Episcopal Diocese of Alaska

49th Convention

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All Saints’, Anchorage

Bishop’s Address

“…Let us go across to the other side of the lake.”

That is our Convention theme this year. It is taken from the Gospel of Mark, the ending of chapter 4. I hope when you first read our theme, or heard it, it piqued your curiosity. What does that mean: let us go across to the other side of the lake? Is somebody leaving? Is the bishop going to announce his resignation? Nope. Sorry. Well then, is the bishop going to ask US to leave, to abandon our shore and head to some other unknown place? No, or not necessarily.

Maybe the bishop is planning on taking us on a cruise! Yes, please!

No, not a cruise in the way most of us envision a cruise. But I do see us in a boat--the same boat the Disciples are in while headed to the other side of the lake—the same story where Jesus calms the storm. I see in this story a narrative that speaks to our reality as a Church. There is much to this story that resonates with our time and our place; as disciples, as congregations and as a Diocese facing a crisis that by all measures of this world is described as decline.

We might see some of our experiences and worries about church decline in this story. More importantly, I believe we might find strength and hope for our time in this story as well.

I am going to exercise a bit of poetic license with the narrative to help make this point. In other words, the story may not have happened exactly this way, but what we hear in it is true.

But, before we get into the boat and head to the other side of the lake, let’s recall what was happening with the Disciples—the “Church,” right before they get in the boat. They are with Jesus at Capernaum along the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is healing and teaching and preaching and he has attracted huge crowds.

From the perspective of a bishop, or a rector, or a church warden, things are going great. The pews are packed! In fact, the crowds are so big that Jesus has to get in boat just to have space to preach to all the people. And it isn’t just crowds—large crowds, but it seems there are even young people in the crowd.

By all accounts, these gatherings on the shore of the lake, the Sea of Galilee, rival even Episcopal Church attendance in the 1950s and 60s.

And with all that: with crowds and youth and loaves and fishes galore, and, one imagines, with no worries at all about the success or life of this “church,” Jesus, under the cover of darkness, decides to take only his 12 disciples--who by many accounts aren’t even the brightest and best of the lot and must be mostly exhausted from following Jesus around and serving Him AND his crowds, Jesus decides to take just THEM and leave for the other shore.

They pile into a boat, with Jesus, just as he was—an interesting detail included in the narrative, and they push off away from the shore. And suddenly the church of the 1960s becomes the church of the 2020s. Although the text does say there were other boats with them, their numbers have dwindled, the crowds are gone. They are only remanent. In a boat. Out on the water.

And it is dark. And it is a long way to the other shore; one imagines they can’t even see the other shore. And they are tired. And it is starting to rain.

Then the wind picks up.

Now imagine with me that Peter is thinking: “We need a youth group. We’re too old for this. Hey, Andrew, we need to figure out how to get more young people on this boat. Let’s try to learn a few catchy sea shanties. I hear those are pretty popular with the young folks.”

To which Andrew responds: “A Youth Group would be great, but don’t you think it would be better if we just caught a whole bunch of fish to sell so we could repair this boat? Have you noticed the leaks?”

Catch a bunch of fish? James says. Have you forgotten that we are lousy at fishing. We need to hire a professional fisherman, that is what we need to do. That will get us the money we need to spiff-up the boat while we learn catchy Sea Shanties to attract the youth. What do you think, Jonathan?”

“I’m just thinking about all those people who surrounded us when we were back on the shore, says Jonathan. So many people. It was great. Remember? And I can’t understand why so few of them are with us now. I even put a sign on the stern of this boat welcoming everyone onboard: “The Disciples Boat Welcomes You.” Can’t understand why no one came.”

“I cannot believe you people,” says Thomas. “What does all that matter now, anyway. A storm is rising. The boat is swamping. There is no one left but us. What? Are you expecting a crowd of people to just walk out on the water to join us? I doubt that. Nobody can walk on water….at least, not on THIS trip. Let’s just face the facts, we should sell the boat to a micro-winery. They can use it for tours during the week, and maybe let us use it on Sundays.”

“Hey, Judas, any ideas?”

“I think we should wake-up Jesus.”

“Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

My dear friends, I don’t want you to be fooled, and I don’t want to come over as naïve or to be accused of magical thinking. We cannot deny that we are facing significant challenges. The numbers don’t lie. We continue to get older. We continue to get fewer. We continue to see our resources shrink. Our buildings continue to need heat, light, maintenance. Many are tired. And some are anxious that it is just a matter of time before the boat goes under the waves and the storm wins.

What then? Life is over? The Church is dead?

The same questions come to our minds that came to the disciples: What should we do? What can we do? What is going to save us from going under?

Bishop, give us the answer!

I think we should wake-up Jesus.

And that is not an act of surrender, it is an act of faith. While we may no longer be the church of the 1950s, we are still the body of Christ. It isn’t resources, or numbers, or relevance to any specific demographic that gives us life, it is the Holy Spirit. The living God who we meet and know in this world but who is always beyond this world, transcendent, unknowable, holy, and mysterious, THAT God is the source of all life, including the life of our church, and the life of your congregations.

Our faith and hope in the living God who we meet in this world, and know best in this world in Jesus and His Gospel, is the assurance of our life. We find ourselves in the midst of a storm and the boat is sinking. Wake-up Jesus. He’s our life.

I will always remember the words of a retired Archdeacon who was a member of the first parish I served fresh out of seminary: Monte Pearse. He told me: Mark, the one thing I’ve learned in my life that has meant the most is this: “God is God, and I’m not.”

God is God, and you’re not.

While that is a humbling message that helps keeps me in proper perspective, it is more than that. When we say that God is God, we acknowledge that God is transcendent. Beyond our measures, beyond our definition, even beyond our expectations. And this God who alone is God, God who alone gives life, also gives meaning to life.

But it is meaning that is always beyond our ability to fully describe.

“Who is this? Even the wind and waves obey him.” God is God. No other explanation will suffice.

In this time in the life of the church, as we confront decline or worry that we have lost relevance, it is important that we do not lose our faith and hope in the living God who is God. Storms are abundant in our world. We may not have the answers, the wind and waves may not obey us even if we do think we know exactly what God wants; nevertheless, we know where the ultimate meaning to life is to be found.

And meaning is what humankind seeks. Even those who have cast off every form of religion; even those who are avowed atheists; from Gen Z to Baby Boomers, people want meaning and purpose for their life. They may not be interested in going to “church” in the forms we recognize, but they are hungry for meaningful relationships, meaningful community, meaningful life.

So let’s look beyond the boat. Let’s look beyond ourselves. Let’s wake-up Jesus.

This is an exciting time for us. If we trust in the life that is given to us in Jesus; if we grow in our understanding of the purpose and meaning of that life as it is revealed in the Gospel and person of Jesus; and if we are able to hope boldly in a God who is God, always beyond our understanding but present and alive in our midst; then we can boldly embrace new ways to share our hope and our meaning with others.

Let’s wake-up Jesus and courageously explore new ways to “be” church in our communities. Let us push off from the shores that hold us afraid, let us weigh the anchor of false security in resources and numbers, and let us set sail to explore new horizons, new shores for our church, new opportunities to share the hope, life, and meaning that we have found in Jesus who accompanies us on our way.

We are blessed to have with us the Rev. Tom Brackettwho serves on the Presiding Bishop staff as the Manager for Church Planting & Mission Development for the Episcopal Church.. Many of you already know Tom from his work with the Southeast and South Central Deaneries. He will be talking about Genesis II and sharing with us opportunities and resources to help us explore new ways of being church, new ways to share the life and meaning that we have in Jesus.

Of course, not all resources and opportunities to assist congregations will fit the diverse characteristics of our communities. Genesis II is only one of many resources to help us re-imagine the church.

The Diocese also continues to support congregations in this work of renewal and development by sponsoring parish teams to participate in the College for Congregational Development in the Diocese of Olympia (Suz is a Trainer with CCD). Over half a dozen parishes have participated in the College. It is a two-year week-long intensive program probably better suited for congregations with full vestries and a Rector or Priest-in-charge.

But we are also committed to supporting renewal and development in our smaller and more remote communities. Recognizing that the model of parish ministry that depends on an ordained leader for the life of the parish and its ministry has been unsustainable and in decline for years in our small communities, we continue to focus on providing resources for training and development of Lay leadership and licensed ministers. Over the previous several years we have offered lay ministry training retreats in the Interior and the Arctic Coast. This October, we will be holding the first Southeast Deanery Lay Ministry Training Retreat in Ketchikan. The Diocesan Budget reflects our commitment to training and congregational development.

I should also mention that the Diocese of Alaska continues its relationship with Bexley-Seabury Seminary. Our partnership with Bexley-Seabury provides us access to discounted tuition for training and courses offered through their “Pathways to Baptismal Living” curriculum. We have had several individuals take part in Pathways courses this year. If you are interested in learning more, talk to me or Suzanne.

We are also delighted to have with us The Rev. Elizabeth Riley. Elizabeth serves parish ministry in the Diocese of Olympia, but she is one of us. She grew-up at St. Mary’s and I am delighted to be able to say that I was the bishop who ordained her as a deacon and priest. Elizabeth also serves as a Fellow with the Episcopal Church Foundation exploring ministry and digital evangelism. She is a social media presence, particularly on TikTok where she has over 60k followers. She uses social media to share the Good News of the Episcopal Church.

I am certain that there is a broad range of opinions about social media at this gathering. Whenever two or three Episcopalians are gathered together there are at least 10 different opinions in their midst. However, I encourage you to keep an open mind. Social media is another tool that we can use to reach people, to share our faith and hope, to connect with others seeking meaning and purpose in life. Elizabeth is going to give us some tools and some encouragement that will help us see how social media can be an affective resource for renewal and for new ways of being church. And she is going to show us just how easy it is. (n.b. Rage Prayers)

On the topic of social media, I want to express my appreciation to Ross McKay. Ross is a candidate for ordination in this Diocese and is a member of St. Mary’s here in Anchorage. Following a presentation by Elizabeth at the South Central Deanery meeting this spring, Ross asked if he could volunteer to facilitate our Diocesan Social Media presence. Ross has done an outstanding job. If you are not someone who uses Facebook, I encourage you to ask someone who does, or to see Ross, and take a look at the way the Good News is being shared on our Diocesan Facebook page.

I mentioned that Ross is a candidate for ordination and that gives me opportunity to share with you my delight that there are now 5 Candidates for ordination in the Diocese of Alaska. For those who are wondering what it means to be a Candidate for ordination: Candidacy is the final step in the process. By the time someone becomes a Candidate they have made sufficient progress in their studies or formation plan and have satisfied nearly all the canonical requirements to be ordained. Our Candidates for ordination are: Ross McKay; Hannah Moderow; Erin Tulip; Jeanette Dementi; and Judy Gau.

Now might also be the right time to introduce Steve Reed, who is the new rector of St. Matthew’s, Fairbanks, and Lydia Wilson who is a priest from South Dakota living now in the Anchorage area.

We are blessed by our ordained leaders and I give thanks for their witness and ministry. But we are equally blessed by our Lay Leaders and those of you who are committed to formation and training as Licensed Ministers. Lay ministry is the backbone of the church. That has always been true here in Alaska, but more and more of our siblings in the rest of the Episcopal Church are discovering this reality, especially in the evolving landscape of the church today. One of the new ways of being church is recognizing, developing, and supporting Lay leadership and ministry. I remain committed to this is work not only through the training opportunities already mentioned, but also by offering a monthly Zoom check-in with Licensed Lay Minsters.

My vision for church leadership continues to be fully empowered, formed, and prepared Lay ministers supported by ordained leaders. When those of us who are ordained took our orders, we promised to share ministry, not do ministry. All of us are called to support one another in our life in Christ and in the ministry the Holy Spirit calls us to perform. To facilitate this sharing and to support each other’s ministries, we are continuing to offer the Small Mission Clergy fund. The Small Mission Clergy Fund provides limited funding to sponsor a formal relationship between a congregation and an ordained leader.

May I ask our Licensed Ministers or lay leaders who have participated in one of our Diocesan training programs to raise a hand. Thank you. If you are interested in exploring licensed ministry or training opportunities, see one of these folks or talk to me. And if you or your community has or is participating in the Small Mission Clergy Fund raise your hand. Thank you. Ask these folks about their experience.

We are going to hear a report on the work that the Diocese and the Episcopal Church are doing on addressing the Church’s participation in the traumatic legacy of Native Boarding Schools. The Diocese of Alaska is exercising leadership in this work in partnership with the Episcopal Church’s A127 Commission which was formed by the Presiding Bishop and President of the HOD in response to a resolution of General Convention charging the Episcopal Church to seek truth and healing with its part in Native Boarding Schools. This work will continue.

So, my beloved, let us set sail on in hope. We know not the storms ahead—we never have. But we have Jesus, we have life, God is God, we can trust and find meaning in that. People, our communities, are aching for meaning—a spiritual alternative to the crushing busyness and transactional nature of our world. Let us seek new ways to be the church in community and not the church in a building. We need to let go of the lie that we can fix our problems by working harder or accumulating more resources—financial or human to restore the past. Time to wake-up Jesus, spread the Good News, grow the good, and embrace the life, hope and meaning that God has given us and is giving us in new and ways.

To bring this address to a close, may I express my deepest gratitude to all of you for the gift of your hope and faith. It is an indescribable blessing to serve as your bishop—I hold that blessing very dear.

Thank you to All Saints’ for your hospitality. To the South Central Deanery for your support of this Convention. To our special Guests: Tom and Elizabeth. And I cannot thank your Diocesan staff enough for their partnership in this ministry. Melissa Ward our secretary and my assistant, Lynnette Winfrey Frank our bookkeeper and assistant to the Canon for Finance and Administration, and Suzanne Krull our Canon for Finance and Administration: those are their titles, but the work they do goes far beyond the titles. Thank you all.

Prayers: