinary. I could go on, but I don't need to, because you get it. That's one of the things I so appreciate about this congregation.

Anyway, here we are, in something feeling less like Ordinary Time and more like extra-ordinary time. As I observed last Sunday, we might take some consolation from the Gospel of Matthew. There are large swaths of the Bible that I read not as *predictive*, as some might say, but instead as *descriptive*. By the time this gospel was written down, Matthew's community of Jesus-followers was already facing hard times. I glean from today's passage less *apocalyptic threat* and more *immediate encouragement*. You matter to God. Find your way by following Jesus.

Thinking of this community in these extra-ordinary times has often led me to pondering the first rector of St. Thomas's, Eben Edwards Beardsley. You regulars have heard me mention him before. Eben served this church from its establishment in 1848 until his death in 1891. He happened to die on St. Thomas's feast day, by the way. Most particularly, I have wondered what it was like to serve a church before, during, and after the civil war. To be honest, I hoped to learn that Eben was an active abolitionist who preached against the sin of slavery. Alas, that does not seem to have been the case. It wasn't the case with too many Episcopalians, I'm afraid. Eben's nephew William Beardsley, the second rector of St. Thomas's, wrote a biography of his uncle Eben. In it, William's few words about the Civil War note that that Eben avoided politics from the pulpit. It seems impossible to me that Eben could have avoided the turmoil completely—members of his congregation must have died—but I guess I will never know for sure. That's in part because William writes that Eben directed that all but a very few of his sermons be destroyed upon his death.

I wish it wasn't so, but I get the impulse. Retired ministers and their surviving spouses have been known to struggle with what to do with their boxes of old sermon manuscripts cluttering up the attic or basement. For the minister, all those pounds of paper become symbolic, pointing as they do to the weight of many, many hours spent wrestling with scripture. It's generally acknowledged that it takes about an hour a minute to prepare a sermon. A fifteen-minute sermon takes fifteen hours. No matter how I try speed the process, that has proven to be about right for me.

Because I am who I am, I keep an Excel spreadsheet listing every sermon I have ever delivered. If you don't know me, that tells you a whole lot. This is sermon number 439. I can't believe it myself. Of those 439 sermons, 246, or 56%, have been delivered right here at St. Thomas's. Good golly! How did that happen? It seems impossible, but there it is. I have occupied only a small slice of the history of St. Thomas's, but St. Thomas's has occupied a large slice of the history of *me*. More than half of my priestly wrestling with scripture has occurred among you. You have given me the freedom to tackle any and every subject. I like to think that I am always learning. If that's so, then you have been instrumental in forming the priest I am today, and for that I am grateful.

I have read from the principles of physics that time isn't linear, that time isn't even real. I read articles about it, and I listen to podcasts about it, but I never really understand it. I just can't get it, no matter how simply the concepts are broken down. Time is relative? No, I don't get it. But I can say at least two things about time. One, time has felt wonky for over three years now. And two, I have felt the weight of 175 years of history here at St. Thomas's.

To be only the sixth rector in 175 years, and to follow a rector of 33 years? As I considered coming here, that was more than a little daunting to ponder. But I thought I was up for the task. Now, seven and a half years later, I find myself thinking a lot about the fine line between self-confidence and hubris. I will long be trying to sort out the "successes" and the "failures" of my time here. I don't yet know what conclusions I will reach, but I do know one thing: even though we so often get caught up in thinking about church as the institution or the building or the history, church is always the people who are right now. That's ultimately where my own thoughts will always return.

To that point, one thing that has long marked St. Thomas's is its sense of hospitality, its commitment to hospitality. Part of giving hospitality is signaling the possibility of hospitality. You do that simply through the rainbow flag that has long hung over the front door. You do that through the paper cranes that hang over the children's area and say to someone walking in, This place is going to be different. You do that by allowing someone who looks like me to preside over your worship.

My wife Jakki and I first visited St. Thomas's near the end of the tenure of my predecessor, Michael Ray. I had recently wrapped an interim rector position in Glastonbury, and the diocesan transition officer had floated St. Thomas's as a possibility. Jakki and I decided to come and visit on a Sunday—incognito, so to speak. It happened to be Day School Sunday in September. It was more than a little chaotic, but the energy was upbeat and kind of fun. Michael preached and the then-Day School chaplain presided.

What really stood out for us was this: the congregation gathered around this altar for the Eucharistic prayer, combined with the invitation for *everyone* to receive communion. The practice of communion here is an important act of hospitality, both in and of itself, and for what it gestures toward, which is the fullness of God's kingdom. That day after Jakki and I sat down after receiving communion, she leaned over and whispered in my ear, "I don't know where *you'll* be serving on Sunday mornings, but *I'm* coming back here." I'm glad I got the job. As it turned out, we both came back here, at least for a while.

Then again, maybe I'm saying too much about my understanding of this congregation's identity. When I first arrived, I talked a lot about the importance of the congregation taking time to figure out who it is aside from its rector. Looking back, I'm not even sure that was possible to do so soon after that rector of 33 years. Maybe it's possible now. My comparatively short seven-and-a-half-year tenure, while actually a couple of years longer than the average tenure of a rector these days, will sharply reduce the average tenure of the rectors here.

In hard times, it is so easy to fall into the habit of seeing just the challenges. But there is always so much more to the story. "Extra-ordinary" always runs all ways. This year, for this long season after Pentecost—this long season of mission—it looks like you will be rector-free. I'm pretty sure that's actually a good thing. Maybe it will help you carry that history lightly. You as a church are entering a new season. I hope it is not plain ordinary, but ostentatiously extra-ordinary, in all the best ways, maybe with some rainbow and glitter. And I hope you can enter this time both individually and collectively with a sense of possibility.

Most of you know that I enjoy poetry. I want to share one last poem with you. I discovered this poem nearly twenty years ago. My seminary preaching professor had it tacked to the bulletin board outside her office. I have returned to it frequently over the years. It goes like this:

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes¹

Before leaving a congregation, every outgoing priest is required to have an “exit interview” with a bishop. Mine took place on Thursday. The outgoing priest must bring along a stack of church documents that the diocese holds for the new priest, things like bylaws and policies. The outgoing priest must also bring written answers to a whole series of questions. I ended up with a Word document over 11 pages long. The last question was, “Anything else?” Addressing that question, my last words were these: “I have been deeply touched by my time at St. Thomas’s. Despite the difficult parts of it, I love this Church and the people who currently make it up. I’ll be praying for them and for my successor.”

Well. It’s just about time to call it a wrap. Know that you have touched my heart in ways both known and as-yet unknown to me. I think you have allowed me to touch yours, too. For all that and more, I am and will be forever grateful.

Notes

¹ Kaylin Haught, “God Says Yes to Me,” from *The Palm of Your Hand* (Tilbury House Publishers, 1995); available online from the Library of Congress at <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/126.html> (accessed June 25, 2023).