

Whitsunday
May 23, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“For in hope we are saved.”

I usually start my sermons with a fragment of scripture from the propers of the day. They are sort of an epigraph, a kernel of the spirit of what I hope to communicate is therein. One theme for today is that there is a lot of hope in the air. Being here is a hopeful act like there is great hope in our reading from Romans 8. Everything is not assured, but hope is possible.

I have to admit, though, that a verse like “For in hope we are saved” is at least somewhat aspirational, because while yes, this is an amazingly hopeful moment, the most hopeful a lot of us have felt for a long time, this is also a very confusing moment. Think of that great Pentecost scene in Acts, the birth of the church was happening, a time of great hope in that fledgling movement and “All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’”

That first Pentecost, the moment of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit into the body of the larval church stands as the most confusing day in the Church’s history. What a scene! The rushing wind; the tongues like flames; the spirit grabbing hold of people, and with it understanding each other across great gulfs. They were misunderstood from outside, amazed and perplexed within, and I don’t know if St. Peter helped anyone’s anxiety quoting the prophet Joel, “The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.” The faithful had been scattered, but on this day they were gathered, and so began the process of commissioning for ministry in the world and sending them off to do it.

Meanwhile, back at the here and now ranch, these past 62 Sundays in the digital wilderness have been pretty confusing, too, culminating in today, as we make our first half-step towards regathering. Maybe today is the most confusing day in this church’s history. Here we are, some of us, together, in our church, together in church; some of us are still on Zoom and YouTube. Talk about confusing. A lot of people have put in a lot of work and prayer, have exercised a bit of courage, a lot of patience to make this possible; both thriving as we have these past 62 weeks, and beginning to regather in person today. You all have gone beyond patient, you have shown forbearance, there’s a word that should be churchier than it is, forbearance (it only occurs six times in scripture). It means patient self-control, restraint, tolerance. And we need your forbearance now in this time of transition as much as we have over the whole pandemic!

We had a good, rigorous, but pretty simple plan for a safe, distanced, masked, hymn-less, service for 50. Then the CDC announced a wave of changes that take effect here in Maine tomorrow. We're doing our plan today, because that's the law, but next week, we're full on. No masks required. No size limit. Sitting together. Singing! (We're singing today, too, but with masks on. Next week it will be church loud!) The vestry is even putting on a big ole coffee hour on the 6th. Some of us are masked here, and will remain so. It is what you feel comfortable with. And for further comfort for those who desire it, and to provide appropriate distanced seating for children and the medically fragile, every other side pew, on both sides, will remain roped off for the time being. (It helps if you don't want someone breathing down your neck when they kneel behind you at the Eucharistic prayer).

We're here. A chunk of us at least. Look around for a minute. And at home, try pinning the Zoom window called "Sanctuary" so you can see us all well. What does it feel like? How do you feel being here today? _____

I have spent a lot of time trying to imagine what I would be feeling this morning. As I wrote this, I was not expecting to feel all happy-clappy joyful. I expected to feel a bit tense. A bit unsure of how things will go, a bit unsure how I would feel transferring my primary attention from a camera and screen to flesh and blood people in a brick and mortar location. These past two weeks have been a roller coaster with all the new rules, or with the relaxing of so many of the old rules we have borne with such forbearance. It has been jarring, hasn't it? Good! Phenomenal! Positive! And jarring.

From the beginning of the pandemic, our ethic, as a diocese and as a parish, has been to follow the science, or more precisely, to trust those entrusted with the care of our society's health. (Only a few of us – not including me – can read the literature with enough understanding to draw informed conclusions on our own, so we defer to the experts). Dr. Fauci, Dr. Shah, the CDCs in Atlanta and Augusta... we had faith that the sacrifices they called us to make over the past year were needed. Now as they have continued to increase our knowledge of COVID-19 and how to live with it in our midst, we are learning that the vaccines are just about the miracle we all prayed for. They work. Phenomenally well. And safely in virtually all cases. So we are continuing in our policy of following the recommendations of public officials, the experts, charged with protecting our collective health.

And you know what, I am a bit apprehensive about it all. I have felt a bit exposed, slightly immodest without a mask. I had my first unmasked visit, an outdoor walk, a while ago and it felt

really weird (for about 3 minutes, then my body and mind remembered that I have spent the vast majority of my life talking *not* talking to people though fabric and then it was fine. I think our apprehension in this moment shall pass as well). But is still feels like a leap of faith, trusting that at least for people who have been vaccinated, it is safe now to return to life pretty much as we knew it. I hope, in the letter to the Romans sense, that the scientific process is sound. Hope, I can't see it, I don't know it, but I trust. I hope, again, in that Biblical sense, that the people charged with doing that science, with creating policy based on it and communicating it to us are doing it right. And it is *that* kind of hope because I don't know, not personally, the details are unseen by me, but I hope, I trust, I've got my shots, I am taking my mask off tomorrow when we are told it was safe to do so.

That is not unlike the experience of the early church. A confusing time, competing priorities, large personalities (oh, they had some large personalities). And what did they do in the middle of all that swirling confusion? They became the church. They healed the sick. Spread the gospel. Developed ministries. Raised money. Invited people in. Got in trouble with authorities. The original model of all the things churches are supposed to be. And it was a confusing time. And it was an uncomfortable time. (Just ask St. Stephen). And in that crucible, the Body of Christ found its feet and step by step, baby step by baby step began its journey back into God in Christ with a very present Holy Spirit right there amongst them. And they did this in hope, for where they were headed was not seen, could not be seen, and yet they did it. With courage and perseverance, with (often at least) grace, ever with forbearance, they lived the hope they had been given.

This coming summer, the vaccine summer, we're just going to have fun. Let's get used to being back in the world, back in Maine, back in church together. Back in each other's yards, at each other's tables, on each other's boats. We get to welcome some new folks into our midsts, folks who have found Blue Hill and St. Francis during this time. Let's not forget them as we rekindle old relationships. And we get to have a second first year together, you all and me! Let's get to know each other in person. Let's enjoy the hard won freedom that sacrifice and vaccination have given us.

And then, as we have leveled off into life post-pandemic, this fall, we'll get to work. With the model of our ancestors in the early church, we can have faith that hope will carry us through the confusion and we can have faith that that same hope will help us define what it is that we are supposed to be as a parish; what are we supposed to do? We are in a uniquely thin space for a congregational family. You have a new(ish) rector. You have kids in the wings (a lot of them). We've all been through a lot. We know more about what is essential in our own lives and in our

common life together at St. Francis than we did 15 months ago, a lot more. There is a whole new constellation of needs in our community. In addition, we have an opening in the life of St. Francis; we no longer have the St. Francis Fair to bring us together OR to tire us out. Where will that energy go? How will the good work that carried that tradition forward for 30 years find its way into our life and the life of our neighbors here on the Blue Hill peninsula? It is wide open for us here. What is our mission and ministry in the new world we are emerging into? We've got some listening to do this Fall; and some work.

Right now, though, I am just glad to see a light at the end of the tunnel and it almost certainly not be an oncoming train. Oh, I am also glad that there is such a sweet, sweet spirit in this place. It is fabulous to see you. I hope to see a lot more of you next week. "May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit." AMEN.