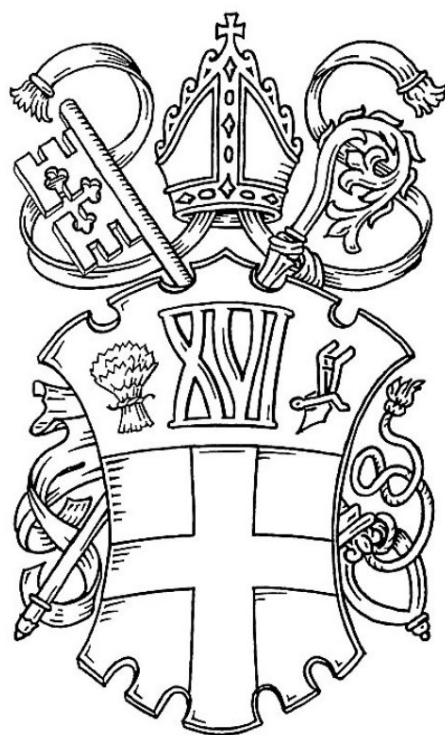


# Sermons 2007

*Bishop John Bauerschmidt*  
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## The Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, February 18, 2007, Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

*“And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues” (1 Cor. 12:28).*

Today the Apostle Paul gives us a look back into the life of the Early Church. This is important for us because their life is our life; not always the same in every particular, but still the same life. It's always good for us to touch base with our roots, and to find points both of connection with and difference from our past. What we find today is a concern with leadership (“apostles”, “prophets”, “teachers”), which is a point of connection; but also a difference that is humbling, on a day like this, in that among the leaders of the Church bishops are not even mentioned. I'd call that an oversight on the part of the writer (forgive the pun). Well, never mind: bishops are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, which we may take as sufficient scriptural warrant for our celebration today.

Look carefully at this antique list from our distant past, dear People of God, because you may find yourself within it. Indeed, you should find yourself there, because you are members of the Church. “Deeds of power”, “gifts of healing”, “forms of assistance”, “various kinds of tongues”: can you see yourself there? It's not an exhaustive list; Paul is just calling out to the scribe a few items from the top of his head as he writes to the Church in Corinth. Still, the list invites us to see ourselves and God's gift and calling to us. God has given you gifts through baptism: are you exercising them? God has called you to ministry by making you a member of the Church: are you answering the call?

Christianity is not a spectator sport: it requires you to be involved. You may not think of yourself as a leader, but you are (or are at least called to be one). Or you may think your gift is one thing, while others discern something else. Believe me: I've become an expert on this subject through my experiences of the past few months. But however we feel about it, we are all called and we are all given gifts so that we can answer the call.

The days ahead for Christianity will require all of us to share in the work that God is doing in the Church, and through it, in the world. When Paul writes about “forms of leadership” he is reminding us that leadership is a gift that goes beyond the “leaders of the Church”. The work that we are doing will require leaders and leadership, people and gifts that God will uncover in the churches of the Diocese of Tennessee. “Strive for the greater gifts”, Paul says. *“Strive for the greater gifts”* (1 Cor. 12:31), indeed.

A final point. As we go about the work that God is calling us to as a Church, we won't want to wander very far from the *“more excellent way”* (1 Cor. 12:31) that the Apostle talks about, the way of love. *“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”* (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Years ago, a monk I know recommended to me as my Lenten discipline of self-examination that I replace the word “love” with my own name, and see what happens. I can tell you that if you do this you will be challenged as a disciple.

The “more excellent way” of love looks to the cross of Jesus Christ. The love that the apostle talks about is modeled on the self-giving and sacrificial love of the Lord of the Church. Think of God's vast patience and forbearance in taking human flesh, becoming incarnate and suffering to bear the sin of the world. Remember, the word “patience” is rooted in the Latin word for “suffering”. We will need all the patience, kindness, and hope that the Holy Spirit can muster within us for the work of the days ahead. God will give it, as he raises up leaders for the Church.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## The First Sunday in Lent, Year C, February 25, 2007, St. Peter's Church Columbia

*"When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time"* (Lk. 4:13).

Everyone knows what it's like to be tempted. Our desire for something outweighs our moral sense of what's right and wrong. In temptation, an appeal might be made to our baser instincts (lust, avarice, etc.), but it might just as easily be made to our higher self. In a good cause, we might be tempted to take some ethical shortcuts, to let the end takes precedence over the means. After all, it's difficult to let the bad guys win because we have to play by the rules. That too is temptation, to do evil that good may come. Or we might even do something good for the wrong reasons, forgetting that our own motives may be suspect even if the action is nothing objectionable. And then flip it, and realize that just because our motives may be pure doesn't mean our actions can be excused. "I meant well!" So you see, temptation is a tricky thing.

So we can be tempted, tricked, involved in a kind of moral "flimflam" in a number of ways. Jesus is just like the rest of us in our Gospel reading today. The temptations he's exposed to are of the sort that I've just outlined: less the gross ones we know too well, and more of the sort that involve us in moral perplexity. He can be tempted, hoodwinked, by the Devil, the Cosmic "Flimflam Man". But of course he's not taken in, though we often are.

Do you feel a bit like you're in a moral minefield? It's undeniable that sometimes we are. One misstep can be fatal. Which way do we go? How will we ever find our way out? If we look at things this way, it's hard to find a way forward.

But there's another way to look at this. Temptation may sometimes resemble trickery, but it may also be a test. Again, everyone knows what a test is. We take tests in order to prove our capabilities: we've learned the lesson, we're qualified for the job, we're ready to move on to the next level. You don't need to be a perpetual student to know that people are tested all the time, to prove what they're made of. Will we measure up? In terms of Jesus' temptation in the Wilderness, he too is being tested. The foundations of his character are being exposed, his faithfulness to God. This is Good News for the Church, because it shows us what human beings are capable of, through God's indwelling grace. The world is not so much a moral minefield, as a place we can dwell in with confidence that the Foundation is rock solid.

Finally, testing also forms us, and this brings us back to Lent. Each test that is before us is not an end, a final examination, but a preparation for the next challenge before us. We learn from our tests, if we have any sense, especially from the parts we get wrong. I know all about this (not that I ever get anything wrong!), and I bet I learn more as I go about the new tasks that are before me.

Testing shapes us, knocking us into shape, into *"the full stature of Christ"* (Eph. 4:13). This test is practice for eternity. As Christians, the experiences we have, and how we respond to them, are freighted with great significance. Testing is the way in which we *"grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* (2 Pet. 3:18). The Lenten discipline that we are undertaking is our way of becoming more like Christ, of flexing our spiritual muscles so that we can be strengthened to bear our cross. We're being formed this Lent, so that we can walk with Jesus into Jerusalem. We die with him so that we may be raised, the pattern of our Lenten discipline and of the Christian life.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Second Sunday in Lent, Year C, March 4, 2007, Grace Chapel Rossvie and St. Luke's Church Springfield

*"He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory" (Phil. 3:17).*

The very beginnings of photography in this country coincided with the catastrophic American Civil War. Some of the best known early photographs are of soldiers in uniform, preparing to go to war; and some of the most compelling and troubling photographic images from this period are those taken of casualties. It was much easier, then, to photograph objects that were not moving, rather than marching men or the height of battle. I think that Matthew Brady, a photographer who traveled with the Army of the Potomac, is best known for these pictures, taken in the aftermath of battle, chronicling the loss and the destruction of human life that is the cost of combat. Civil War buffs, take note: I'm thinking of the photograph of the dead Rebel soldier at Devil's Den at Gettysburg, or the bodies of the dead men in front of the Dunker Church at Antietam. If you don't know these images, of course, others may present themselves, more modern and up to date (straight off the television or the Internet, in fact). Sadly, the chronicle of human loss and destruction has not yet come to an end.

"The body of our humiliation." The Apostle Paul did not know Matthew Brady's photographs, of course, but he did know the human condition. He knew what it was to carry the cross of Christ, to bear in his own body the marks of the cross. Human beings are finite and limited, and always have been; but we are also plagued with what God never intended: the consequences of sin, the humiliation of death. We are vulnerable, not just physically but emotionally and spiritually. When Paul writes about "the body of our humiliation", he has in mind the humble and distressed state of human affairs, of human reality, the same still sadness and sinful consequence we can glimpse in Brady's photographs.

This is a good theme for Lent, to be reminded of our humble and humiliated state. On Ash Wednesday, the priest placed a cross of ashes on our foreheads and said, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return". These words conjure up the realities of human life, and our deep distress. They are words that remind us of our need for a Savior.

Because it is God's will that we be saved. According to Christian faith, there is always Resurrection. So Paul reminds the Church in Philippi that as there is "the body of our humiliation" there is also "the body of his glory". The body that was broken on the cross has risen from the dead and been given new life. We are members of Christ's Body, the Church; we will be transformed, too, so that humiliation will be put away. We will be conformed to Christ, the Risen Christ, and discover a new life. There is a new life coming, and new way of living, a new reality for God's People. That, too, is a part of Lent: the glory of Easter, the glory of Resurrection.

It's easy for us to get stuck on "the body of our humiliation", especially when it is a time of great challenge and difficulty for the Church. The Presiding Bishop said recently, in the context of the controversies that we live with in the Church and in the world, "I am a Christian and I live in hope and I don't think we can live anywhere else".

What an idea is conjured up by this: that human beings might actually try to live in a place called "hopelessness", a place where there is no hope! I don't know what such a place might look like, but I think that whatever it looks like, Matthew Brady might be summoned up to photograph it. Nothing's moving there; nothing's alive; nobody has any hope. It's a dead end. Thank God we don't need to live there.

Hope is what we have now, before the glory is revealed. We live in hope: hope that "the body of our humiliation" that we here endure will be transformed, as we are conformed more and more to the Body of Christ.

The Rt. Rev'd John C. Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## The Third Sunday in Lent, Year C, March 11, 2007, Church of Our Saviour Gallatin

*"Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Ex. 3:5).*

Consider Moses for a moment. You know the story: a child of the Hebrews, spirited away at birth to save his life and raised by the Egyptians who had been trying to kill him. He comes to maturity within the royal household, and then has to flee the country after committing murder. He goes far away, marries and raises a family, and then one day he encounters God. He's going about his business, tending the flocks, when he sees the burning bush and hears the voice. God is calling him, to do a tremendous work, to lead his People to freedom. He's got to get his shoes off, because he's standing on holy ground.

How do you encounter God? Many of us are not expecting him to show up. Some of us would be pretty disturbed if he did; after all, a burning bush can really turn things upside down. It's hard to carry on with business as usual when a miracle happens, when the impossible takes place. A few of us would like God to appear, but only when we call on him; that is, when we are in need, or when we're ready to receive him (maybe for an hour on Sunday, or when we've got it all together). People, especially Church people, like to have everything in good shape when God shows up.

But one of the points of the story of Moses is that God does not work this way. He shows up when we're not expecting him. He shows up when we're not ready, when we've settled down, satisfied with our lives even when they're not so great. He shakes things up and makes it impossible for us to go back to the life we used to live. When God appears, he speaks our name, because he already knows who we are: that is, he knows who we really are.

When God appears, he calls us. Everything changes. He makes us do amazing things. He leads us to freedom.

The story of Moses brings us to the story of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul suggests as much in our second reading this morning, when he places the story of Moses and the Exodus alongside the experience of Christians, in Baptism and the Eucharist. Jesus was present then, and he's present now. He's leading us to freedom: freedom from sin, from death, from every ill that plagues us. Are we expecting him to show up, to be powerfully present in our lives? I hope so. When he calls us, he shakes us up. He's made the ground we stand on holy.

Let me tell you that when God called me to be Bishop of Tennessee, he showed up when I was not expecting him. He certainly showed up when I was not ready. Everything changed for me. God made it impossible for life to continue as it had been before. I know that you and I are being called to do amazing things, and I'm praying for the grace to accomplish them.

So again, how do you encounter God? I hope it will be for you as it was for Moses: in the midst of your everyday life. In fact, I hope it will be right now. I hope that he will creep up on you and tell you to get your shoes off. The folks here today who are becoming confirmed members of the Episcopal Church are reminders to us that God is active in our lives. He knows each of you in this Church by name. He knows each of you better than you know yourselves. There's no possibility of pretense or concealment with God. The good news is that God loves us, sometimes in spite of ourselves. We need to start expecting that he's going to show up, and not just when we're ready for him.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee.

## Celebration of Parish Ministry and Final Service, March 24, 2007, Church of the Apostles Thompson Station

*"But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters\*\_beloved by the Lord, because God chose you" (2 Thess. 2:13).*

When Christians come together, they are a Church. "Church" means "gathering", and that's what we're about. But of course, there's more to it than just getting together, because our gathering is in the presence of Christ. We are a "faithful" community, the "community of faith", with particular beliefs and faith in God as revealed in Jesus Christ. We say the Creeds, we celebrate the Sacraments: both expressions of our faith.

Faith leads to commitment. We may be gathered, but God brings us together so that he can send us out. We "live out" our faith, literally speaking, by going out into God's world to do the work we are called to do. Faith demands commitment; in fact, faith commands it. "Faith without works is dead", the Apostle James said, which is I think getting at the same point. John Henry Newman wrote "If faith is to live, it must love" (*An Internal Argument for Christianity*), doing the works of love toward God and neighbor that are signs of our commitment and our ultimate allegiance. As people of faith, we have made commitments, and we seek to follow through on them.

So as members of the Church, we are living out our faith. But please note carefully that the life we live as members of the Church is not dependant on our faith and our commitment. The Church is not a community that we bring together of our own will and sustain through our own action; instead, it is the gift of God. We cannot create the Church, and we do not have the power to keep it going or even to end it of our own will. It does not depend on us, but on God, and thank goodness for that.

Remember what it says in our Epistle today, "God chose you". He really did choose you. You did not choose him, and please don't forget this. God chose you to be a part of this community, yes; but more fundamentally, he chose you to be a part of the Church, to be "living members incorporate" in the Body of Christ. God chooses us and he does not give up on us. Remember, "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29), according to the Apostle Paul. God gathered us, and sends us out, and will continue to do so. It's not our plan, but his.

There is a lot to celebrate today as we gather as the Church of the Apostles. There are eight years of ministry that Christian people have shared in this community; lives that have been touched and formed by Christ; relationships that have been made and deepened. You've done these things in the presence of God, through the community of faith.

But that community goes beyond the particularities of this place, this time, this people, as dear as they are. God has called us, and he still calls us. God is faithful, and will continue to be so. God has chosen you, and continues to choose you, over and over again. You are precious in his sight. The community of which you are a part, the fellowship of the Church, is more than any place or people or time, but is for all people, in every place and time. The Church is Catholic, with a Catholic vocation that goes beyond particularity to universality. We celebrate the love we have for this place, these people, this time, but we also celebrate our belief that God's love is even greater, and can contain and keep and preserve these things for all eternity.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C, March 25, 2007, St. James' Church Sewanee

*"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Is. 43:18-19).*

"Remember", "consider", "perceive": these are words that cause us to stop and step back and reflect. We're people in a hurry, no doubt about it; but the prophet Isaiah is inviting us to slow down and do something else for a change. If we stop and step back we can look at what's before us from a different angle; if we reflect on what's going on then we will be able to look a little bit deeper below the surface. Most of us, however, are barreling along like passengers on a runaway train, without much opportunity for reflection on the countryside around us. When you're moving fast, the view gets distorted as well, and you can't actually see much of what's going on. So words like "remember", "consider", "perceive", call us to do things differently: to slow down, to change the angle, to look deeper.

Isaiah wants people to do this because he believes that God is doing a new thing, and he doesn't want people to miss it. The new thing that God is doing emerges as people reflect on what he has already done. There is a pattern that emerges only when people slow down, change the angle, and look deeper. Isaiah reminds the People that in the past God liberated them from slavery in Egypt. God is the one *"who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters"* (Is. 43:16). But now if the People will slow down, remember, and reflect on the past they may notice that God is about to do a new thing. The backward glance will focus us on what is happening now, and bring us into the future. There's a pattern, and it's being revealed if we pay attention. For people in Isaiah's time, the hope was that God will bring the his People out of exile in Babylon, through the desert and back to their own homes. And later, for Christians, an even deeper pattern emerged, as God's People experienced the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which brought an even deeper freedom and a greater homecoming.

In our own day, there remains a need for careful reflection. The pace of modern life is not getting any more gracious or less relentless, and a lot of us feel the pressure. I bet even primates and bishops feel the forces that militate against words like "remember", "consider", "perceive". The train is rushing by, and the passengers can hardly see what's happening. The view from the train is so distorted that we scarcely know where we are.

So what is the new thing in your life that God wants you to sit up and take notice of, the sign of the deeper pattern that is crying out for recognition? I take it as a given that God is active in your life; but I also challenge you with the truth that a good portion of our lives we recognize only a tiny portion of that activity and very little of its meaning. The good news is that we can look deeper, change the angle so that we can see more clearly, stop and reflect and come to greater understanding. But to do this we will need to slow down, so that we can see what is going on. We will need to know the pattern, of liberation and freedom, of death and resurrection (that is, the Scriptural story) so that we can recognize what God is doing now. So again I ask, where is this new thing happening in your life? Where is God powerful for you? Where in your life is he leading you from slavery to freedom, through death to resurrection? If you can hazard a guess, and I'll bet you can, then you're on your way to Easter.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee.

## The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, Year C, April 1, 2007, St. Paul's Church Murfreesboro

*"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross" (Phil. 2::5-8).*

On April 3, 2003, in the early days of the Iraqi War, American soldiers on patrol in the city of Najaf were suddenly surrounded by a mob of angry people. The situation was tense. People felt that their mosque was threatened by the troops passing through. The scene was caught live on CNN, and journalist Daniel Baum remembers thinking that the result would be a massacre of civilians, as soldiers met force with force. Then suddenly, in the midst of this explosive situation, Baum saw an officer appear, holding up a rifle with the barrel pointed at the ground. Even though it seemed counter-intuitive, the officer ordered the troops to "take a knee". The soldiers looked at the officer like he was crazy, but they were obedient, and one by one they knelt and pointed their guns toward the ground. The crowd gradually dispersed.

I like this story because Baum describes the scene of the soldiers confronting the crowd "as almost biblical" (Daniel Baum, "Lessons of Battle", New Yorker, January 12, 2005). Biblical, indeed. Later, to write an article, Baum tracked down the officer for an interview, and goes on to talk about the innovative thinking that is emerging as soldiers confront new situations which their training has not prepared them for. Showing respect to the crowd was the right move, though it was not the "standard operating procedure". Baum's point is that it's a good thing to be flexible and adaptive in unusual and stressful situations. But I would add that it is also a good thing to show courage and be willing to take a risk in dangerous situations, even when the risk is taken on behalf of people who are confronting us with violence. Protecting ourselves may not be the value with the highest claim upon us. Sometimes we take risks and offer our lives, even for our enemies.

The Sunday of the Passion is a case in point. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the People hoped that the moment had come for the Messiah to claim his place. The smart move, the obvious move, was to overthrow the Roman occupation force. But that isn't what happened. Instead, the Messiah risked his life by dropping his guard, showing real courage in the face of hostility. He became defenseless before his enemies, so that he could save his enemies.

This is what is meant by emptying oneself, being humbled or humiliated for the salvation of the world. The world is so wounded, the fracture of sin is so great, that the world can only be saved by resolute and courageous action on the part of God's Son. The world has made itself God's enemy. Only sacrificial offering, God's own sacrificial offering, can bind the world's broken heart together again. God loves us so much that he is willing to extend himself for the sake of the world. Jesus is willing to be humiliated, to empty himself of life and to become as nothing, so that the world's wounds can be healed. Remember the soldiers in Baum's story?: they are obedient, and so is Jesus, even when it is counter-intuitive and risky.

"Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus". This is challenging. We were enemies of the cross; now we share the mind of Christ. Where are we being called to innovation and adaptation; where are we being called to take courage and to be willing to risk? Where are we being called to put down our guard and to give of our selves, especially for folks who are our enemies? If we simply try to forgive our own enemies I believe we will have work, and more than enough, to do. It will mean emptying ourselves, and becoming new people. It will require us to pass through death to resurrection. But that is the way of new life, the way that Jesus shows us, dying to self and living to God.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee.

## Renewal of Ordination Vows & Consecration of Chrism, April 5, 2007, Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me" (Lk. 4:18).*

Humility is not just avoiding an over-exaggerated sense of our own importance, which is how we usually think about it; it's also having a right estimation of our own gifts. Not underestimating ourselves is also an act of humility. In J.R.R. Tolkien's story *Lord of the Rings*, the hobbit Frodo accepts the burden of the Ring in humility. He's humble enough to listen to the call and to undertake the task. He pays attention to what his comrades in the Fellowship of the Ring are telling him. He knows what the terrible cost will be, but he also knows that someone must bear it. In humility, he is willing to bear it.

So when Jesus goes to read the scroll, he does so in humility. Humility is a word that has been softened over the years into something resembling modesty, but its true meaning is preserved in the word "humiliation". There will be a costly price for stepping up to read the words and claim the place. Jesus, unlike Frodo, isn't guided by his comrades, but by the call of God. He believes that the words he is reading are being fulfilled now, through his own ministry. He's humble enough and audacious enough to listen to the call and to undertake the task.

We do two things today that are hallmarks of this liturgy: renewal of our commitment to ordained ministry, and the blessing and consecration of holy oils, especially the oil of chrism used in baptism. One is at the service of the other. "Chrism" is linked to "Christ" (again, the same word), and both suggest "anointing". The pastoral task of the Church is to bring to birth the person of Christ within the community of faith; to form us in the Divine Personality and encourage and sustain this life among the members of Christ's Body the Church. So the Church baptizes people and celebrates the Eucharist so that Christ may be formed, take shape and appear in our lives. These oils, and this liturgy, serve to remind us of the Christological character of our mission. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me". The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because it was upon him.

The commitment to ministry that we renew today is in the service of this mission. We need humility to embrace it. Our own salvation is going to be worked out through the calling that has been addressed to us. This is true of all God's People, but perhaps especially so for those who have accepted ordination. We will need to be humble enough to take up this task and to continue in it. We will need the humility to accept humiliation. We will need to be bold enough and audacious enough to step forward in this harrowing task, confident that God will provide the grace to accomplish the task. God is at work in us, as he was in Christ, in ways that we often cannot perceive or understand. But it is Christ who is being formed in us.

I close with words of W.H. Auden that I discovered this Spring, words that appear in William Walton's anthem *The Twelve*:

"Without arms or charm of culture, Persons of no importance  
From an unimportant Province, They did as the Spirit bid,  
Went forth into a joyless world Of swords and rhetoric  
To bring it joy. When they heard the Word, some demurred,  
some mocked, some were shocked: but many were stirred  
and the Word spread. Lives long dead were quickened to life;  
the sick were healed by the Truth revealed; released into peace  
from the gin of old sin, men forgot themselves in the glory of the story told by the Twelve..."

And here's the bit that really matters:

"O Lord, my God, Though I forsake thee Forsake me not,  
But guide me as I walk Through the valley of mistrust,  
And let the cry of my disbelieving absence Come unto thee,  
Thou who declared unto Moses: 'I shall be there.'"

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Easter Day, Year C, April 8, 2007, Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

*"On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared" (Lk. 24:1).*

In the Summer of 1940, American correspondent Edward R. Murrow made a succession of radio broadcasts from London for CBS Radio during the "Blitz", the period of most intense German attack on Britain during the Second World War. Murrow was a witness, in a number of ways, to what happened in London that Summer during the bombing. First, of course, he saw what happened; he was a witness in the sense of being a bystander. Second, he offered testimony, as a reporter, to other people: "This is London". Third, Murrow's reporting from London was a testimony that became a testament. His witness to Nazi inhumanity and ruthlessness in intentionally targeting civilians was an invitation to his listeners in America, to understand what was really happening and to choose a side. His listeners had a sense of witnessing themselves the historic events that were taking place, and being invited to take their own place. Murrow's witness became a part of his testament, his most important legacy.

Now let's lay Murrow aside for a moment and consider our Gospel today, the women who came early in the morning to Jesus' tomb. They, too, are witnesses. The women see the empty tomb and the astonishing events that accompany it, so they are bystanders, at the very least. More importantly, they are also witnesses who offer testimony to other people; something more than simply being bystanders. And then they are witnesses whose testimony, being offered, is a testament: a witness meant to invite others into a shared perspective and a way of life that will transform their lives. Those who heard their words became witnesses themselves.

At the very end of Luke's Gospel, the Risen Lord says to the disciples gathered around him, *"You are witnesses of these things"* (Lk. 24:48). And over and over again, Jesus' followers claim of his death and resurrection, *"To this we are witnesses"* (Acts 1:22, 3:15, 5:32). More than just bystanders, more than just witnesses in the box testifying about facts: they are witnesses to the powerful things that God has done who offer their testament so that the world may believe and be transformed.

It's significant that women are the initial witnesses, because women's witness was sometimes discounted in Jesus' day. So the fact that women are first to testify that the tomb is empty is itself a clue to the radical nature of what is happening here. The women are inviting us into a whole new way of looking at the world. Jesus Christ is alive, not dead.

So we are witnesses of these things. Surely we are more than bystanders when it comes to the life of discipleship. Are we seeing what is happening and also perceiving what God is doing? Are we able to share with others the crucial points where God has touched us and offered us new life? Awesome things are happening, life-transforming things are happening, and we are witnesses to them. The thread runs all the way back to that empty tomb and the encounter with the Risen Christ. Christian congregations are full of these stories, and this congregation of Christ Church and our Diocese of Tennessee are no exceptions to this rule. What will our testament be to the things of abiding importance?

At this point, we go one step further, one Gospel step further, as we consider our witness, our testimony, the testament of our lives. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is preeminently God's testimony, the "new testament" of his faithfulness and his love for us. Jesus Christ himself is the "witness" (Rev. 1:5), who by his death and resurrection has interjected something wholly new into human experience. This is the testament that invites us to wake up and to pay attention to what is really happening in the world. His witness invites us to transformation, to shared perspective and a common life in Christian community. Nothing can ever be the same again. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and to this we are witnesses.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Second Sunday of Easter, Year C, April 15, 2007, St Philip's Church Nashville

*"Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord" (Jo. 20:20).*

In Tom Hanks' movie *Castaway*, the main character is involved in a plane crash which he survives only after a terrifying film sequence which brings him to the point of death. Though he's survived, he is marooned alone on a small island far from the shipping lanes, with no prospect of rescue. People are looking for him, but they are looking in the wrong place, and after years have passed it is clear that no one will ever find him. Hanks' character is cut off from the world, and the only way he can return is by finding a way himself off the island. So he builds a boat, and survives the heavy surf to launch himself out onto the great Pacific Ocean. Against all odds, he's actually found by a cargo ship and rescued, and returns to the world long after being given up for dead.

This is where the movie gets interesting to me. People are overjoyed that he is alive, but they can't really take it in stride or adjust to his presence. His fiancée has married; his job has changed and people have moved on. Nothing can ever be the same for the one who has returned, or for those who encounter him. It is disorienting to discover that a person you've buried (in the movie, both literally and emotionally) is alive again. People cannot take the reality in. It's an old theme in literature and popular culture, that continues to fascinate.

Now, imagine that at the end of the movie Hanks' character didn't return from the island, but that instead people just talked about his memory and all the good times, or about how he was still with them in spite of being dead. Or imagine that people talked about the ideals that Hanks' character represented, and about their continuing relevance in spite of his absence. All very inspiring, I'm sure, but nobody would've ever made a movie that ended this way.

No one would've been disoriented or surprised or overjoyed in this scenario. What's missing is the person: our Tom Hanks' character back from the dead. What shakes up Hanks' friends and makes everything different is the presence of the man himself.

I hope it's now obvious to you why I'm going on about *Castaway*. It is not comforting memory or abiding presence or continuing ideals that the disciples are given on the day of Resurrection, but Jesus himself. Jesus Christ, alive not dead, is the source of their joy and their bewilderment. The relationship that the disciples had with their friend had been ended by the crucifixion. There was no chance for survival. Only the return of their friend, as improbable as this was, could have changed this. And that, of course, is the claim of Christian faith: that this return and the restoration of relationship has happened. It is the presence of Jesus Christ, the man himself, that makes the difference. He is alive, not dead.

Nothing can be the same in light of this. To go back to *Castaway* for a moment, the question for us now is a bit like the question before Hanks' character in the movie: having been given back his life, how is he supposed to live? When something like this happens to you, everything has to be thought through again; nothing can be taken for granted. Relationships have to be examined anew; life has to have a new direction. If Jesus Christ is alive, not dead, then how are we supposed to live? If new and everlasting life is a reality, then what does this mean for us? If we have been given a new life, freed from our imprisonment, what will our freedom mean? That is the joy of Easter, an event which reorients us and sets us off in a new direction, with a new freedom. There are new possibilities before us, and a new life.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## The Third Sunday of Easter, Year C, April 22, 2007, Otey Parish Sewanee

*"Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way" (Jo. 21:1).*

Christian faith requires imagination. We're invited to believe that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead; to believe that because he is alive new life is possible for us; to have faith that God is victorious in the face of sin and death. These affirmations all require imagination: a sensibility that does not accept things as they are, or as they seem on the surface, but which imagines something different and deeper. If you are at a dead end, it will take imagination to continue to move ahead. The distinguishing mark of strict atheism may be its belief that there are no solutions to the world's problems that go beyond the human race and rationality, and its resolute lack of imagination in the face of our dilemmas. The Gospel of Jesus Christ imagines something different, stretching our minds and hearts and welcoming us into a different reality.

Don't hear what I'm not saying: that Christian faith is imaginary. We know what it means to have an imaginary friend. What the disciples encounter on the Day of Resurrection stretches their imagination, but it is not imaginary. The Risen Lord is not a "figment of the imagination". There is a dreamlike quality to our Gospel today, I'll grant you; the disciples' improbable return to Galilee to resume their old occupation and their former pattern of life. But here's the sense of it: the disciples encounter Jesus precisely while they are going about their ordinary business, in the midst of the "real" world. It's exactly there that they have to stretch their imaginations, to accept that Jesus Christ has really risen from the dead.

The familiar scene helps to "root" the experience. The disciples had fished and eaten and spoken together many times before Jesus' death in Jerusalem. Now, new life is taking shape in concrete ways before their eyes. Poet Denise Levertov puts it this way:

"people so tuned /to the humdrum laws: /gravity, mortality –  
can't open / to symbol's power /unless convinced of its ground / its roots / in bone and blood  
(-"On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus").

Resurrection life is like that: rooted in the flesh and blood business of eating and drinking and working and living. It's a metaphor "with legs", if you will; not only legs, of course, but arms, hands and feet.

So let's "kick it up a notch" here, and move beyond the human imagination, which is what we have been talking about so far, in order to contemplate the imagination of God. God's imagination is creative, bringing the world into being, and also re-creative, imagining the salvation of the world through the death of a man upon the cross. Now that's imagination. The Easter story is fundamentally not an act of human imagination, but the expression of divine imagination. We know the power of human imagination, both for good and for ill; its ability to reshape things before our eyes. But God's imagination is even more powerful, and it is always for good. God's imagination calls us, into new life and into a new world we could not imagine for ourselves. God's imagination calls us to be transformed, to be reshaped, to be remade.

So what is God inviting you into; what is God asking you to imagine? Like the disciples, you and I and everyone else are going about our ordinary business, doing the familiar things that fill up our lives. But we are being asked to imagine something different. The Gospel we hear and the sacraments we celebrate welcome us into a new and different world. Are our hearts and minds capable of this, or have we set them elsewhere? Are we so sunk in the everyday stuff that we can't break out and imagine something else? If you will, take this away with you today, the challenge to imagine something more for yourself than you had imagined before. Just ask yourself, What are you imagining?

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C, April 29, 2007, Church of the Good Shepherd  
Brentwood

*"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." (Jo. 10:27).*

When I was a boy, I got used to hearing the words, "Pay attention, John!" pretty frequently at school. The lesson would be going on, and I would be looking out the window, not minding much at all. I guess I wasn't much interested, or was more interested in what was going on in my own mind. It's great to be a free spirit, but it's a tough way to grow up. Eventually I got the hang of things, and began listening to what was important before I'd done too much damage to my educational prospects. So I learned the value of listening and paying attention, but I learned it the hard way, and still find myself having to re-learn the lesson.

There's a lot to pay attention to, after all. Many things come across the desk or flash onto our computer screen, and we have to be discerning in order to figure out what's valuable and what's not. We have to be paying attention in order to do that; we've also got to have our priorities straight. People talk about "information overload", and that's really where we are as a society. We know a lot, but we still need wisdom to figure out what's important and what needs to be done. Nowadays I think my teachers would probably say something like, "Stay focused", and that's what we need to do.

I'll share with you that "paying attention" or "staying focused" are still a challenge for me in my new ministry. There's a steep learning curve that's involved in rapid transitions and new responsibilities. You see I'm still learning or relearning those early lessons of my childhood. Together, we're learning what we need to pay attention to. We have to listen, be focused, and be able to act.

In our Gospel today, the Good Shepherd says, "My sheep hear my voice". Jesus is speaking: are we listening? I don't know about sheep, but human beings are notoriously hard of hearing (at least, in hearing Jesus' voice). There are ways we can listen and be focused; ways which are time-honored and reliable.

First, the Scriptures. If you want to hear the voice of the Shepherd, then it's a good idea to listen carefully to the Word.

Second, our prayer. Prayer is the conversation we have with God. Good conversation requires both speaking and listening. A lot of our prayer consists of the words we speak, but its even more important to listen to what God is saying to us.

Third, the community. God speaks through other people, and especially through the members of the community of faith. When Peter speaks in our first reading today, things really begin to happen. Preachers like to think that God speaks through them, but the most effective word the Good Shepherd may say to you today may come at the coffee hour, from another member of the Church.

Finally (and this is important today), there is the Creation, God's big world out there. When Paul the Apostle was called to preach to the Gentiles, he started with the world that God had made. We can listen at any time, in any condition. On a day like this, we can almost let the day itself be the preacher. With this great window behind the preacher at the Church of the Good Shepherd, and the possibility of a train going by at any moment, we almost have to let the day be the preacher!

The Good Shepherd is calling for our attention. He's calling for us to stay focused, using the tools that he has given us. He's calling for us to act, to hear his voice and to follow him. I hope we are going to follow him, right out of the doors of this church into the big world that lies beyond. That's where ministry takes place. So let's listen, stay focused, and be ready to act.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C, May 13, 2007, St George's Church Nashville

*"But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." (Jo. 14:26).*

A few weeks ago I spent the weekend with friends, and we were reminiscing. It's curious that different people remember different things, and bring them to the conversation; though as soon as someone mentions them, it's very likely that others will remember as well. Memory is often dormant and inaccessible until brought to mind, which makes old friends very valuable; but other things can bring to mind our memories, like a word or phrase or even something we see or smell. Memories can come welling up suddenly, from we hardly know where. We could never write down or otherwise record all that we "remember", so much of which is buried within ourselves.

Memory is what makes us who we are. If you wake up in the morning and can't remember anything about your past, then you may be the same person you were the evening before (technically), but you've got some big problems. Just imagine what that might be like. You may be the same person, but the missing piece is your memory, which binds it all together. Memory is what binds the "you" of yesterday together with the "you" of today. Without the glue of memory, none of us can hold it all together. Without the richness of our past experience, we're just the shadows of our real selves.

Memory is also important to faith; in this case, it's also the glue that holds us together. In fact, Christian faith demands that we remember. In the Old Testament, the People of God were required to rehearse over and over again what God had done for them, to remember the mighty acts of God and to recall the blessings of the past. The ancient Jews had a notion that if you remembered the wonderful works of the Lord God from the past, those works would take shape again in the present. They remembered God, in other words, so that God would continue to remember them. When they forgot what God had done, they ceased being the People they were called to be. God's power ceased to be present. Without the memory of the past made present now, there was no glue to hold them together.

The antidote to the People's amnesia was remembrance, the telling of the story of what God had done. The Greek term is anamnesis, the opposite of forgetting. The People told the story, over and over again, so that they would not forget. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live": that's writer Joan Didion, who knows something about stories and why they are valuable. So God's People told themselves stories, stories of remembrance, to combat their amnesia.

We too are prone to amnesia: the forgetting of who we are, and the forgetting of what God has done for us. This forgetting of ourselves and God is really the same thing, for it's only by knowing God that we know ourselves. We're really amnesiacs without the remembrance of what God has done for us; we're not really ourselves when we forget God's mighty acts on our behalf. God is for us: let us never forget.

That's why Jesus Christ calls us to remembrance. He tells us that the Holy Spirit will teach us all things, and bring to remembrance everything he has said. He tells his followers to "Do this for the remembrance of me". Whenever we remember, the Risen Christ is present. The Church is a community of remembrance. We come together to remember, to help each other call to mind the things that have been done for us by God. He has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and this means new life for us. We tell our story, Sunday by Sunday, so that we can remember. We tell our story, so that we can live.

Our confirmands have an important part to play in our remembering. We've told the story to them. They're going to help us remember. They're going to tell others the story, and together the Church is going to remember. Without each other, we cannot remember. Thank you for being here, and for reminding us of what God has done and is doing now.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## The Day of Pentecost, Year C, May 27, 2007, St. Mary Magdalene's Church Fayetteville

*"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." (Acts 2:2).*

The wind came up suddenly, preceded by a great calm that had been building for days. When it began to blow, the roar of the wind sounded like the idling of a jet engine. The wind tore up trees from the roots; other trees it snapped in two like sticks. Tiles were thrown from roofs; branches and bits of trees fell and were thrown through buildings; rain followed and water was driven by the wind. That's what wind will do; that is, when it's hurricane force wind. That's what I saw from my kitchen window in South Louisiana twenty months ago, in late August of 2005.

Wind has power: to move people about and change their lives; to shape and form communities; to remake the very world we live in. The wind that blew at Pentecost was wind like this: a life-altering wind. Unlike the hurricane that brought destruction, the wind of Pentecost brought new life. But the new life only came through change, as the old was swept away by the "wind of change". It's a violent wind that comes from God. The disciples who encountered the wind of the Spirit were picked up and taken to the four corners of the world, to all the nations as their mission developed. The wind from God was to stir up everything and make everything new.

So how is the Spirit working in your midst today? What is the wind from God doing in your life? Is it stirring things up and blowing them about? Is it more like a gentle breeze than a violent wind? If it seems more light and breezy than anything else, rejoice, because it may not remain so for long. The wind may come and move you along, like the disciples in the story. We may be picked up and brought to a new place that we've not known before. God is at work in all our lives, and change is going to come, in the form of new life.

Believe me: I know what this is about. God has a funny way of sweeping into our lives and taking us somewhere else, calling us to new work and new experiences that bring new life to us and to others. I put it to you that a wind has come from God over the past year in Tennessee, shaking things up and bringing new life to all of us.

The wind from God shapes and forms communities. The community that is shaped by the wind of the Spirit on Pentecost is the Church. The Spirit brings the Church to birth. It is not our creation, but God's own work. And the wind from God keeps blowing, shaping the Church in the way he wills. What is God doing among us in the Church today? He keeps stirring things up, and we keep trying to figure it out.

What is God doing at St Mary Magdalene's Church? I know that you've had your own experience of how God can rearrange the life of the community of faith. How is God now calling this church? How is God's power now being made manifest in your midst? God is doing new things. He calls upon us to respond to them in faith. Some things will be swept away, but in the end there will be new life.

God is at work in our lives, and in the life of the community. Where can we feel the wind blowing? Where are things starting to pick up? What is stirring out there? God's at work, at St Mary Magdalene's Church, and in your life.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Trinity Sunday, Year C, June 3, 2007, Trinity Church Clarksville

*"He will declare to you the things that are to come"* (Jo. 16:13).

What sort of crystal ball do you have? Do you possess the power to peer into the future? Well, probably not. Some people think the future is our destiny, waiting for us out there no matter what we do. Other people think the future is something that we create, and that it's unfixed until we act. Whichever is true, one thing is certain: the future is hard to know.

What we can know is that God is the God of the future. Paul writes in our second reading today that *"suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us"* (Rom. 5:3-5). Hope is faith oriented toward the future; as it says in the Letter to the Hebrews, *"Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen"* (Heb. 11:1).

God is the God of the future. *"Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come."* (Rev. 4:8). When God revealed himself to Moses and to the People of Israel, he called himself, *"I am who I am"* or *"I will be who I will be"* (Ex. 3:6). God is the one who "is to come", the God of the future. Whatever the future holds, it holds God. And even more importantly, God is the Creator of not only what is past and present, but also of what is future. God, and not we, creates the future, and invites us to enter it. Our business is to discern what God is doing, the future that God is inviting us into, and act upon it. We make this discernment of what God is doing and will do through the Spirit of God, which "blows where it wills". It is the Spirit that will "declare to you the things that are to come", as Jesus says in our Gospel today. We don't look into a crystal ball, but we do pray and reflect and seek God's will for the future. God is on the horizon; God is in the future: that which will be, wondrous past telling. God will be all in all.

So what is God doing, and what will he do, in the life of Trinity Church, Clarksville? Are you praying and reflecting on what that might be? God has prepared for you a great future as a parish, and he's calling you into it. We don't know what that future will be, because it is God's job to create it; but we are responsible for the prayer and the reflection as we seek to respond. Your future is out there, as you seek to answer God's call to you as a parish.

I hope you will take away with you today another question as well. What is your own ministry at Trinity Church? What new ministry is God calling you to in the future? God is on your horizon, inviting you to come forward, and to join him in the future he is creating for you. What does that future look like to you: personally, professionally, and in the ministry which God has called you to? God knows us better than we know ourselves: our past, our present, and also our future. It is good for us to think about the future, though it is unknowable, because we expect God to be there, and to be at work in our lives, creating those futures for us and calling us forward.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 5, Year C, June 10, 2007, St. Bartholomew's Church Nashville

*"And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!'" (Luke 7:14).*

There's a theory about the universe, rooted in the second law of thermodynamics, that in the course of time energy will dissipate and disorder increase to the point where the universe will become inert. Things are winding down, in other words, heading to a state of equilibrium where nothing happens anymore. There's an eerie similarity in this theory to the Christian story of the universe, because the world begins with an explosion of God's expansive creativity that almost immediately runs afoul of disordered sin and dissipating death. Human beings, inhabitants of the universe, are enmeshed in this net; the universe is unraveling but we are stuck. In fact, human beings are the source of the disorder, through the misuse of the will, so there is a tragic and mysterious element to this story. We are transcendent creatures who can see the big picture, but we are also part of the story, stuck right in the middle of it.

This is what makes our Gospel reading today so electrifying and full of new life. If the universe was winding down before, it's now being injected with new energy from outside the system, from God the source of all life. There's a great reversal going on. It's no longer the human race which is winding down, heading to a state of deadly equilibrium, but sin and death themselves which are being dispatched by the Son of God. When his voice rings out, it's not only the son of the widow of Nain who hears him (as awesome as that is) but sin and death themselves.

There are just a few stories in the Gospel tradition in which Jesus raises the dead, but all the stories of his ministry are stories of healing, in which the effects of sin are overcome by the re-creative power of God. Jesus makes all things new; that's the point of his ministry. When he raises the widow's son from the dead, he's making it clear what his objective is. It's not a magic trick, something he does to show how powerful he is. This miracle shows that death is the enemy that Jesus means to undo. These stories point forward to Jesus' own death and resurrection, which is the source of new life for those who believe in him.

So let's bring the view down from sixty thousand feet to the point where we can actually see ourselves. Bishops are encouraged to see the big picture, but I don't want you to miss connecting with the message this morning. Can you hear Jesus' voice? What is he saying to you? What does new life in Christ mean to you? What does it mean to receive your life back after you thought it was over? God is at work in the world, and people get their lives back (literally) all the time. God gives new life and freedom through Christ. We come to the end of the road, over and over again, only to discover that the universe is not a dead end street but that there is an open door waiting for us.

We are given these foretastes of the Resurrection, over and over again, in our own lives. These folks who are becoming confirmed members of the Episcopal Church today are reminders of the new thing that God can do in our lives. He's been powerfully present in their lives, and will be in the time to come. Remember, God is at work all the time, making and re-making us, over and over again.

All life is a gift. God's power creates it, and God can renew it. What will you do with your life, with the tremendous gift you've been given? There's no need to settle for deadly equilibrium, for the slow winding down of things. God offers us new life, through faith in the Son of God, the One who speaks to us today. Again, what is he saying to you?

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 6, Year C, June 17, 2007, St. Ann's Church Nashville

*"And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment." (Luke 7:37).*

Sex and power are mixed up in our readings today. This wouldn't be remarkable, if we were watching television or reading the newspaper; but of course we're not, we're listening to the Scriptures, so it's worth noting. The story of David and Bathsheba's adultery, and the murder of her husband Uriah, is a story of unconstrained desire and the abuse of power, coming together in a potent and disastrous way. I once heard this reading used at a wedding, to what purpose I cannot now remember, and I don't mind telling you I still think it was odd. The point about sex and power, I think, is a little too robust for a wedding; at least, too robust for me.

Sex and power come together again in our Gospel when Jesus is anointed by the woman who is a sinner (that is, guilty of some sexual sin), and incurs the disapproval of the religious authorities. It's not quite as obvious as the murder story we've just heard, but it's challenging enough. There's the specter of power being abused in another way, of a religious "policing" of the universe where sinners are punished or at least cordoned off from the rest of us. Remember that disturbing part of the other story, when the child of King David and Bathsheba dies as a result of his parents' sin? I long ago liberated myself from having to explain everything that's in the Bible, or to attempt to explain God's actions to myself or others, so I'm not going to try to do that today. Suffice to say that nothing could be more shocking to our own sensibilities.

Now it's easy to move from this realization about sex and power to one that's not too different: that controversies about sex in society are simply a form of "power game", and that "power games" have no place in the Church. There's no doubt that sex and power are often mixed up together, and it's also true that power is abused regularly in the Church. But there's more than a power game going on in our Gospel today, a "policing" of the universe, thank God, so we're going to have to look a little more closely for the "good news".

First, there's "faith". *"And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'" (Lk. 7:50).* The faith of Israel, relationship with God; faith as belief in the saving acts of God, as trust in God's power. This is the sort of faith the woman showed. For Christians, faith is an attitude, an approach to life; but it's also content, faith in particular actions of God, Jesus' death and resurrection which means new life for us.

Second, there's "love". Note how faith only makes it's appearance at the very end of the story, while love is highlighted all along. The love the woman shows in washing and anointing Jesus' feet; the love of the debtors in Jesus' story whose debt has been set aside. *"Now which of them will love him more?" (Lk. 7:42).* Love is about sacrifice. Love helps to flesh out what faith is in this story: actions of service that transform the world are the practical program of faith, giving faith substance and shape and even helping to define it.

Third, there's "forgiveness". There's an ambiguity in the Gospel, whether the love of the woman is the result of being forgiven or whether she is forgiven as a result of her love. The translation has smoothed out some of these ambiguities by using the less likely meaning of a key phrase, but one which makes the passage more coherent with Jesus' story about the debtors, whose love begins with the forgiveness of their debt; still, the woman is forgiven after her acts of love. The key point, maybe, is that forgiveness is a reality: the possibility of living a new life and beginning over in relationship with God. That's good news for everyone.

"Faith", "love", "forgiveness": these are the common currency of Christian living that lift us out of power games and the need to "police" the universe. Our confirmands today are becoming part of a community of faith, love, and forgiveness, and we are expecting a lot from them, not least of all to hold us accountable for the pattern of life we are sharing with them.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 12, Year C, July 29, 2007, Church of the Messiah Pulaski

It's embarrassing to admit, but I often forget to pray. Maybe you're like me. When there's a difficult situation to resolve, or an emergency in the offing, I tend to think and then to act. Surely this is the ancient, instinctive, learned pattern that goes back to the jungle, one that's been very successful for the human race. But when the disciple asked Jesus to teach his followers how to pray, a new element entered the equation of human reckoning and action. Prayer is conversation with God, the pause in the calculus of consideration and activity that makes us something more than just conscious beasts, but creatures of the Creator with a transcendent focus. Still, the old man dies hard, and so the People of God, even bishops, continue to forget to seek connection with God at the point at which we ponder and act.

Prayer is more than asking God for something we want, or even asking God for guidance. Prayer is a reminder that what we are goes beyond ourselves; it's our intentional focusing of our whole self in relation to God. It's a sign of allegiance, a pledge of fidelity, a tribute to the maker. Human beings live in relationship, not only with each other but also with God, and prayer is the reminder.

There's more to prayer than asking for things. If you saw the movie *Bruce Almighty* you might have gotten the idea that God is occupied principally with people's requests, waiting to see what will be asked for before deciding what to do. It's a ridiculous idea, and none of us would be happy with a notion of God waiting to tally up divergent requests before acting: a form of ruling by public opinion poll.

But it's also true that God cares for us; true that God is listening. God is not indifferent. He may not be waiting to tally up our votes on what's going to happen in the future, but he does care about our hopes and desires. Our prayer is a reminder that we are in relationship with God. Some of us don't want to bother God with our requests. This is a bad instinct, contrary to the Gospel. What does Jesus say? "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." Those three words, "ask", "search", "knock" have imperative force: not "if you ask" or "if you search", or "if you knock". There's a command here, a command to pray. We need to make our requests known to God, as St Paul reminds us. Why? Because this is how we learn to share ourselves with God; to share what is of most importance to us and deepen our relationship with God.

So what is the bishop's prayer today? My prayer is for my family. My prayer is for the Church, world-wide and in the Diocese of Tennessee. My prayer is for myself, that I may have the strength and grace to persevere in the ministry I've been called to. I've been thinking about the prophet Jonah these last couple of months; a prophet whose first instinct was to run away. I don't remember if he remembered to pray or not. My prayer, in those grace-filled moments when I remember, is for the grace of perseverance.

What's your prayer? I hope you will pray for your parish, your priests, your bishop, and for the Diocese of Tennessee. I hope you will make your own petitions present to God. Jesus wants you to share your very selves with your heavenly Father.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 13, Year C, August 5, 2007, Church of the Holy Spirit Nashville

There's a real note of urgency in today's Gospel: Jesus is telling us we need to get up and do what we need to do in order to be ready for what's ahead. We need to be paying attention to the right thing; we need to have our eye on the ball and not get diverted by other things that compete for our attention.

We need to make "first things first". This is the sort of advice that is given to children by their parents, or to students by their teachers, but in spite of this or maybe because of it is often forgotten or ignored. We like to focus on the urgent and attractive, even if its not really very important. I'll admit that I'm liable not to make "first things first", and maybe you are prone to this too. There are things that I find easy or rewarding, and it's more fun to do them than anything else. The trouble is that they may not be the most important thing. Even in the face of disaster, when it makes no sense, we may continue our behavior, and fail to make the "first thing first".

The rich young fool in the story is a fool because he's not paying attention to the most important thing. He thought the most important thing was acquiring wealth, and he turned out to be pretty good at it. He enjoyed the benefits that material success brought. Being successful in his business was attractive and rewarding; it seemed to be the "first thing". But it turns out that it wasn't nearly as important as he thought. When you set it in the right context, the context of eternity and final destination, it starts to become less significant. It's an instance of focusing on what's in the foreground, while ignoring the much more significant things that are looming up behind it. If we can only see what's closest, we suffer from a kind of spiritual "myopia" or shortsightedness. "This very night your life is being demanded of you". A person is a fool if he loses sight of that. Jesus' story suggests that relationship with God is far more important than any wealth we might acquire, or fame we might win, or any other distinction we might merit. When we have sight of this, we really have "the big picture". If we can see this, we are spiritually farsighted, able to see the path clearly and the Person and the destination which are ahead. The person, of course, is God, and the destination is the Kingdom.

So what can we do to become spiritually farsighted, to begin to recover from our spiritual "myopia"? If your vision is focused on wealth or fame or whatever you find attractive, then it's a good idea to clear these things away and let the focus be on what is really important. We need to gain perspective, and we need to do it now and not wait.

Jesus tells us over and over again that our possessions must not be allowed to possess us. Let the Scriptures speak for themselves! *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"* (Matt. 6:19-21). And the Apostle Paul tells Timothy that we are to take what we have and put it to good work. *"They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life"* (1 Tim. 6:18-19). Good works give us back our perspective, allow us to see ahead, remind us of the big picture that we often lose sight of.

So its both important and urgent for us to make the "first things first". This is not the Bishop's job or Father Lee's job alone, but it is your job as a community of faith. Those being baptized and confirmed today will want to keep their priorities straight. We want them to be spiritually farsighted. We want them to see clearly the Person and the destination ahead.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 14, Year C, August 12, 2007, St Anselm's Church Nashville

When I was a graduate student, there always seemed to be a great distance between the place where I was, and the place I needed to be. I seemed to be at the bottom of a sheer cliff face, with no handholds and with no clear beginning point. High above me was the place I needed to get to, the plateau where I wanted to arrive, the point at which I would have achieved my objectives as a student. It was so far away I could barely see it. But in the meantime, what was before me was a lot of hard work, and a very distant destination. There was anxiety involved. If I ever arrived (and I emphasize if) it would be years in the future.

So it is that our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews talks about the journey that Abraham makes, "*not knowing where he was going*" (Heb. 11:8). There is the "*approach*" (Heb. 11:6) to God that must be made because of a distance that seems to separate us. We are "*seeking a homeland*" (Heb. 11:14) because we have wandered. In other words, there is distance involved in the Christian life: the distance between where we are and where we need to be. We can't just go back, the Letter suggests, even when our hearts grow faint. We must press ahead, close the distance, and finally arrive.

Those who have to "go the distance" need faith. Faith is what keeps us going and allows us to arrive. "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*" (Heb.11:1). Without faith we'll never see what lies ahead, and understand that we need to go forward. Our spiritual forebears were nomads, used to progressing from one encampment to another. They knew what it was like to move forward by faith. It was this that won them approval from God, as the Letter says. Faith is important for us because it will make it possible for us as well to move ahead, especially when we do not know the way ahead.

So today we might celebrate distance: the distance that brought Father Angelo and his family here, if no other. They travelled in faith, not knowing precisely the way ahead, but knowing they needed to move forward. Faith is pleasing to God, because it allows us to move forward in response to his call even when we cannot see the way ahead. There is distance involved in the life of faith: the distance between where we are and where we need to be. We maneuver in this space by faith, and only by faith.

You've been called to your own faithfulness as well, not just as individuals but also as a congregation. There's a distance involved here, as well, as you take the measure of the distance between where you are now and where you need to be as a congregation. Do you all know that there is a distance between these two places? It's true for every congregation, and it's true for this one. To negotiate this distance, you're going to need abundant amounts of faith. You're going to need to be open to the call of God, the call to mission and ministry in this community. Without faith, without trust in God, we can never collapse the distance and come within sight of the destination. But by faith we can do this. We can arrive at the place we need to be, as individuals and as a church.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 17, Year C, September 2, 2007, St. Andrew's Church Nashville

*"Let mutual love continue"* (Heb. 13:1).

When you're constructing a new world, you have to use the materials that lie at hand. Only God creates from nothing, something even theologians can't do, not even those who wrote the New Testament. So it is that the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews picks up a time-worn idea of the ancient Greeks, *"mutual love"* or *"brotherly love"*, in order to talk about Christian discipleship.

"Friendship" is what the Greeks called it, the sort of mutual love that they highly prized; and so when the early Christians wanted to talk about the nature of the Church and the quality of their community life they turned to this idea. "Friendship": a community of shared experiences and aspirations, sometimes; though at other times an affinity that is more mysterious, bringing together people who have almost nothing in common. For the ancient Greeks, friendship required doing good for the friend; happiness was impossible without friendship.

"Friendship" is the raw material of our second reading; but remember, it's an idea only taken up so that a new reality can be constructed. The Letter to the Hebrews isn't just repeating the ideas of the Greek philosophical tradition; it's taking them up from the scrap heap of a vanishing world and making something new out of them. The early Christians were something more than friends: they were brothers and sisters whose love for each other felt the immense gravity pull of the love of God. God's love of us, and our love of God, encountered and made real in the love of neighbor.

Within the fellowship of believers, good deeds were called for (as they were by the philosophers); yet now these were seen as deeds of charity, as acts of sacrificial love patterned on the supreme, redemptive sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. All love is founded on this love. Just as the ancients had understood that happiness was impossible without friendship, now the Church claimed that true happiness was impossible without fellowship with God. This happiness now had a different trajectory, as it came to rest beyond this world in the kingdom built by God. All happiness is a reflection of this supreme happiness.

These are words addressed to the Church, founded on the wisdom of the ancient world but given new meaning in Christ. The Church is the new creation of God that our reading is attempting to describe with the tools at hand. In the Church we are brought together in fellowship, with God and with each other. We may have similar experiences or aspirations, but it is just as likely that we will have very little in common.

It's in the Church that we are challenged to incarnate the call to love God and our brothers and sisters for Jesus' sake. In the Church, love needs to become real and visible. So let's end with words from St Augustine of Hippo, a reminder of the nature of the love that binds us together in the Church: "In loving your neighbor and caring for him you are on a journey. Where are you traveling if not to the Lord God, to him whom we should love with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind? We have not yet reached his presence, but we have our neighbor at our side. Support, then, this companion of your pilgrimage if you want to come into the presence of the one with whom you desire to remain for ever" (Augustine, Tractatus 17). Good words, the sort that God uses to construct a new reality.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 18, Year C ,September 9, 2007, St. Mark's Church Antioch

*"Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace."* (Lk. 14:31-32).

"Stuff happens": a slogan for the ages, which seems to have first appeared on bumper stickers and then worked its way out into the cultural mainstream. You'll forgive me for mincing words, but this is a sermon. "Stuff happens" seems to mean that bad things happen without any rhyme or reason, pointing toward the random quality of life. Napoleon Bonaparte is supposed to have said that if he had to choose between a good general and a lucky one he would choose the lucky one. In a world where "stuff happens" you need good luck, after all. In a world where "stuff happens" its hard to plan for the future, or calculate your choices with any real certainty, because of this random quality. Maybe you'll be lucky, and maybe you won't. Our world identifies with the world of "stuff happens" (that's why it's on those bumper stickers), and there is something profoundly true about the way the universe seems inexplicable and defies predictability and calculation.

So let's leave this world of "stuff happens" for a moment, and go back to... Napoleon Bonaparte! This may be one of the few sermons in Christendom today that quotes the erstwhile Emperor of the French, so hold on for a second. "The first qualification of a general-in-chief is to possess a cool head, so that things may appear to him in their true proportions and as they really are" (Burnod, *The Military Maxims of Napoleon*). So it's not just luck, but calm, careful attention and awareness of reality, that makes for success. "Stuff" may happen, but we're not helpless; paying attention does make a difference, and if we don't panic in the face of the "stuff" that life throws at us, we might even discover that we can make our own luck.

I don't hold up Napoleon as any kind of Gospel exemplar, but it seems to me that in today's Gospel Jesus is talking about some of the same things, even using a military metaphor to talk about the need for calm, careful attention to the reality around us. We are supposed to have faith (that is, a cool head), and also to plan ahead, calculating the cost of discipleship realistically and then embracing the life that faith requires. Jesus doesn't want any of his disciples to stick their heads into the sand, and to live in denial of the real requirements of faith. This is realism, robust and firmminded attention to what lies ahead. "Stuff" may happen, but disciples are not powerless. Faith requires that we plan, not that we don't plan; faith requires that we turn toward the future in hope.

Now here's the 20th century German theologian Moltmann, "Creative action springing from faith is impossible without new thinking and planning that springs from hope" (Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*). So what's your plan for discipleship? Where do you need to invest yourself in some calm, careful attention to the reality around you? Where do you need to plan ahead and to take action? Life is not just random, no matter how it sometimes seems to appear to us, but there is divine intentionality at work. We try to puzzle it out, the meaning of it all, but we can't; yet still there is our need to respond to God's call and to plot a course ahead. It's true for us as individuals, and true for Christian communities like St Mark's, Antioch, and for the Diocese of Tennessee. We need to be paying attention to our context, the reality around us, and planning accordingly. This paying attention and planning you might describe as prayer, but that's another sermon. "Stuff" doesn't just happen. The key piece is to take stock, and move ahead as Jesus' disciples.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 21, Year C, September 30, 2007, St. Michael's Church Cookeville

*"Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."* (Lk. 16:29).

We begin with a powerful and disturbing image from Jesus' story about the rich man and the poor man: the great chasm that separates those in heaven and hell, the disjunction between those in bliss and those in torment, the division of the righteous and the unrighteous. A chasm is a "deep, steep-sided opening in the earth's surface", so when a chasm opens up it's possible for people to be quite close to each other but nevertheless irreparably separated by the chasm. I think that every film ever made about arctic exploration contains at least one scene where the ice opens up and threatens the travelers with a steep plunge down into the abyss, into the unbridgeable chasm that opens up beneath them. People get separated, they cannot return, and so the story goes.

Notice that the great chasm, the final and irreparable chasm, is predicated on another division at the beginning of the story: the separation between rich and poor. In the small villages and cities of Jesus' day, rich and poor lived closely together. Unlike our own day, when rich and poor tend to cluster or be clustered together in enclaves, in his day no wealthy person could go far without encountering the beggar at the gate, the "Lazarus" of the story. Though not physically distant, a great chasm separated them, the chasm between poverty and wealth. There is division and separation and other perils of discontinuity that draw people apart by means of this chasm. There is destruction here as well: destruction of human fellowship, community, and hope.

Jesus' story challenges us to bridge the chasm between rich and poor, before this chasm becomes the eternal one that divides the righteous and the unrighteous. The story Jesus tells is not so much about the great chasm of the day of judgment, the unbridgeable divide between the righteous and the unrighteous, but about the chasm we must bridge between those who are cut off from each other. Our action, or lack of action, in reaching out to our fellow creatures, has everlasting consequences. We need to build fellowship, community, and hope, or we will find ourselves on the wrong end of an eternal divide. People are pulled apart and divided by chasms that open up suddenly, finding them unprepared and unready, but we should not be among those who slip and fall to their death.

So the question for us is, where in our lives does the chasm open? Where are we pulled apart from one another? Where are we separated and divided, from each other and even within ourselves? Where is the division and separation in our lives, the discontinuity between what we are and what we're supposed to be? Are there chasms opening up in your life? Or to put it more positively, where is God urgently offering you fellowship, community, and hope? This is *"the life that really is life"* (1 Tim. 6:19), as the Apostle puts it in our second reading, the life we are meant to take hold of. That life is our anchor when we balance on the precipice, when we teeter on the edge of the chasm.

There's a charming image from one of St. Ephrem the Syrian's sermons, that posits yet another chasm, the one that separates God and humanity. This, of course, is the fundamental chasm, which underlies everything I've been talking about: the chasm between rich and poor, and the chasm of eternal judgment. All separation and division has its source here. Ephrem was a deacon, theologian, and poet, and he imagines that when faced with this chasm, Jesus takes his cross and places it down so that it bridges the gap. That chasm has been crossed, the chasm between life and death, by the One who rose victorious from the dead.

Our confirmands this morning are a reminder to us that new life is possible. They're willing to move ahead with us in fellowship, community, and hope. They're helping us to build connections and overcome separation. Together, we're invited to move away from the edge of the chasm and to walk across the bridge.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 22, Year C, October 7, 2007, St. Francis' Church Goodlettsville

*"The righteous live by their faith" (Hab. 2:4).*

I realized this weekend when Andy Petite picked off Kenny Lofton as he tried to steal third base in a post season game that I had faith that the Yankees would win. Baseball is a pretty theological game, as sports go: you can make "errors", after all, and everything in baseball counts (like the hairs of our head, it's all "numbered"). Faith like this is not completely rational, of course; and then again, faith can be misplaced. By the way, the Yankees went on to lose that game, so I guess my faith was misplaced. A colleague of mine (a Red Sox fan) believes that the New York Yankees are evil, and so anyone who has faith in them has embraced the great Satan. I told you baseball was theological, at least for some people.

Faith for the Hebrew prophets was fundamentally "trust", belief that God would stand with and for the People, and would be faithful to his covenant. So a person who "has faith" looks for God to be faithful. Faith is really not about something we have, but about who God is and what he's done. That's why the "righteous" are contrasted with the "proud" in our first reading, from the prophet Habakkuk: because the proud rely on what they have done, but the righteous rely on God.

This is the faith they live by.

But let's get back to baseball. The sports fan who has "faith" probably isn't making a theological statement, but is saying something about the general benevolence of the universe. It's possible to believe that good things will happen, to have faith that things will turn out all right, without having faith in God. People do this all the time, and not just about baseball, but about really important things. We're hopeful, as human beings, even when we don't know why. We can trust, and surely that's a good thing, but it's something else to trust in God. Trust "in general" ("baseball trust") may even be the first step to faith in God, so I don't want to discourage it, but it's not what we're talking about when we talk about Christian faith.

Christian faith is relentlessly particular: it's faith in what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Listen again to what our second reading says: *"But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus"* (2 Tim. 1:12-13).

Faith here isn't "baseball faith", faith in the general benevolence of the universe, faith that good things will happen, but something else. It involves a *"standard of sound teaching"*; it involves *"the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus"*. That's faith "in particular", faith in and love of a Savior. That's not "baseball faith", but faith in Christ.

So what are we trusting in? Christ crucified, of course, and risen from the dead. Faith is not just trust, but faith "in" something. Faith is not just an attitude or disposition, but can take shape in some statements like those we have in the Creed. We say "I believe" because this is the faith we live by: these statements about the crucified and risen Lord of the Universe. These are the things that God has done to be faithful to us, to bring new life to those who were dead.

We need to have faith in something; indeed, in someone. So where are you putting your faith? These are questions for every believer, questions of ultimate meaning. Are you living a "faithful" life, a life that's marked by trust in God? And then again, what is it in your life that shows that you are expecting God to be faithful to you? Have you got all your bases covered yourself, or do you have faith in God? (Sorry: I told you baseball was theological.) He raised Jesus from the dead, so I guess he can bring new life to you. That's the kind of life we need to start living now.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 23, Year C, October 14, 2007, Trinity Church Winchester

*"He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan."* (Lk. 17:16).

There's a story in Taylor Caldwell's book, *Grandmother and the Priests*, that's stuck with me over the years. Two young priests, one Roman Catholic and one Anglican, share a compartment on a train in England. Each looks down on the other, and tries to establish his superiority; it's the nineteenth century, and each young man has social and religious pretensions that he's eager to assert.

It's not an edifying spectacle, as each young man attempts to outdo the other in snobbishness. At the next stop, a stranger gets on and joins them in the compartment: someone who is different from them, a foreigner who looks, sounds, and even smells different from them. The two young men draw together in solidarity, now asserting their "Englishness" in reaction to the stranger. They congratulate themselves that they are not like the foreigner. After a little while the new occupant, in broken English, begins to quiz the two priests about who they are. "Iss-men of Gott-Holy Iss Nam". As the two priests from two different Communion begin to explain themselves, they start arguing with each other. After all, a serious social and theological gulf separates these two young snobs. Then the stranger reveals that he is a rabbi, a refugee from persecution in Russia, where his children have been killed and his congregation scattered. He's delighted to meet follow men of God.

Suddenly our young priests are ashamed of themselves. They realize what they've done. They've been taught a lesson.

Strangers have a lot to teach us. I think that's the point of Jesus' encounter with the ten lepers. He heals the ten, but only one turns back to give thanks. The one who returns is a Samaritan, member of a group that pious Jews had nothing to do with. In other words, he's a stranger, a foreigner, an enemy. It's this person who has faith, this person who gives Jesus thanks. The stranger is the one who teaches Israel.

Strangers are important in ancient Israel: usually seen as on the other side of the religious divide; Gentiles who are a reminder that God's People are special, the inheritors of the Covenant. Yet it is a stranger like Ruth who stands by Naomi, and who becomes one of Jesus' forebears. Under the New Covenant, Gentiles are invited to become a part of the People of God. Strangers are included in the Israel of God.

Now that brings us to another lesson that the stranger teaches, the one that concerns our salvation. When we encounter the stranger, we're reminded that we too were once strangers. Jesus is the one who has welcomed us. We're the ones who've been included. We're the ones who have been healed. We're the ones who need to give thanks. The healing has been costly, precious in fact, because it's been purchased on the cross. Only Jesus' death and resurrection could turn strangers like us, people alienated from the life of God, into Jesus' brothers and sisters. Faith is the key. We've been given a new life, a new beginning, a new relationship with God.

Then there's a final twist to the lesson of the stranger, the one that concerns our mission. Not only were we once strangers, welcomed by the Son of Man, but now we get to greet strangers ourselves, and discern in them the person of Jesus. The Samaritan who turns back to give thanks reminds us that the Church has a universal mission, in all times and all places, not simply in our culture among people like us, but to all people. To all people, but especially among those most in need. 'Then the righteous will answer him, *"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"* And the king will answer them, *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."* (Matt. 25:37-40).

Strangers are important. Strangers have a lot to teach us. Who's your stranger? If you look carefully, and pay attention, you may see your own salvation.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Proper 24, Year C, October 21, 2007, Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

*“Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak”* (Heb. 32:24).

If you want a little more background to this sermon, or are even seeking a more coherent version of it, I encourage you to check out Elie Wiesel’s book *Messengers of God*, from which I have freely cribbed this morning. Credit where credit is due.

So with that disclaimer (let me ask you), who was Jacob wrestling with? Remember at what a critical juncture in his life Jacob had arrived: after years of cutting corners, getting into trouble, and being in exile, Jacob is finally returning home. He brings with him his two wives, and two concubines, and his many children, as well as all his worldly goods. He has good reason to believe that his brother Esau will still be angry at him, even after many years, because he has stolen their father’s blessing. It is the night before he expects to meet with his brother; it is the time of crisis which comes to us all. Jacob is risking a lot by returning. He divides his people and possessions into two groups because he expects at least one will be destroyed. Now he is alone; it is nighttime, and who among us has not experienced this sort of crisis? So who was Jacob wrestling with? He’s presented as a man, a human being, by the writer, but there seems to be more to him than meets the eye.

The first attempt at an answer is that Jacob was wrestling with an angel; and not just any angel, but with his own guardian angel, a spiritual doppelganger. At the moment of crisis, Jacob is struggling; and one strand of interpretation is that the encounter that Jacob has is a tussle with another piece of himself, represented by the angel. So the encounter is a matter of character, its shaping and forming. Will Jacob have what it takes? Before the crisis, Jacob has to reach deep within himself in order to find what he will need for the facing of the new day.

When the crisis comes in the form of the encounter with his brother, Jacob is ready. He has found the resolution within his own character in order to meet what is ahead.

The second attempt at an answer is that Jacob is wrestling with God. *“For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved”* (Gen. 32:30). Jacob is wrestling with the call of God, wrestling with God’s claim on his life. He is, after all, a patriarch, the one chosen to be the father of the People of God. The fact that he cuts moral corners and continues to get in trouble only illustrates that God has called him freely, improbably, to his service. God gives gifts freely, God calls people freely, and that’s grace, God’s free power and presence. But Jacob has to accept the call, and so he and God wrestle to a draw. At the end, he receives a new name, Israel, the name of the People.

Jacob’s also changed by the contest. Afterward he walks with a limp. Though he has seen God, he still lives. In the midst of crisis there’s transformation.

So the question for us today is how willing we are to let our character be shaped; how willing we are to answer the call of God. In his own crisis, on the night before his death, Jesus prayed that he might do the will of his Heavenly Father, and (Luke’s Gospel tells us) an angel appeared to strengthen him. In his ministry, the pattern of transformation is fixed by his death and resurrection, and his invitation to share new life with him. Can we reach deep within ourselves to find what is necessary to respond? Can we allow God to transform us for the work ahead? Can we bear to be upheld by his grace, in spite of our own failings? We wrestle with ourselves and we wrestle with God, but he sustains and strengthens his People and helps us to meet the new day.

The Rt. Rev’d John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Sunday after All Saints' Day, November 4, 2007, All Saints' Church Smyrna

*"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."* (Rev. 7:9).

Defeat: that's where we begin this sermon, though I promise you it's not where we will end. Our people don't know much about defeat, not the sort that leaves your country devastated and occupied by the enemy; but God's People knew this kind of defeat, in the time of the Babylonians.

Their country Israel had been reduced by foreign invasion to little more than the capital city Jerusalem. Then, terribly and inexorably, the walls were breached, the Temple destroyed, and the People driven into exile. Defeat. Abandonment. It seemed that God himself had turned against them.

Now God had willed what had happened, but for a purpose. The People were sent into exile by God to learn to rely on him, not on the walls of the city or on the supposed presence of God in the Temple. Their defeat had been total, but it was God's plan to bring the People back from exile.

It was God's intention to lead them again to Jerusalem, the City of Peace, and to dwell with them forever.

And the People did return, though not without sadness for what had been lost and for the years of exile. It's said that when the Temple was rebuilt that those who remembered its glory of former days wept with the memory. That Temple too would be destroyed by other invaders.

Wherever God was leading them to, it must be to a different place, a city not built with hands.

So that is how we get to the glorious vision from our reading today, of a multitude drawn from all the peoples of the earth, gathered in the Heavenly City worshipping God. These are the exiles: not the exiles of Israel, but of all exiled humanity, driven from our true homeland Paradise but now welcomed back to the new home God has prepared for us. God is building a City for us, the place where we will be together in his presence. God will be at home there too, as he was in the Temple in Jerusalem, but in a new way. God has made his home with his People in Jesus Christ, has made himself one of us. We find him in our midst, as we look around us now at the saints of God.

I told you I would start with defeat, but not stop there. Defeat and exile are followed by new life: that is the pattern God's People have come to know in Jesus Christ. In his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ our Lord has experienced defeat, abandonment, the desolating absence of God, and become the source of new life for all of us by being raised from the dead.

Learning this pattern, and experiencing it in our lives, is what makes us saints, the saints of God. There is the breaching of the walls, the going into exile, and it seems in God's deep and inexplicable wisdom that these experiences for us are the start of the road home. These experiences make us the holy people, the saints, we are called to be. God's at work here, in what looks like defeat, bringing new life and victory.

It's a time of transition for the People of God at All Saints', Smyrna, a time for new life and new ministry. The signs of it are all around us. There is new life for God's People, as they gather around the Lamb of God in worship. The walls of this place may crumble, but God has prepared a City for us, the City which is to come. What has been best shaped here, in the experience of this congregation since its founding, has not been these buildings but the lives of these people, of these saints of All Saints', Smyrna. You are the building that's being built! You've learned the pattern of death and resurrection over the past year especially, and been shaped as the saints of God. God has been knocking you into shape, getting you ready to serve him, getting you ready to gather in the city that still lies ahead. The resurrection life of Jesus Christ is found among us, as we look around and see the new life that is at work.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 27, Year C, November 11, 2007, St. David's Church Nashville

*"That day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed..."* (2 Thess. 2:3).

The Shakers had a term for the devil: "old ugly", and as far as I'm concerned that just about says it all. I don't have too many opportunities to preach about the devil, so I've been saving that old piece of wisdom from Shaker song for a while. Apparently the act of driving out the devil was a part of the inspiration for Shaker dancing, the thing that drove the stamping of the feet and the ritual movement that gave "the Shakers" their name. "Be joyful, be joyful, for Old Ugly is going... good riddance we say!" The idea was that with the singing of the song and the stamping of the feet that the devil would be driven out of the community assembled for worship. It's not quite "Tis the Gift to be Simple", but it worked for the Shakers.

Evil is ugly, disfiguring; and so I think it's in this sense that Satan gets identified with the original ugliness. You know the story: the devil as a rebel angel, a spiritual power in rebellion against God. It's not that the devil is homely; it's that he's "out of whack", out of proportion, disordered. My mother used to say to us, "Don't be ugly" when we were misbehaving; and it's absolutely true, our sins are ugly and make us ugly. So the apostolic writer in our reading today talks about "the lawless one", the one who is in rebellion against God and who attempts to take God's place. What could be uglier than that?

But let's not make more of the devil than we need to. In our baptismal liturgy we promise to renounce Satan, and all spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. At the root of sin is the ugliness of self-will, a spiritual issue that comes from within. We can't blame it on the devil. "The devil made me do it!". But on the other hand, sin seems to have a power that goes beyond any individual, infecting communities with a power of evil that seems to go beyond any individual's responsibility and certainly defies any individual's power to eradicate. This ugliness is not rational, it defies our good intentions, it is hardened and desperate.

So now we can go beyond the devil and look for relief. It says in our Collect today, "O God, whose blessed Son came into the world that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life". That's what's happening at this baptism today. By the power of God, "Old Ugly" is being put away and a new community is being created and renewed; a community in which the power of sin will no longer reign. Those who are being confirmed are looking back at their baptisms, and confirming the promises. In the community of faith we put aside our self-will, and our desire for our own way. We leave our own ugliness behind, the old, old ugliness of the human race, and embrace a new innocence. There is new birth, a new beauty, and a new community.

Our second reading holds up for us this new community, the Church. No one can wage war against "Old Ugly" on his own. That is why in the Church we take on the identity of Christ, the One who has contended with the devil, with the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God, and won. What does that new identity look like to you? Can you see it emerging? Can you see it coming to light in the people around you? Jesus has triumphed over sin and death themselves, and become the source of new life and new innocence for us. By baptism we are made one with him, and become heirs of eternal life. It is Christ who lives in us. None of us can wrestle with the devil on his own. We need the grace of God, and the identity we find in this community.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 28, Year C, November 18, 2007, Church of St. Joseph of Arimathea  
Hendersonville

*"But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." (Mal. 4:2).*

Everybody loves a happy ending. When the hero and heroine are reunited, the enemy vanquished, and the screen credits begin to roll, we know the story is over and everything's resolved.

"They lived happily ever after": the conclusion of every good story and of every satisfying drama. It doesn't always work that way, at least not in our time. When God's People the Jews were in exile in Babylon, their hope and expectation was that God would bring them back to their own city and to their own land. This was their horizon of salvation. It was a fantastic promise, seemingly impossible to fulfill, but God did it. The People came back. The Temple was rebuilt. It seemed like the end of the story, the beginning of the time after the drama when "they lived happily ever after".

But it was not to be so. The prophet Malachi lived in the time after the return from exile, and through his prophecy and others we come to know that this was not the end of the story, the conclusion of the drama. Malachi tells how the People continued to cheat God and each other by their disobedience, by turning away from each other and by offering to God the very least that they could. The priests of the Lord were corrupt, and the people were unfaithful: the priests and people that God had brought back from exile! They had arrived at the point before them on the horizon, had entered into the promise, and now it seemed that the People believed that God's promise was in vain. *"You have said, 'It is vain to serve God'"* (Mal. 3:14). Was that all there was to the fulfillment of God's promise? If so, not very interesting, not very profound, and not really very fulfilling.

There's a gap revealed here between promise and fulfillment. It's not that God's promise was a false one, or that the People spoiled it by their faithlessness (though they certainly were faithless). The gap is about something else: God's promise is always beyond our capacity to imagine fully its fulfillment; God's promise is always larger than we are, and is fulfilled in ways that are not clear to us at first. It doesn't run according to our timetable, with a conclusion we can wrap up quickly. God's story is far more complex than we are capable of conceiving; and in any case, it's God's story, and not our own. So the fulfillment is going to be better than we could credit, and the resolution not as simple as we might think.

When Malachi prophesizes the rising of the sun of righteousness, with healing in its wings, he's pointing to a new horizon, a fulfillment that lies beyond the return to Jerusalem and the end of exile. He's pointing us to Jesus, to the coming of the Messiah, to the something or someone that lies beyond what the People expected, or what we expect. "Happily ever after" didn't just mean coming back from Babylon, or entering into Jerusalem, but could only be fulfilled by return from a more profound exile, the exile we all experience as sinners. There is judgment that comes with the sun of righteousness, and it makes the healing possible. There is fire that comes with the day of the Lord, but it brings with it new life. There is death and resurrection, which is surely a fulfillment of the promise that goes beyond our capacity to imagine.

We continue in our own day to experience the gap between God's promise and its fulfillment. There continues to be a horizon ahead of us, bounded by the return of Jesus Christ.

There is a happy ending, but we are not yet there. Part of what is being judged is our own expectations and our own timetable. There remains as well a gap between God's promise and our own expectation of its fulfillment. Are we really expecting God to act in ways that go beyond our own capacity to imagine the result? Do we think that his power is spent? The message of the prophets is that if God's People will be faithful, the power of God will be unleashed in ways that we cannot conceive. God's happy ending is unimaginable in its glory and joy.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 29, Year C, November 25, 2007, St. Barnabas' Church Tullahoma

*"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest"* (Lk. 19:38).

Shepherds used to tie a bell to the ram who led the flock, so that the other sheep would know in what direction to head. From this we get the idea of a "bellwether", from the marriage of the word bell and the Middle English word for ram. A "bellwether", like the ram from which it takes its name, is a leading indicator of trends, the person or thing you look for to show how everything else is going to go. In politics and economics and in every other realm strategists look for signs, and try to distinguish the "bellwethers" from the stuff that signifies nothing and leads nowhere. If you can identify the "bellwether" you can predict where things are headed and follow accordingly.

Our Gospel today is a "bellwether", a leading indicator of trends; but it is a "bellwether" that takes faith to distinguish, and patience to fulfill. Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem is the first act in a drama that leads to death and resurrection; in fact, we're most used to it in the Palm Sunday liturgy. Jesus enters Jerusalem; is greeted by the crowd as the liberating king; but then is arrested and put to death. In dying and rising again he becomes the Savior of the world. But the triumphal entrance is also a "bellwether", a leading indicator of trends, the first sign of the way that things are going to go. It foreshadows the coming of Christ in glory, not as Redeemer of the human race through death and resurrection, but as King and Judge at the end of time.

We are creatures of time, but God is not. History has a beginning, and it will also have an end, but God has no end. At the end of time we will find Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, gathering to himself all things. He will be claiming his own People and establishing his Kingdom. His reign will be everlasting because it will be outside of time as we experience it now. The entry into Jerusalem is just the harbinger of things to come, the foreshadowing of the future. This "bellwether" needs faith to be perceived. From the purely human perspective, Jesus just looks like another failed messiah, less like a "bellwether" and more like a dead end. But faith lifts our eyes beyond human history to see Jesus risen from the dead, and coming in glory to rule over all things. Our hope is in him, a hope which moves us from where we are now to the future God has prepared for us.

This "bellwether" also needs patience in order to be fulfilled. Human history does not end with Jesus' resurrection but continues on, giving the human race a time and a space in which God continues to act and we continue to respond. God's unfathomable wisdom gives us this time and space, in which our salvation is worked out patiently. "Patience" is rooted in the Latin word for "suffering", and we're reminded that this time and space between resurrection and second coming is a time of endurance but also of opportunity, time and space in which God will act. So as we peer into the future, are we ready for what is coming, for the One who is coming?

Have we correctly distinguished the signs? Are we ready to be claimed by Christ and to become members of his kingdom? Christians are those who are able to tell the signs of the times, and who have struck out after the bellwether who is Christ himself. He's our leading indicator, our King and our Judge, and he is leading us to himself at the end of all things.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Advent 1, December 2, 2007, Church of the Advent Nashville

*"Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Matt. 24:42).*

"Standing watch": it's an image drawn from a more violent era, when it was unwise to sleep without someone else staying awake to keep an eye on things. In the ancient world, people built walls around their cities and made sure there were guards on the ramparts, "lookouts" who made sure that thieves and other enemies didn't creep up and surprise them. "Vigilance" means literally this: staying up through the dark hours of the night "in vigil", "watching out" as it were in the sense of facing out from the campfire and paying attention to what's "out there".

"Keep awake", Jesus tells the disciples over and over again in this part of Matthew's Gospel; pay attention to and keep watch for events that you cannot predict or schedule, things that stand outside your circle of vision which you must be prepared for even though you have no idea when or if they will come. This part of the Gospel, which tells of the end time or apocalypse, is shot through with the imagery of guardianship and siege, the language of the sentinel and of a people at bay. Even today, a sailor stands his watch, a cop walks his beat, a soldier mounts his guard, through the long hours of the night, waiting and "watching out". We may not feel the constraints of watch-keeping in the same way, but it remains a part of our imagination and even of our experience. Just go to the airport and you will be reminded that we are not at peace, and still rely on people standing guard.

Jesus tells the disciples to keep awake, however, not because the enemy might be sneaking up on them, but because they need to be ready for the coming of the Lord. The watchman here is keeping an eye peeled for the coming of the new day; not on guard against the enemy, but for the sign that the army of deliverance is approaching. God's People are vigilant because they want to be ready to act; to open up the gates and welcome the King when he comes. There are fierce events predicted at the time of his coming, true enough; but the King draws near in order to deliver, not destroy.

This is the Christian hope now, as Jesus' disciples today gather to look for his coming again.

We have our own vigil of sorts to keep, staying spiritually awake so that we don't miss something important and fail to act when we're called on. We don't want to be found morally asleep, slumbering away with our senses dulled, missing God's call to us when he speaks. Each of us is capable of "sleepwalking", of being unaware of what's really important in our lives and of the significant choices before us. We don't want to be deaf to Jesus' call when it comes. We ought to be vigilant, in the sense of being awake to what's happening; we ought to be keeping watch so that we are found faithful when the relief column comes in view.

We ought to keep our hope sharp and not let it be blunted. Hope is faith oriented toward the future, and that's where we need to be looking. Here's a hint for keeping hope sharp: if you're keeping watch, it helps to pray! Remember, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done". If we focus our hearts and minds on our deliverance, then we will see it when it comes. When we celebrate this Eucharist, we commemorate not only Jesus' death and resurrection, but we await his coming again.

The kind of prayer we make today is the sort that helps to fulfill its own hope. Remember, Christian hope is faith oriented toward the future, and our future is with God and Christ's coming again.

So is it time for you to wake up and keep watch? Is it time for you to start paying attention and see what's happening around you? Do you really want to keep sleepwalking? What do you need to do to get ready for what's coming, to be prepared for events that we cannot predict or plan for?

That's a good question to take away today. It doesn't pay to be complacent. We have to be ready, and that means we're going to have to keep watch, "look out", and expect God to show up.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Advent 2, December 9, 2007, Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

*"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Is. 11:1).*

It's one thing to read and understand a book; it's another thing altogether to be able to "read" and understand God. Take for instance Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth century Carmelite Friar. The decisive point in his life was reached one Winter day when he passed a tree on the road, bare of leaves, and realized that with the Spring it would come to life again. Self-evident, on one level; the natural order of things, and perfectly understandable. *"Custom, natural reason, are everyone's assurance"*, writes poet Denise Levertov about this seemingly unremarkable encounter with the leafless tree; *"we take the daylight for granted, the moon, the measured tides"* ("Conversion of Brother Lawrence"). But Lawrence didn't look at the tree and see natural processes; again Levertov: *"Wooden lace, a celestial geometry, uttered more than familiar rhythms of growth"*. What Lawrence saw, what he "read" in the tree, was the grace of God, the pure gift of life that God gives and gives again. "Considering that within a little time the leaves would be renewed, and after that the flowers and fruit appear, he received a high view of the providence and power of God" (*The Practice of the Presence of God*).

This is the ministry of the prophets of the Old Testament: they look at what is unremarkable and commonplace and see what God will do. They see more deeply, under the surface of things, and get to the real heart of the matter. They remind the People of God of truths they have forgotten; they foretell for the People the new things that God will do.

This is the "shoot" that comes out of "the stump of Jesse": the prophet Isaiah foretelling the birth of the Messiah. He looks at the bare, ruined remnant of the Kingdom of Israel and its ruling family and sees the new life that God will bring. The prophet looks at a different sort of leafless tree and sees the flower that will bloom.

*"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them"* (Is. 11:6). Isaiah is "reading" God's reality; he's simultaneously recalling the past and foretelling the future. The past is the Garden of Eden, where innocence reigned; the future is God's kingdom, where righteousness is at home and peace prevails. The prophet is recalling the People of God to a reality they have tried to disavow by their sins; he is foretelling at the same time the new thing that God will do through grace.

There is so much we take for granted. We look but we do not see; we hear but we do not understand. Advent is the time to look more deeply, listen more closely, and see and understand what God is doing. There is more going on than the familiar customary things that present themselves at first glance. Advent is the time to heed the warnings of the prophets; to grow in wisdom and understanding, in counsel and might, in the knowledge and fear of the Lord, as the Prophet says today. These are the gifts of baptism, after all, and they lie within each one of us. Our participants in the catechumenal process, like the little child of the prophecy, are going to lead the way for us this season. They are going to remind us of the ever-present need to forsake our sins, and to share the life of Jesus the Messiah. They are going to help us look more deeply and to listen more closely.

Look around as you go home today; look at the leafless trees and the winter landscape. Can you see the flower that will blossom? Can you see the new shoot that will come forth? Can you see it as something more than a natural process; as, in fact, a gift from God, something that we received as a grace rather than something we presume on as a given? Can you see the gift of new life that in fact is within you? Advent, and every season of the Church year including Christmas, has its culmination in Easter, in the pouring forth of new resurrection life. That's where our candidates are headed, and so are we. Can you see the new life that will spring forth?

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Advent 3, December 16, 2007, Church of the Epiphany Sherwood and St Agnes' Church, Cowan

*“What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?” (Matt. 11:7).*

When the first Europeans arrived off the coast of North America, they looked out and saw a wilderness, unknown territory without the familiar markers of their own civilization. The expanse of thinly settled forest struck them in two ways. First, it was an intimidating and fearful place, full of strange people and wild beasts, isolated and far from home. It was dangerous and edgy. But if frightening, it was also a place where old constraints and burdens could be escaped, and a new life begun. They were leaving behind the old, and looking for a new start. There would be challenges, surely, but the challenges would prove their faith; the wilderness would become the Promised Land. So these explorers and settlers set out into the wilderness, surrounded by challenge and opportunity.

Now imagine another wilderness, the biblical one we know from the story of faith. This is the desert that the People of God, ancient Israel, set forth into in order to follow the call of God. They left the settled country behind them, the place where they had been slaves. God had promised them a new country, their own land, but first they would have to go through the wilderness. The People were afraid, because the desert was dangerous; it was unfamiliar and they were reluctant to go. They were leaving behind the only civilization they had ever known. Yet in the wilderness they would start afresh and learn the lessons of faith. By venturing forth they would leave slavery behind, and become dependant on God alone. There was a future prepared for them. They would make a new start.

This is why John the Baptist, in our Gospel today, carried out his ministry in the wilderness. John was the last and greatest of the prophets, and he's reminding the People that being faithful requires entering the desert, the fearful waste place, so that they can learn to rely on God. He's taking them back to the place where the People left the wilderness in order to enter the Promised Land, in order to expand their imaginations. He's calling them to a new Exodus: not an exodus from slavery, but an exodus from sin. He's reminding them that there is a future prepared for them, and of their need for a new start.

John is preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. He's calling the People of God to conversion: to turn around from the direction they were headed, and to begin to head in a new one. He brings them down to the Jordan River so that they can enter the Promised Land once again. John is engaging their imaginations so that they can see a new world. The way forward is the way of Exodus: out into the desert so that they can learn to trust in God.

So what did you go out into the wilderness to see? Are you seeing what you are supposed to see? Are your eyes being opened to the new world God is creating for you? We need to go out into the wilderness, out into the desert; we need to leave behind the things that we are used to depending on so that we can learn to depend on God. What is the sin that we need to leave behind? What is the new life that we need to begin? What is the new world that is waiting for us? It's time to make a new start. There's no need to fear. God is preparing the way in our hearts for the coming of the Messiah.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Advent 4, December 23, 2007, St. Bernard's Church Gruetli-Laager & Church of the Holy Comforter Monteaagle

*"When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (Matt. 1:25).*

One theory about dreams is that while we sleep random bits of our memory float to the surface of our consciousness, jumbled together in a haphazard way that doesn't mean much. The dream I had last week about the four term papers that I needed to complete was a piece of my memory from long ago days as a student, brought to the surface perhaps by the fact that it was my sons' exam period. But it's also possible to take this idea one step further, and imagine that the dream is trying to tell us something that hasn't quite risen to our consciousness yet, using these same bits of our memory. So perhaps the dream about the four term papers that I needed to finish was really about some anxiety I have about some uncompleted projects. Part of me is trying to tell the conscious part that I need to get moving, and telling me that I'm going to be on edge until I do. It's an interesting idea, but who really knows what dreams mean?

The ancient idea was that God spoke through dreams, and the story of the angel messenger who appears to Joseph to announce God's plan is a case in point. The angel has a demanding message: Joseph is supposed to carry through with his marriage to Mary, because the child she is carrying is to be the Messiah, the Savior of God's People. God is giving Joseph a message that his subconscious mind could never have given him, but God is using bits of the People's past to convey the message. For the message had been there from the beginning, concealed (if it was) by God's purpose. *"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (Is. 7:14)*, from the prophet Isaiah, repeated in our Gospel today. The prophecy from the past had foretold the birth of a king, who would deliver the land from invasion; but now this piece of the past is being shaken up so that it points to the birth of One who will save his People from their sins.

I don't know what's going on in your dreams, but I do know that if we want to hear God we have to listen closely and respond faithfully. Joseph was a person who did this, and he's become our model of obedience. "Obedience" is rooted in words that mean "to listen to each other". So being obedient means listening closely and then acting faithfully; what the Apostle Paul calls *"the obedience of faith"* (Rom. 1:6). Joseph is listening carefully, recalling the ancient prophecy (whether consciously or unconsciously, I don't know: by the time Matthew tells the story it's in *his* consciousness) and knowing that God required him to act obediently, in spite of every practical consideration that might stand in the way. Faith is what makes this response and action possible, and faith is the gift of God. But when we listen carefully and respond faithfully, incredible things happen.

So are you listening carefully and acting faithfully? Here's some things to consider. If you want to hear what God is saying don't wait for him to speak in your dreams. Of course, he might speak in your dreams, but he might also speak to you through the Scriptures which we read every Sunday, and which I hope you are reading every day. God's People know his promises from the place where he announces them, in the record of his saving history. God might also speak to you, not through an angel, but through another member of the community of faith: if not the preacher, then one of your fellow Christians. God might also speak to you through prayer, if you make yourself available to listen to him. God gave us one mouth and two ears, and our prayer ought to give at least twice as much time to listening to what God has to say to us as to telling God what's on our mind. Our prayer ought to conclude with "thy will be done". We listen carefully, we act faithfully, so that in obedience to God we can do his will.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

## Christmas Eve, December 24, 2007, Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

*"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Lk.).*

In 1938, Dame Freya Stark spent the Winter in Yemen, travelling with two archeologists, exploring the remains of early civilizations on the Arabian peninsula. As it turned out, the writer and explorer Stark did not get along very well with her two colleagues, women of an understandably scientific bent whom Stark couldn't forgive for being so uninterested in the present day Yemeni people and their culture. After a while, this discrepancy in understanding became almost humorous: the collision of the modern Western scientific mind with a strange world almost biblical in its parameters. When the three Englishwomen came to stay in the town of Shibam, along the ancient incense trade route, Stark's archeologists became alarmed at the strong smell of donkeys in their lodging. Stark writes, the smell "reminds them of typhoid, which is a pity, for it might just as well awaken happier associations, such as the beginning of the Christian religion" (*A Winter in Arabia*).

Stark was absolutely right: our faith was born in a stable. Christmas brings together the ordinary and the extraordinary, the humble and the exalted. We have shepherds and the angels, the stable and the palace, three kings and the son of a carpenter. It is a story of remarkable juxtapositions and surprises; one we have grown used to, but no less remarkable for that. Most surprisingly, of course, it brings together God and humanity, in the person of Jesus Christ: an extraordinary juxtaposition if there ever was one. It stretches our imaginations.

Our celebration tonight reminds us that ordinary people (like the shepherds in our Gospel reading tonight) can become the vehicles for the most profound truth to reveal itself; a conviction of the dignity of the ordinary and the human that is one of the characteristics of the Christian Gospels. It is this conviction, some have suggested, that continues to reverberate in the modern novel, theatre, and cinema. We imagine the experiences of others, like us but not identical, not only to be entertained but also to be informed. By doing this, we stretch our imaginations (and imagination, after all, was what Stark's two colleagues seem to have lacked).

The Gospels taught us to do that, to look for what is profound in the midst of human life, to stretch our imagination and enlarge our sympathy. This is at the heart of the Good News: a proclamation of truth in the course of the commonplace. God is revealed in the everyday world; in fact, he becomes one of us in order to save us.

So we need only look around tonight, to see extraordinary things in the midst of the everyday. I take it as a given that we are ordinary folk, the sort of people who might have learned by now that it is among us that God is most likely to turn up. It is for us, for ordinary human beings, that Jesus Christ was born into the world, to suffer death and to rise again. He brings us new life. It came to the shepherds, to Mary and Joseph, and it comes to us. It all begins here, tonight.

So look around carefully this evening, especially in the faces of your fellow worshippers, family and friends and others. If Jesus Christ was born in a stable, he can certainly turn up at Christ Church Cathedral; if the angels announced the Good News to shepherds, it won't take much to bring the Good News to us. Stretch your imaginations tonight, enlarge your sympathies: God has become human for our sake.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee