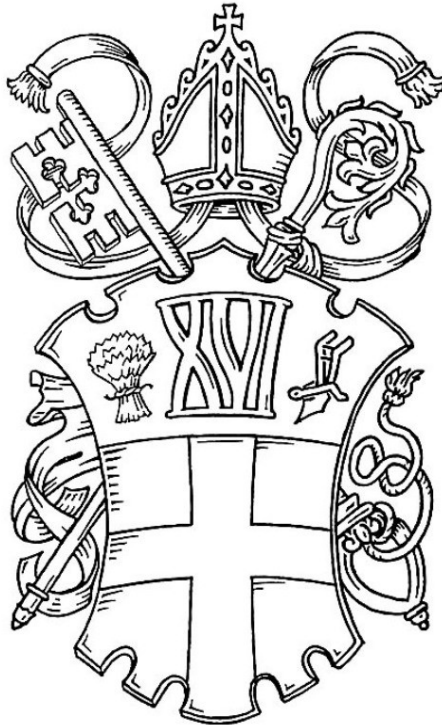


Sermons 2009

Bishop John Bauerschmidt

Diocese of Tennessee



“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).

The Second Sunday after Christmas, Year B, January 4, 2009
Church of the Epiphany Lebanon

"This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'" (Matt. 2:14).

It's a time of political transition in the nation, the end of one administration and the beginning of another. Political commentators and pundits of all sorts are prognosticating on the meaning of it all, while the rest of us are wondering as well. It's also the cusp of the year, "out with the old and in with the new," with 2008 hardly dispatched and 2009 barely begun. Some are making resolutions for the new year, so change is in the air. We know where we've been, and where we are right now, but we don't yet know where we're going.

Our Gospel reading delineates just such a transition: in fact, a political transition like some others, but one with a great meaning for the Holy Family. Their transition is marked by the death of King Herod, the politically astute usurper who had become the Roman-sponsored ruler of Israel. Herod sought to kill the infant Christ, spurred on by the visit of the kings from the east and threatened by the child's own implied claim to his throne. Joseph takes the child and his mother to Egypt to wait out Herod's administration, which like all ancient tyrannies would only end with his death. The bit that's left out of our Gospel today puts the whole story in perspective, since it's the account of the children that Herod massacres in an attempt to kill the infant Christ. Then, as our Gospel tells us, the political transition comes, and it's safe to return to Israel.

One transition suggests another, one embedded in our Gospel story itself. When the Holy Family goes to Egypt, we're reminded of a story about another tyrant. The People of Israel had once been slaves in Egypt, called out of captivity by Moses to serve God in the land that he would give them. The Pharaoh and his army were destroyed at the Red Sea in a great moment of transition both political and religious, as the children of Israel regained their liberty and became the covenanted People of God. The memory of the Exodus is invoked for us as the Holy Family returns from Egypt to Israel.

Both transitions, the story of the child returning from Egypt and the story of the original Exodus, conjure up an even greater transition. Where is Jesus heading? The story of the flight to Egypt, the visit of the kings and the massacre of the innocent children, reminds us that Jesus began his life with conflict and death, and ended it in the same manner. The themes are there from the beginning. Jesus' ministry is all about the great transition, from death to resurrection; it's all about the movement from slavery to freedom, from sin to new life. There's a costly price for this new life, which is paid for by Jesus Christ himself, so that the gift may be ours.

We know where Jesus is headed, but where are we headed? We're still faced with political transition, and nary a one of us knows what the new year holds, politically or financially or in any other way. We're full of good intentions and new year's resolutions. Still, we know where we've been and where we are now but we don't know where we're going. Or do we? Perhaps the transition we see in the death and life of Jesus Christ holds the key to our own destiny. This of course is the not-so-modest claim of Christian faith. Remember that the gift is ours. The great transition from death to resurrection, from slavery to freedom, from sin to new life, is also our transition. We ought in fact to know where we're headed.

Those confirmed and re-affirmed today are reminders of what is true for all of us: the gift of new life that God has given us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is a transition for them today, coming at the cusp of the year. There are promises to reaffirm and vows to be made at this critical juncture, poised as they are between what was and what will be. It's a transition point for Church of the Epiphany as well, as we peer forward into the future and celebrate the new life that has been given us by Christ. After all, we know where we are headed.

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

The First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, January 11, 2009
St. Paul's Church Franklin

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:1-2).

Chaos is creative. The German poet Schiller is supposed to have kept a rotten apple in his desk drawer, to give him inspiration when he wrote. I'm indebted to journalist and critic Rebecca West for this story, who observed that "one cannot create without a little sluttishness packed away somewhere. Neatness and order are delicious in themselves, but permissible only to the surgeon or the nurse" (Black Lamb & Gray Falcon). I don't know about you, but I like things in their place, which is perhaps why I'm a bishop and not a great poet like Schiller. But even those with a sense of order have to admit that creativity is not a tidy process, proceeding according to a prescribed formula. It's the nature of creative genius to be exceptional. There are messy bits that go with creativity, like Schiller's decomposing apple; the chaotic mischance of false starts and wrong turns; yet out of all this chaos comes new life.

So it is that the story of Creation begins in chaos, in a creative medium that loomed large in the imagination of the ancient Hebrews. Creation begins with the primordial deep, the formless void out of which all else comes in the Genesis story. Life begins there with the Spirit moving over the face of the waters. It's in this darkness that light will shine. In the mind of God's People Creation is always threatened by the primordial deep, by the waters of Creation that may come rushing back to overwhelm the world. It's only in our own time, in the midst of ecological crisis, that we've recaptured this sense of nature's fragility. This is what the story of Noah is about, the collapse of life back into the primal elements; it's also the backdrop for the story of the Exodus, when God holds back the waters of the Red Sea so that the People of Israel can move from slavery into freedom. The terror of the Jonah story for the Hebrews, of the storm on the sea, was the terror of the void that lurked just outside the boundaries of Creation.

But it is out of this chaos that all life comes. God is the great Creative Genius, and his creativity masters the formless void. God's at work in the chaos bringing life and light. There's messiness in Creation, and perhaps this messiness is always out there lurking around as the Hebrews feared; but it's the stuff of transformation and it's heading in the direction that God has willed.

This brings us to the story of Jesus' baptism. Here God is not working to create but to re-create all things, through the person of the pattern man, the great exemplar Jesus Christ. The waters of the Jordan River become the place where new life is emerging, new life in Christ; the water of baptism harkens back to the formless void over which the Spirit moves to create a new person redeemed by Christ. We all follow that pattern. Once again, the chaos is creative, or perhaps re-creative, as we are snatched from sin and death and are given new life in baptism. If Schiller's apple was rotten or decomposing, we ourselves know that the primary movement for Christians is in the other direction, from death to life.

If chaos is creative, then where does this truth find you? Surely not hankering after chaos (who'd want that?); but even the most orderly life contains the mischance of false starts and wrong turns. We're in process; we're being transformed; it's messy but we're headed in the right direction. Those being confirmed today are bearing the truth of this out. Wherever they are or wherever we are, it's there that God finds us; he even finds us in the midst of our mistakes, and brings new life out of the chaotic stuff that threatens to engulf us. God is using that very medium, the stuff we fear, to fashion us according to his will. We're emerging from the waters and receiving new life. Whatever our identity was, we have a new identity in Christ. Chaos is creative, and in whatever metaphorical or real mess that finds you, God is bringing you to new life.

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

Ordination of Peter Floyd to the Priesthood, January 16, 2009
Grace Church Hinsdale, Diocese of Chicago

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, ‘Here am I; send me’” (Is. 6:8).

“Think globally; act locally” - a political sentiment short enough to fit on a bumper sticker, which is where I first encountered it a few years ago. Usually I'm leery of drawing too much wisdom from bumper stickers; after all, how can anything that compressed really be thoughtful or helpful? Isn't the “sound bite” part of our societal problem; the urge to overly simplify? Still, I think I know what it means: keep the big picture but don't forget to act in the particular and the specific instance.

The prophecy of Isaiah stands as a case in point, an illustration of the principle of thinking globally and acting locally. Biblical prophecy has a broad historical sweep, looking back into the dim past and forward into the far future, but none of the prophets has the depth or range of Isaiah. His prophecy gives us a panoramic view over more than two centuries, tracing the course of God's care for the People of Israel in some very hard times, in a period of repeated invasion. The People faced a time of destruction and exile extending over many decades; yet the Prophet, guided by God, seeks to understand God's providential care of his chosen People.

Of course, Christians take this prophecy even further when they see it fulfilled in Jesus Christ. His birth is the sign of God's love for all humanity; his death and resurrection are the means of our salvation. It's the proverbial view from 40,000 feet. It's a case of the “macro” level, the universal human issue, the great sweep of history illustrated. There couldn't be a better example of what it means to “think globally.”

Yet there's something else in the prophecy of Isaiah, which takes us beyond “thinking globally,” and gets us to “acting locally;” something in the prophecy which keeps to the big picture but doesn't forget the particular and specific. That particular and specific “something else” is the actual call of the Prophet. Though God in the prophecy addresses himself to the case of a troubled humanity, yet here in our reading God speaks to the Prophet himself. The Prophet hears the voice, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”. And then comes the answer, as individual and specific as anything can be: “And I said, ‘Here am I; send me.’”

No matter how wide the range, how great the sweep, how universal the issue, when it comes to God's dealing with humanity there is always our own encounter with God, as individual and specific as anything can be. As God called the prophet Isaiah, so he calls us. God is not just at work in the abstract; he is at work in our own lives, though we are not always conscious of the action nor are we always able to understand its meaning. The call of God means that God has a claim on us, that he seeks to work through us to accomplish his will for the world. God calls upon human beings to respond in love to serve the world and our own fellow creatures. God too seems to “think globally” yet to “act locally,” in our own hearts and minds.

When God addresses his call to us, he calls for us to go beyond ourselves and to extend ourselves in his service. The call requires us to do things that we didn't think we were capable of. We do these things by grace. God is calling us, each of us, to this encounter with himself, so that each of us can be carried beyond our own selves and stretched into a whole new configuration. God's call shapes us, transforms us, conforms us to a new pattern of life and service. Our pattern is Jesus Christ, who stretched out his arms upon the cross so that we through him might be saved.

This is true for all of us, but perhaps this occasion of the ordination of Peter Floyd to the sacred order of priests is a good time for us to remind ourselves of this truth. For surely the leaders of the Church are called to illustrate in their own lives the way in which God calls us and stretches us in the process. The life of a priest is a living testament to the grace that is present in each of our lives, a living example of the way in which God shapes us, transforms us, and conforms us to the pattern of his Son. We ordain with the laying on of hands as the outward and visible sign that God both claims us as his own and also supplies the grace that makes us able to respond. The lives of those called to ordained ministry are “ordered” in a particular way, so that all can be reminded of God's claim and call upon us.

Peter, it is traditional on these occasions to ask the ordinand to stand. My very dear colleague, God has called you to the life and work of a priest in his Church. This is a great moment for all of us, but it is a time of stretching for you. Having come through the challenges and joys of selection and preparation for ordained ministry, we may be tempted to think that the time of stretching is past, but in truth it has only begun.

As you begin your pastoral ministry as a priest you will continue to be transformed by the crucified and risen Christ. You will celebrate the sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist and through them the dying and rising of Christ will be proclaimed and enacted in the life of the Christian community. You will not do these things in isolation, but in union with the whole Church. In fact, God will continue to use the Christian community, your family and friends and parishioners, to conform you more closely to the pattern of his Son. The pastoral ministry that God has called you to will be the individual and particular means by which God will stretch you, using you for the service of your brothers and sisters in Christ, and also working out in you your own salvation. God is at work in the world, in the great sweep of time and history, but he is particularly here this evening. It is our privilege and joy to share with you in this moment in which God is so powerfully present, calling and claiming and equipping you for the work of a priest in the Church of God.

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

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, January 18, 2009
Holy Trinity Church Nashville

"Therefore Eli said to Samuel, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" (1 Sam. 3:9).

Kelsey Grammar's character Dr Frasier Crane in the 1990's TV sitcom began his radio program with the phrase, "Hello, Seattle, I'm listening". Grammar played the psychiatrist host of a call-in show, where people phoned in their perplexities and problems and engaged in some dialogue with their sympathetic host. The radio doctor provided a therapeutic ear, dispensing some advice (much of it pretty funny, of course), but mostly just listening.

Listening is important, whether you are the host of a call-in show, a psychiatrist, or a Christian believer. We're given the sense of hearing, and through it we take in information about the world; but we also listen carefully with the inner ear so that we can "get the sense" of what is said. We're trying to understand, to distinguish, to get the gist. Speaking and listening are primary ways we communicate, and what is most tricky about them is getting the meaning right. When people speak, we listen carefully because we want to understand.

This brings us to the call of Samuel, our first reading today. When God is the One who is speaking, we want to be listening very carefully indeed. Samuel, of course, doesn't know at first that it is God who is calling him; he needs the counsel of the older and wiser Eli to understand and respond. To listen, Samuel has to be quiet and wait. When we're having conversation with God (which is what prayer is), it's important to remember the old spiritual maxim that God has given us two ears and one mouth, and that our communication with God ought to be in a similar proportion: mostly listening and only occasionally speaking. If Samuel had been chattering away he would never have heard God speak. In order to understand, to distinguish, to get the gist, Samuel has to be obedient and listen. If he's going to "get the sense" of what God wants him to do, he is going to have to be still and "bend an ear".

There's a little bit more here, too, that needs saying. The listening that the child Samuel does in our reading doesn't just require paying attention, but also requires making himself available. If he's listening then he's going to have to respond. Understanding will lead to action. In listening to the call of God, Samuel's life is changed, and he becomes a priest and judge of the People of God. He's listening and making himself available, and God is making use of him.

That brings us to Holy Trinity Church, which is a bit like Israel in Samuel's day. It's a time when the Word of the Lord is rare, perhaps, a time when there is no frequent vision. Maybe we're wondering what's next for this community of faith. Well, let's take a leaf out of First Samuel and be servants who are listening. It's a time of waiting and paying attention to what God will say. It's a time of prayer. We all have things that we want to talk about; plans that we want to share with God, and questions that we want answered. Fair enough. But we need to employ our ears as well as our mouths; we need to understand, to distinguish, to get the gist. In order to hear what God is saying we are going to have to listen closely so that we can "get the sense" of what's being said. This is true for everyone involved: parishioners, Vestry, the bishop himself.

We're also going to have to make ourselves available to God in this process. Understanding will lead to action. Like the disciples in today's Gospel, who hear the call that comes from Jesus Christ, we're going to have to respond to what we hear God saying about Holy Trinity Church. God will make use of us in this process. Our confirmands are reminding us of how God calls people to his service and looks for their response. We're going to be the means by which change will come. Remember, he brings life out of death through Jesus Christ, and so the transformation that will come through faithful listening will be wondrous indeed. We're making ourselves available to God; we're listening and paying attention.

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

Commemoration of Phillips Brooks, Diocesan Convention, January 23, 2009 Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Eph. 3:21).

These are tough times: tough times for the nation, for the world, and for the Church. The economy poses challenges for the people of the Diocese of Tennessee and for our parishes. I hear the same theme as I travel around the Diocese, making visitations and connecting with clergy and people. It's a struggle for all of us, with hard choices to face, and I want to begin this annual Convention by acknowledging this outstanding fact of our life together. We're in a different place than we were a year ago, for reasons that go beyond our ability as individuals to control.

The good news is that we have lots of company, many fellow pilgrims on this road we're traveling. The challenges we face are societal, though they tug at us as individuals. We have the opportunity to pull together and to face what is ahead. It's also good news that God is mightier than any challenge that confronts us. We have confidence in the grace that lies concealed in every crisis; grace that will see us through, come what may, by the mercy of God.

Our celebration today is just the beginning of the work of this Convention. Along with worship, we have elections, resolutions, and a budget to undertake. We will learn a bit more about important developments and programs in the Diocese of Tennessee. Most especially, I'm grateful for the presence of the Rt. Rev'd Charles Jenkins, Bishop of Louisiana, the person I continue to think of (even after two years) as "the Bishop." There's a long, long, connection between our two dioceses stretching back to their very beginnings, which we're delighted to renew today. Bishop Jenkins brings us a word from the Gulf Coast, three and a half years into the societal crisis there, brought to the fore by Hurricane Katrina. So many of us in Tennessee have experience of relief work on the Gulf that I know we will be inspired and encouraged by the news of what God is doing there, and reminded of what God can and will do among his People when they lean faithfully into the challenge.

Let me not skip too quickly over the budget that comes before you for action, about which we'll hear more later. Our budget is required to do many things. There are needs that we have not been able to address in this budget, and important programs that are either underfunded or not funded at all. We have had to phase out programming and positions, and reassign resources. The Diocese of Tennessee is not immune from the challenges that face our people and our parishes, and this budget reflects that.

There is another piece of our financial situation to consider as well, of more lasting effect. The Diocese is the co-borrower or guarantor of a number of significant bank loans made to parishes, intended to help them grow and expand the ministry of the Diocese as a whole. Our indebtedness is significant and serious in relation to our ability through unrestricted assets to meet those commitments. The same economic challenges that have had an impact on our annual budget have also had an impact here. As a Diocese, we are going to have to dig deep within the resources that our common life affords in order to continue to move forward. We are in this together, "in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). There are no quick fixes here, and we will need to be in this for the long haul.

This brings us back appropriately enough to the Good News, the Gospel that the Apostle Paul places before us today. We're given a vision of the Christian community and its members, "*rooted and grounded in love*" (Eph. 3:17), that is "*filled with all the fullness of God*" (Eph. 3:19). Paul earlier in the letter talks about the Church, "*the fullness of him who fills all in all*" (Eph. 1:23): the People of God with a universal call out into the world. The Apostle talks elsewhere about "*the care of all the churches*" (2 Cor. 11:28), a care he exercises for the sake of the mission. His care is our care as a diocese: the care of the Church, that community which is filled with the very fullness of God.

And God's power will need to fill us. Remember where we started?: "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory". St Augustine once wrote in a letter, "*The Law commands; grace supplies the strength to act*" (Ep. 177.5). Grace: that ever abundant gift from God that manifests itself as the strength to act. And will we have the strength to act? Will we have the grace to move forward in our mission? I am confident that the answer is "yes" because I trust in the mercy of God, and have known his grace in my own life. You too have known his grace and his power which cannot fail. "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations".

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

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, January 25, 2009
St. Francis' Church Goodlettsville

"And immediately they left their nets and followed him" (Mk 1:18).

I wish it were that simple. If only decision making were that clear, and the human capacity to respond to God's call were unlimited. That word "immediately" which occurs twice in our Gospel reading today is a little bit worrying, if we take it to mean that it was easy or natural for the disciples to respond to Jesus' call. The Gospel writer Mark is fond of this word, but for him it's really not about how the disciples pack up quickly and move out in obedience to the Word. Mark's about something else in this first chapter of his Gospel; he's giving us a sense of the breathless pace and even the bewildering progress of Jesus' ministry. Now that's a theme I can respond to, and which echoes with me. Does it echo with you? "What a long, strange trip it's been", according to the Grateful Dead. I put it to you that we don't know anything about how strange that trip can be until we've been on the road with Jesus.

But let's get back to decision making, and our human capacity to respond to God. Our reading from Jonah compounds the problem, by showing us the prophet speaking the Word of the Lord to the people of Nineveh, and the people responding obediently. It's a surprising development, that obedience; but what we ought not to lose sight of is the fact that Jonah himself only arrived at this point, of speaking the Word of the Lord, after running away as fast as he could. You know the story. Jonah is called, and to avoid the call he embarks for the very end of the known world. But God has another idea, which is where the whale comes in. Jonah gets back on track, but that's not the end of the story, since Jonah continues to make bad decisions and fails to respond faithfully. You might say that the portion of the story we read today is the only one in which Jonah is obedient. Before and after, he's taking issue with God.

The point of the story of Jonah is more like this: human hearts are hard, and our capacity to respond to God is constrained by sin. We make mistakes all the time. Human discernment, too, remains a chancy business, as we attempt to see what God is doing in our lives. People act in surprising ways, for reasons that are unfathomable to human wisdom. Discipleship is a complicated business because, as the Psalmist says, *"the human heart and mind are a mystery"* (Ps. 64:7).

I think it's fair to say that when it comes to "immediately," disciples are much more likely to "immediately" run away. This is perhaps the distinctive stance of the Church. A wise man once said that the last time the Church acted as one was when it fled from the cross. We mess up on a regular basis. We lose heart and, like Jonah, we head for the hills.

Yet, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, in spite of everything, "we do not lose heart." Years ago, at an awkward junction in my ministry, I came to that point where I joined the ranks of Jonah, and wondered whether a ticket to Tarshish might not be the best way to go. I just didn't know what the answer was to the difficult question before me. But God supplied my need. My heart was divided, but God's purpose did not waver. After I lost hope in him, God did not lose hope in me.

So maybe you're like me, and like our friend Jonah. These are difficult times for people, hard-pressed by the economy. Yet God has not abandoned hope in us. He's continuing to use us as his disciples to propel forward his mission. He continues to use you, members of St Francis' Church; to call upon your judgment, imagination, and resources, to respond to him.

"And immediately they left their nets and followed him." We are called by God, and though our first instinct may be to go in the opposite direction, God is still going to bring us to the place we need to be. He's going to supply the grace that will carry us forward as disciples, as people who are obedient to him. Mark's point is that it is a bumpy ride; still, Jesus brings us, breathless, bewildered, and yet believing, along the same road he travels.

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

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, February 1, 2009
St. Matthew's Church McMinnville

"They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority" (Mk 1:22).

There're many different kinds of authority. Some come with a proper form of credentials: witness all the fuss about the oath of office our new President took a couple of weeks ago. Would he have had the proper authority without the right oath? If you think that's a silly example, you might think again, about the police officer who shows up at your door to search your house. He needs to show you his warrant, his form of authorization from the judge, in order to enter. We certainly want everything in order there before letting him in. Authority here involves power, resting in our society upon the ballot box, the ultimate form of political credentialing.

Another sort of authority comes with expertise. We talk about educational "credentials," our authorization to be "experts," but to be an authority in this sense you need more than a degree. You need real knowledge in order to have technical expertise. In fact, if you know more about something than anyone else, they even say you're the one who "wrote the book."

That expression brings us close to a third sort of authority, different from either political authority or technical expertise. "Authority" is rooted in the word "author," the one who creates something, a book or movie or what have you. An author has authority because everything depends upon him. An author makes things happen, shaping and forming the characters and events. Characters can't speak back to their creator, after all; they can't insist that the plot line is bad or that they really don't want to do what's written. The author has moral authority: the power to describe how things really are. "What's the moral of the story?" we ask. Someone with moral authority appeals to the way things are supposed to be, the intention of the author.

This is the sort of authority that Jesus has. He doesn't rely on power or expertise (though he has all sorts), but on the authority of the Author. The trick is that in the story of the human race, the characters are endowed with the power to talk back, to argue with their Creator. It's a bit like the film where the actors take issue with the writer or the director and insist on playing the part their own way. Or even like the Woody Allen film in which the character himself leaps from the screen and refuses to do what he's told. Human beings can chart their own course. We have the ability to re-write the script and to introduce all sorts of nonsense, at will. And the story of the human race is the story of how the power that we possess to re-write the script has been misused and abused.

In our Gospel, Jesus has the moral authority that comes with being the Author of the entire Universe. If the unclean spirits can argue with him, they also recognize his authority. The dialogue they engage in is a real one, with back and forth, but at the end Jesus says, *"Be silent"* (Mk 1:25). In other words, it's time to get the story back on track. This is good news for the human race, because we have wandered a long way from where we need to be in the story. Through Jesus Christ, the human heart and mind, the human will, is invited into God's heart and mind for the human race. His love is for us, even when we are against ourselves. We're characters, after all (some of us more so than others!), and by the end of the story we will arrive where the Author needs us to be.

Those being confirmed and received today are reminding all of us of Jesus' invitation to us; the invitation to be conformed to God's will. We don't need to have unclean spirits in order for this to be difficult for us. It's hard for us to understand what our role is, and even harder sometimes to play it. So we pray for the grace to know what God's will for us is, and we make ourselves available to God, again through grace, in order to be able to do it. God's masterful scripting, the genius of the Author, has brought our confirmands and each one of us here today, so that through the grace of Word and Sacrament we might follow through. God's at work in our world, in our lives, with the authority of the Author.

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

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, February 8, 2009, Christ Church Alto & Church of the Holy Comforter Monteaagle

“And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons” (Mk 1:34).

The novelist Calvino tells the story of The Cloven Viscount, an imaginary aristocrat who goes forth to battle against the Turks and is cut in half in combat. Improbable as it seems, the Viscount is recovered from the battlefield, horribly maimed, and returns home, where he begins to terrorize his tenants and other dependants. Apparently his horrible experience in battle has soured him. But then something happens: the other half of the Viscount which was assumed to be destroyed shows up, the good half which was missing. The two become rivals for the love of a beautiful woman, and eventually they fight each other; a strange contest, each with one arm and leg. During the duel they rend the old wound that had divided them, and a magician-like doctor is able to put the two bleeding halves back together again. “Now he’s healed,” says the doctor. “Now he’s healed.”

When Christians talk about salvation, they’re using a word that’s rooted in the idea of health, of physical and mental well-being. Holiness and wholeness are related concepts, and integrity of self is both spiritual and physical. The miracles of healing that Jesus performs in the Gospels are sacramental, outward and physical signs of a more profound healing that Jesus brings to the entire human race. Salvation is the restoration of the whole person, divided by sin and cut off from God. Health is what God wills for us; health in body and soul.

I like Calvino’s story because of its notion of division within the self. Like the Viscount, we are fragmented: a truth we feel in our bones, literally in the aches and pains of everyday living. When not pre-occupied by these taxing aspects of our physical existence, we are emotionally fragmented, distracted and mentally divided by the many cares that come our way. Human beings are also divided, one from another, and there is a long story of pain that goes with this. And, of course, in Calvino’s story we are pointed toward moral division, the reality of human failure and sin. There’s a good half and a bad half within us and that divides us too.

The Church’s ministry of healing speaks to these divisions, and offers wholeness and integrity to the whole person. The laying-on-of-hands and anointing address our physical and emotional burdens, and point most profoundly to the healing of ourselves and of the whole Creation by the ministry of Jesus Christ. When we speak of “spiritual healing” we are recognizing that there is more to this ministry than our physical and mental integrity; but at the same time we are also saying that real salvation includes our physical and our mental health as well as the health of our soul. Christ died for our sins, but also for all that ails us. Christ died and rose again to new life so that the whole person might be healed, the whole person saved.

At the end of Calvino’s story, the local villagers and others who have seen these remarkable events half expect that now things will be better in the lands of the Viscount. This turns out to be the case, yet Calvino then tells us, “Some might expect that with the Viscount entire again, a period of marvelous happiness would open, but obviously a whole Viscount is not enough to make all the world whole” (The Cloven Viscount). We might agree with Calvino, as we look around us at that world, and look within ourselves too. But Christian faith points us toward the One who can heal the whole world. *“By his wounds we are healed” (Is 53:5).*

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

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, February 15, 2009
Church of the Redeemer Shelbyville

"Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it" (1 Cor. 9:24).

In 1954 Roger Bannister, a young British medical student, became the first man to run the mile in less than 4 minutes. Bannister had missed winning a medal at the 1952 Olympics, but had then set his sight on being the first to break this record. His achievement created quite a stir at the time; and Bannister became the best known record-setter in regard to the mile, even though his new world's record held for only a little over a month. Sports Illustrated made him its first-ever "Sportsman of the Year" in 1954. The current record holder has shaved off about 16 seconds from the 1954 record, a reminder of what a modern training regimen can do (steroids or no steroids).

Roger Bannister went on to do some other things, however. As a doctor, he practiced in neurology; later he was knighted for his lifetime achievement and became the Master of an Oxford College. When he was asked by an interviewer whether his record with the mile was his singular accomplishment, he pointed instead to his life's work in neurology. Work like that won't get your face on the cover of Sports Illustrated, but perhaps it brings more lasting satisfaction.

Paul the Apostle in our second reading uses the metaphor of the race to encourage the church in Corinth to persevere, to press on and to stretch itself to achieve its goal, which is God. Just as an athlete has to train, so Christians have to train themselves and submit to discipline in order to win the prize. Self-control must be exercised. In the ancient world in which Paul lived, the winner of an Olympic race was given a garland of bay leaves, a perishable laurel crown upon his head. So in contrast Paul talks about an imperishable crown that will be given to the Christian who crosses the finish line, who is willing to run in order to win.

It's a timely lesson for us as we approach Lent. Christians take on a discipline during the season so that they can learn self-control, training themselves so that they can grow in grace and the knowledge of God. We stretch ourselves so that we can become proficient in the practice of faith. This Lent will be a little different, as we all make do with a little bit less anyway than we had last year. But that doesn't diminish the Lenten discipline. We give things up so that we can come to depend on God; we take on new disciplines so that we can grow in charity towards both God and the world. We're like the runner who stretches himself in the race so that he can cross the finish line when it counts.

But while we're running, let's not forget the lesson. The key achievement is not what we do this Lent or any other, but the shape our lives take as a whole. At the end of this Lent, you may have broken the record; they may be ready to put your picture on the cover of Sports Illustrated or whatever the Christian equivalent may be. But that won't be your singular achievement, the most important thing you should be known for. What's the day-in, day-out routine look like? If you've been in training, what effect has it had, really had, on who you are? What's your lifetime achievement? It's that which brings satisfaction, and in God's eyes the prize. It's our lives that count, the virtue that we find there. Character is what's being shaped by this training. If we want to cross the finish line, we need to be in the race for the long haul.

Our confirmands today are reminding us that God is about the transformation of our selves, the whole of who we are. Christian character is being formed. The crown is not given because of this or that spiritual exercise or experience, but because God has claimed our lives. He's claiming mine and he's claiming yours, as we meet together in his presence. He's making grace available to us in the sacraments, and preparing us for the finish line we must cross. What we need to do is to run to win.

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

Celebration of New Ministry, Polk Van Zandt, February 21, 2009
St. Paul's Church Murfreesboro

"So the LORD said to Moses, 'Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel'" (Numbers 11:16).

This morning we focus on leadership, because we're celebrating a new ministry at St. Paul's Church. Everybody here has had a crash course over the past two years in what leadership means in a Christian community, whether they've wanted to enroll in this course or not, because St Paul's has been in a leadership transition. Not just in the most obvious sense of the search for a new Rector, for a new leader, but most profoundly in the development of new leadership across the whole spectrum of parish life. Members of the Vestry have had to think again about what it means to be a leader in the Christian community; members of the staff and volunteer leaders have had to reflect on their own leadership roles; and members of the Search Committee have had to exercise their own leadership in guiding the parish in setting forth the qualities of Christian leadership that this community seeks. No member of St Paul's has been able to be complacent and take leadership for granted, but has had to "think again" about what it means to lead. And of course our new friend and colleague Polk Van Zandt has had to think about these things too, as he has discerned his new calling and come to this community of faith. All of us, every one, have been involved in this leadership transition.

Keep these things in mind as we look back to ancient Israel. This too is a community in transition, moving out of slavery in Egypt toward a new life in the Promised Land. In between the exodus from Egypt and the entrance into Canaan lies the desert, the place of wandering for forty years. This is a time of testing for leadership, and the leader who's being tested is Moses.

A regular feature of life in the desert is regret, a looking backward to what seems in retrospect the "good life" in Egypt. "Who cares that we were slaves?, at least we had enough to eat!" "Why have you led us from our homes out into this desert to die?" Moses' leadership is closely questioned, and is found wanting by the People. They are dissatisfied, and their groaning and complaining can be heard practically all the way back to the Nile River.

In the chapter from the Book of Numbers from which our first reading is drawn, a lot of this unhappiness is hung on a group called "the rabble;" but it's clear from the text that even if the source of strife is projected on to a particular group, everyone else buys into it and joins in the gripping. Everybody's implicated. A "rabble" is a negative gathering, the Hebrew words for "rabble" and "gathering" being related, and this is certainly the case in the desert. The People as a whole are in danger of becoming a rabble, and the responsibility for that (strangely enough) is on Moses himself. Why? Because of course leadership takes responsibility.

There's a leadership "deficit" in ancient Israel at this awkward point in its life: not because Moses is a bad leader, either ineffective or tyrannical, but because the rabble, the negative gathering that the People are becoming, needs to be re-gathered. The People's carping about Moses' failing as a leader is really beside the point. His real failing is not that he's leading the People in the wrong direction, or that he failed to do the shopping before they left, but that by bearing the burden of leadership by himself he's failed in what is the chief defining act of leadership: raising up other leaders and new leadership for the future. The chief act of leadership, in fact, is transitional, calling for the passing on of the gift to others and requiring a look to the future.

The People need to be re-gathered, and so Moses moves as a leader ought, by gathering the elders for the sharing of leadership. God says, *"they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself"* (Num. 11:17). If the People enjoy gathering to gripe, then they need to be re-gathered for another purpose. The means by which this is done is by the wider dispersal of authority through the call to shared leadership. A gathering of leaders liberates the People from their tendency to become a rabble, and it comes through the instinct of leadership to share itself more broadly with others.

Here of course we're on solid Gospel ground. *"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends... You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last"* (Jo. 15:15-16). Jesus' own pattern of ministry is built around these things, around this pattern: intentional gathering, shared leadership, and a common mission.

So that brings us back to St Paul's Church in Murfreesboro. This is a Christian community that knows this Gospel pattern of leadership well. It's been one of the defining marks of the way in which St Paul's has developed in past years, a parish that has been defined by partnership and the sharing of leadership. It's been the same in this transitional time, and I expect it will continue to be so in the future. In calling your new Rector, you have sought someone who could re-gather St Paul's Church; someone who could tease out the gifts of leadership that are really within each member of the congregation. You've chosen well. Recognizing, authorizing, and nurturing the gifts for ministry that lie within us all is not an abdication of leadership; instead, it is the highest practice of the art. As Moses says a little bit later in the chapter, *"Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!"* (Num. 11:29). It's a day for God's People at St Paul's Church to gather, for the gift of leadership to be widely shared, and for the Spirit to be poured forth afresh on those who are called to mission and ministry.

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

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, February 22, 2009
St. Peter's Church Columbia

"And Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white" (Mk 9:2-3).

Every so often at my house, the picture albums come out, and it's time to refresh the memory. My wife Caroline is the keeper of the albums; and though we made a belated transition to the digital camera a few years ago, those albums are still around. In the days before digital photography, people collected and stored photos in this way; not much has changed I suppose with modern developments, except now people store more pictures on their hard drives than they ever did in an album. The pictures conjure up people, places, and events, making them live again in the memory; reminding us of what may have slipped to the edge of consciousness. There's the picture of the wedding day, the pictures of the old friends, the photo of the first house. We remember what others were like and what we ourselves were like, reconnecting in this way with a piece of ourselves. The snapshot catches something that we can reclaim.

I imagine today's Gospel scene as just such a snapshot, a picture in the Church's photo album that the community looked at on a regular basis. The metaphorical camera has caught something crucial, which is why this story appears in three of the four Gospels. It captures the glory that will be revealed, the glory of the Father revealed in Jesus Christ. This is the glory that will burst forth again at the Resurrection. And the snapshot also reveals something of Jesus own identity. *"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"* (Mk 9:7). It must be a good likeness, since we're still looking at it.

Somewhere in this picture is the key, as well, to our own identity. We're Jesus' brothers and sisters, so we too are the sons and daughters of God. Looking at this picture of Christ, the beloved Son, reminds us that we are God's beloved, his most precious possession. Maybe this truth has slipped to the edge of our consciousness; maybe it's something we need to be reminded of. God claimed us in baptism, but perhaps this is a piece of ourselves that needs to be reclaimed.

What pictures are in your photo album? Can you look back and reconnect with yourself, see the pivotal points that you would like to claim and keep in mind? Now of course you know I'm not talking about a real album, digital or not. These snapshots are hung in the great hall of memory. If you look carefully at them, you may actually see Something or Someone in the background, no more concealed than the face of God is in today's Gospel. Perhaps you remember the voice from heaven, or perhaps not. But God was present, whether or not we noticed at the time; God was present and can be found now as we look back.

When we reconnect with ourselves, we reconnect with God. If anything can make sense of who we are, if anything holds the key, that Person is God, who holds the clue to all personality. Our identity is wrapped up with Jesus' own identity; we are the beloved sons and daughters of God, and in the snapshot we see it all today.

Our liturgy today ought to be entered into the Church's photo album, as well; in fact, I think we can be sure it will be. And I'm not just talking about St Peter's photo album, but about the Great Church's record of its mighty deeds. Or again, perhaps we're talking about God's own family album. This celebration of confirmation is a significant moment in the life of the Church. It's a significant moment in the life of our confirmands, as well; a moment that shapes their identity and which reclaims their identity for Christ. It's a day that will be looked back on, a day which catches something crucial, a day in which the glory of God is revealed.

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

Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009
Trinity School for Ministry, Ambridge Pennsylvania

"Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly" (Joel 2:15).

The liturgies of ancient Israel fulfilled a familiar function: they bridged a gap between the sacred time of salvation history and the time in which the People lived. When God's People came together in response to the trumpet blast, there was before them the memory of God's mighty deeds in the past, and the prayer that those deeds would be made present now in all their power. The gathering that the prophet Joel calls for is meant to close the distance between the sacred past and the time in which the People lived, under threat and in the midst of devastation. *"Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry unto the Lord"* (Joel 1:14). The gathering of the People is a ritual action, a solemn remembering or recalling of themselves so that they can remember who God is, and recall that he is mighty to save.

Our own liturgies in the Church function in somewhat the same way. We come together as well to recall the memory of what God has done in past times and to claim it as our own salvation now. Just as ancient Israel remembered the great moment of liberation from slavery in Egypt at every Passover festival, so we gather week by week in our own solemn assembly in order to recall the death and resurrection of Christ by which salvation has been won. Just as the prophet called for the community to gather, to solemnly enact in ritual gesture the drama of redemption, so too the Christian community gathers to "Do this for the remembrance of me", and in so doing to be filled with life. Our liturgy for Ash Wednesday closes the distance between what Christ has done and that place which we now inhabit, and calls us into God's future as well.

During this Quiet Day I want you to bear in mind the sacred nature of our gathering and our fast; to bear in mind the distance that is closed by our solemn evocation of God's presence today. There is power in memory when we recall God's faithfulness and love. But there is also another distance to be closed here today; another gap to be revealed and overcome by the mercy of God. That distance is the distance between who we are and what we were created and called to be. The prophet Joel conjures it up in our reading today: "Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, *'Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach'*" (Joel 2:17). The prophet invites God's People to rend their hearts and not their garments, and to turn to the Lord their God, because there is a distance to be closed between us.

What we do today in this liturgy for Ash Wednesday is the ritual enactment of some truths that have the power to destroy, to demolish us utterly. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." There is the truth of human sin, of our falling wide of the mark, of our going astray on the way. These are explosive truths, so potentially incendiary and destructive that human beings will run from them and live in denial. Yet in the confession and absolution that are a part of our liturgy we own for ourselves the gap between what God made us to be and what we have made for ourselves, and place ourselves in the way of grace that comes to us as God's gift. We receive forgiveness, not destruction or demolition, from the God who loves us.

Most fundamentally, the distance that is closed by Christian faith is the distance between God and humanity. St. Ephrem the Syrian invited his listeners in a sermon to imagine the chasm that separates them from God, and to imagine Christ laying down his own cross to bridge the gap between. Can we imagine travelling the distance that separates us from God? The Good News is that we don't have to close that distance, for Our Lord Jesus Christ has already done so.

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

The First Sunday in Lent, Year B, March 1, 2009
St. Luke's Church Springfield & Grace Chapel Rossview

"He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mk 1:13).

Strange things happen to people who are exposed in the desert. You may see things, you may hear things, your mind in fact may play tricks on you. In the desert, you're far from the settled verities of the civilized world, "out of bounds" as it were. In fact, you're far from the "real world," from everyday life and everyday reality. The grip on reality may loosen. It's because you're "far out" that the desert is a place of testing, above all of spiritual testing. That's why Jesus goes to the wilderness, to the desert, to be tempted and to triumph.

There's a clue to the nature of temptation and sin in the desert experience. If your mind plays tricks on you in the desert, it's a reminder that temptation begins there in the mind, with the imagination. When the devil started out in the temptation business, in the Garden of Eden, his appeal was primarily to the imagination. Adam and Eve weren't tempted by hunger, by their physical needs, but by their imaginations. So the serpent says to Eve, *"God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"* (Gen. 3:5). Their imaginations are engaged; they're convinced that the reality they know can be replaced by another, in which they will be better, wiser, like God himself.

These days, you don't need to go to the desert in order to be tempted, in order for your imagination to be hooked and mislead. Images are all around us in the media, and just through advertising alone we are presented with a daily dose of unreality whose chief motivation is to make us spend and consume. Images like these can mislead the imagination. We're invited to reduce ourselves to being servants of these powerful idols. Talk about the mind playing tricks on you! Images of power and beauty and success, which will be ours if we will make an offering. Through our imagination, we see things, we hear things, and we lose our grip on reality. It's not the real world, but something false and less real. We leave the real world behind and embrace a false reality.

So there are some wild beasts out there; ravening and roaring beasts that can scent us and stalk us and tear us apart. But, like Jesus' time in the wilderness, there are also ministering angels. Our imaginations can mislead us, but those same imaginations are also the means by which we are inspired and given a vision of a different reality. We can be tempted, surely; but the point of the temptation story is that Jesus keeps his grip on God's reality, which is more true than our own. He makes no offering to the devil, but he offers himself for others. In terms of the real world, this vision may be "imaginary," but that's only a way of saying that it's through our imagination that new possibilities are put before us. It may be "fantastic," a word which not only signifies fantasy but also some rather wonderful things that we would be wrong to dismiss. Fantastic things like grace, like resurrection, like new life itself.

So don't let your mind play tricks on you. We're tempted, but Jesus has triumphed. We're surrounded by false images, by idols that we are supposed to worship; yet the way to new and larger life is found through Jesus' sacrifice of himself. We're supposed to follow that pattern. Lent gives us the chance to learn it. It will take imagination, but that's what it's all about. We need to have hearts wide enough and minds open enough to imagine the greater reality that is God's.

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

The Second Sunday in Lent, Year B, March 8, 2009
Church of Our Saviour Gallatin

"God...gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." (Rom. 4:17).

"You've got to have faith." People talk about it, but it's one of those words that need some definition. Think about it for a moment. Faith can be propositional, the affirmation of one thing or another, such as belief in God or in the resurrection of Christ. But faith has another sense, as well: to the ancient Hebrews, it was trust in God, that foundational sense of God's "trustworthiness." Faith here is something like assurance and confidence in God. Or again, in yet another context, faith is neither propositional nor foundational, but a matter of the will, the desire, the commitment of the self. When we "have faith" in this sense, we are orienting ourselves in a direction and dedicating our whole self to God.

This brings us to Paul's Letter to the Romans, and to the story of Abraham. Abraham is a figure to conjure with for Paul; he calls him *"the father of us all"* (Rom. 4:16) and for Paul he's an example of faith. For two reasons, in the Letter to the Romans: first, he believes God's promise that, even though he is an old man, and his wife Sara is well advanced in years, he will be the father of a multitude of nations. Abraham believes that God will be faithful to his promise and that he will have an heir, a son to inherit the Promised Land. God has made a covenant with Abraham and his family, and the covenant will extend to many generations.

The second reason is really an extension of the first, and brings us to the God who, as Paul says in our second reading, "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist". God gave Abraham and Sara a son, Isaac, in fulfillment of the promise; Abraham had faith that God would call Isaac into existence and be faithful to the covenant. But faith is also going to require something else from Abraham; it's going to require him to believe in the God who gives life to the dead. And so Abraham receives a command from God, to take his son Isaac, the child of the promise, to the land of Moriah, to offer him in sacrifice to God. Though it makes no sense for God to demand such a sacrifice, yet that is the command.

It's this story that lies behind Paul's reference to God giving life to the dead. Abraham is prepared to obey God's command, even though it makes no sense. Why give him an heir only to take him away? But this is faith, belief in a God who can bring life out of death. At the last moment the executioner's hand is stayed and Isaac is given back. He was as good as dead, yet God gave him life again. And of course, the story points forward to Jesus' own death and resurrection, the foundation of our faith that God gives new life.

As Paul describes him, Abraham was *"hoping against hope"* (Rom 4:18). That's a part of faith, too: trusting God in desperate times, believing that the future holds promise and that God is at work bringing new life. We might well believe that Abraham was in a tight spot as he raised the knife of sacrifice. But God was with him, and good things came forth. It was a tight spot, but there was room for faith.

It's good to know that there's room for faith in difficult times; good to know that God can bring life out of death. These are difficult times for our nation and for the world. People's confidence has been shaken, and some things that we relied on have turned out to be unreliable. Be careful what you put your faith in. We know that the biggest tests may still be ahead. But still, faith beckons; that is, faith in God, who is reliable and trustworthy.

"You've got to have faith." Our context, like Abraham's, is challenging, but we still move forward in faith. Members of our congregation today are giving us an example, by being willing to profess their faith and to commit themselves anew to Christ. God raised him from the dead, and gave him life, and he gives us life too.

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

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B, March 22, 2009
Otey Parish Sewanee

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (Jo. 3:16).

In the winter of 1943, a group of young German students at the University of Munich were arrested and executed by the authorities for protesting against the Nazi regime. Known as the "White Rose," Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans, Christoph Probst and a few others chose to engage in non-violent opposition to Hitler's Germany at a time when the Second World War was still going in Germany's favor, and no one could yet reliably predict the end of the "Thousand Year Reich." The group included Lutherans and Catholics and even a Buddhist, inspired by a dissident bishop; young people motivated by a mixture of religious faith, political conviction, and cultural allegiance. Unlike the German officers who attempted to assassinate Hitler after it was clear that the war was lost, there's a certain quixotic quality to the "White Rose." There's not much evidence that these students made any difference in the course of history; yet by their actions they affirmed their fundamental commitments as human beings even at the cost of their lives.

For the moment, place this story alongside our Christian talk about "belief." Our Gospel today exhorts us to believe in Jesus Christ, "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life," but we hear the words through a powerful filter. "Belief," we note, is understood primarily as intellectual assent. It's a trick we do with our minds. We also note how "belief" kicks in when we move beyond the facts. What's "beyond belief" is something that's incredible, improbable, not likely, but for many moderns it's precisely this territory that belief inhabits. We may believe in extra-terrestrial life or that the earth is flat, but most people don't.

What we learn about belief from the story of the "White Rose" is that it is really not just a trick we do with our minds, but a matter of fundamental commitment. The kind of belief that the Gospel writer is conjuring with is the sort you bet your life on. Belief doesn't require success, but it does require follow through. Belief doesn't just call upon our minds, but on the whole of who we are and everything we have.

Belief is also not a matter of probabilities or improbabilities, of facts that we evaluate, but something else altogether. People believe the truth, they don't calculate it; and truth is a moral category if there ever was one. If you're standing around and trying to figure the truth out, you need to quit and go ahead and get in the game. Again, if we go back to the "White Rose," the question for those young students was not the probability or improbability of Nazi defeat or of their work making a difference, but finally a question of moral conscience. Belief is the same for us, an expression of who we are and of how we are open to being shaped by God. Christian believing is not about believing the unbelievable, but about a life with purpose and direction.

Christians are invited to believe in Jesus Christ. Here is a man of fundamental commitments and moral seriousness. His life has a trajectory that's leading him to Jerusalem, to crucifixion and resurrection. Where is he leading you? He is *"the way, the truth, and the life"* (Jo. 14:6), the road we travel to embrace both truth and life. What are your fundamental commitments? What are you betting your life on? This is what belief is all about. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," and it is this that makes belief possible.

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

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B, March 29, 2009
St. Bartholomew's Church Nashville

"They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'" (Jo. 12:21).

God never gives up on us, never abandons the search. Over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus hammers away on precisely this point, teaching his disciples about God's constancy and his willingness to go in search of us. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son, where the father welcomes the son home in spite of everything; goes out, in fact, to greet him while he is still far off. Parable after parable sounds the same note. The shepherd goes in search of the sheep, and the woman for the lost coin: stories that speak of God's search for the lost human race. The notion that God searches for us is woven into the very warp and woof of the New Testament, into the very fabric of the Christian faith. *"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"* (Jo. 3:17); *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of woman, born under law, in order to redeem those who were under the law..."* (Gal. 4:4-5). Significant witnesses. God never gives up on us; he's always searching for us; he sends his Son as emissary in order to find us and bring us home.

But there's another piece to this, to God's indefatigable search for us, and that's the contrasting and complementing human search for God. The Greeks in our Gospel today are looking for Jesus; they tell the disciples they want to see him. We're not given too many pictures quite like this one, as clear as this one, where people come seeking Jesus. It's true that crowds follow him, astonished at the miracles and the teaching, drawn by Jesus' presence. But so often they've got it wrong, mistaking what he's about and looking in the wrong place. Our search for God often sends us in the wrong direction. We're in need of guidance and help.

Yet this is still part of the story of faith: the story of our need for God, and our search for the One who was sent. We search because we are made in God's image, and because within us is the proverbial "God-shaped hole." We search because there are questions that can't be answered in any other way; we search because we know that something of our own is missing, a part of ourselves that has been lost or perhaps even misplaced. *"Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you"* (Matt. 7:7). "Ask," "search," "knock:" all words with imperative force. We need to search, but God has to open the door.

So what are you searching for? The Greeks in our Gospel are looking for Jesus; they've got the sense to set out on a course and to cover the distance. They want to see Jesus. Who do we want to see? On what have we set our sights? There's a journey before us, whether we will it or not: the human journey that each of us takes into the future that is set before us. If we put ourselves in our Gospel in the place of the Greeks, these questions occur. What are we looking for? Where do we expect to arrive? Into whose presence do we hope to come?

There's one last question for us to ponder. If we put ourselves in the place of the disciples instead of the Greeks, then the question is a bit different. If people are seeking Jesus, where will we take them? What will we show them? Think about St Bartholomew's Church for a moment. What will we show them when they seek Jesus? I know there's a lot here at St. Bartholomew's that speaks directly to this question. What is it in our community that speaks to us of Christ, and ministers to that God-shaped place within us? Now there's a good question for any parish community.

Lent's not a bad time for us to consider these questions. As we enter the home stretch the Church lifts up before us more and more the image of Christ crucified. And by their earnest seeking our confirmands today are keeping the object of our search before us. They're searching and God is opening the door. Are we looking for Christ? Are we searching for him? Where in our churches will Jesus be found?

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

Reaffirmation of Ordination Vows & Consecration of Chrism, April 9, 2009
Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

"He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed... to proclaim liberty to the captives... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Is. 61:1-2).

Bruce Springsteen has never appeared before in a Bauerschmidt sermon but he appears here, for good reason and (I hope) to good effect. I was struck last month when Springsteen appeared on "The Jon Stewart Show" talking about his new album, ruminating on what it's like to be performing with people you've known for forty years, still performing after all that time to appreciative crowds, still writing and making music and still living in New Jersey. Springsteen said that in a concert show like his, there's a weaving together of the band's history, its new material, and the attempt to "capture the moment now;" in other words, to connect with the past, with the present, and with the audience and its concerns. He noted that folks are there to hear their favorite songs, or because they connect with his philosophy and admire what he does; sometimes he gets booed, and that's okay too. Springsteen also noted that these are difficult times, but that as a people we've been here before. "People go to storytellers when times are like that," said Springsteen, casting our times in terms of the loss of a moral center that lies behind the issue of the world's financial difficulties. The "E Street Band" was built for bad times like these, said Springsteen: "for bad times like these."

Wow, what an interview. Now you and I know that it's only rock and roll, but there's application here to the ministers of the Gospel: to bishops, priests, and deacons poised on the edge of Easter. We're in need of a word from the Lord, and perhaps we might find it here. What we'll do over these next three days in liturgy and preaching is to summon up the past, the mighty acts of God from Creation and Exodus, to Christ's death and Resurrection, and bring them into the present now. We're capturing the moment by connecting God's mercy in the past with our present need; we're capturing the moment so that the life in Christ that we discover through his Resurrection from the dead can become the life that we live now.

That's our vocation: to be storytellers both in word and deed. We're performing with people we know well, the People of God; sometimes they're there for the music and sometimes because they appreciate what we do, and sometimes (if we let them) some of them would boo. Our band was built for hard times, too; "the blessed company of all faithful people" has been on the road for centuries now, performing here and there to mixed reviews, but never flagging in telling the story and singing the song. The bad times that we face, hard times that are rooted in human hard-heartedness and self-centeredness are times that are in God's hands; they are times that were made for the ministry of the Church.

What "the Boss" didn't tell us in the interview is that people seek out storytellers in times like these because they're seeking meaning; because when you lose your moral center you end up wandering far away into a country where nothing makes sense, including ourselves. A moral question is always a question of self-identity, of the kind of people we are and what we believe. What's your identity? Who are you as pastor, teacher, and servant? Our re-affirmation of vows today is our opportunity to claim that identity. The death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the great truth that we proclaim, the truth that cannot be reduced to any other or categorized under a more general heading. It's God's great "Yes" to the human race, a "Yes" that we interpret and parse and celebrate and sing, over and over again in these next few days. It's the truth that gives us our identity, our meaning and purpose, not just as ministers of the Gospel but as human beings ourselves.

May God be with each one of you this Holy Week and Easter, as you pray and preach and hear yourself the story of what God has done in Christ for the human race.

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

Easter Day, Year B, April 12, 2009
Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

"But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (Mk 16:7).

People who tuned in to the final episode of "ER" a couple of weeks ago wanted to be there for the end: to see what happened to their favorite characters and find out how plot lines were wrapped up and resolved. If you're not up on "ER" you might remember earlier TV series finales, like the last episode of "MASH" or "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." If you're not much for television, you'll still know the feeling of pressing on to the last chapters of a good book, looking for resolution and conclusion. Wrap it up, put a bow on it; period, full stop.

It's a satisfying feeling; which is why our Gospel this Easter Day is so very puzzling. The earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark conclude here rather abruptly, with the women discovering the empty tomb and encountering the angel. They're supposed to tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead, but they don't actually see him. They leave the scene in perplexity and fear; perhaps understandable, given the unbelievable message, but a puzzling point at which to wrap up Easter Day.

It's hard to know what to make of this. There are other longer versions of Mark with more conclusive endings, and the very earliest account of the Resurrection (in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, our second reading), and all the other Gospels in fact, make Jesus' appearance an integral part of the disciples' experience of Jesus' Resurrection. It's possible that our short ending of Mark is nothing more than an inconclusive and abbreviated version of the main story; a book (literally) with the last page torn out. After all, encountering Jesus, risen from the dead, is what Easter is all about. It's why we've tuned in, it's why we've read on, it's why we're here today. It's easy to believe that our shorter version of Mark is a mistake: the story just couldn't have been meant to end here.

But perhaps that's exactly the point: the story doesn't end here. Perhaps (shorter) Mark is trying to tell us something. Human beings love an ending, a resolution and conclusion. Wrap it up, put a bow on it; period, full stop. But that's not the nature of the Gospel. It's not the nature of Jesus' Resurrection, which is open-ended and still in process. Still in process, because we're still in process. His Resurrection life is still being lived out in our lives, and the final chapter of this story won't be written until all the characters have been fully developed and all the plot lines have been resolved. That's as open-ended as you can get. We're connected to Christ by the power of his risen life, and that life is still being lived out in us. We live because he lives. You might say that in Jesus' Resurrection God has acted conclusively, but that nothing else about it is resolved and therefore not concluded. We're not allowed to bring this story to a close because it's still being written.

Remember what the heavenly messenger told the women, "He is going ahead of you". Jesus has risen from the dead, but there is no way to bring this story to an end, and so our Gospel is a "cliffhanger" rather than a finale. There is always something more ahead of us because the Risen Lord himself is ahead of us. We try to wrap things up, but Jesus keeps unwrapping them. We want things tidy, but the Day of Resurrection leaves us with plenty of loose ends. There's always more ahead for God's People. More for us, individually, as we discover the meaning of new life; for us as a community, as we move forward in mission to the world. Our story does not end with death. That, too, is a part of Resurrection.

The Eighteenth century priest and writer Jean Pierre Caussade put it this way, "The Holy Spirit of God, pen in hand, the book open before him, continues the sacred story which has yet to be told. Its theme will not be exhausted until the end of time" (The Sacrament of the Present Moment). It's up to us, says Caussade, to take our part in this unfolding story and to supply the plot. God has brought us to Jesus' empty tomb, but the rest of the story is still ahead. What lies ahead for you?

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

The Second Sunday of Easter, Year B, April 19, 2009
Church of the Resurrection Franklin

"But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe'" (John 20:25).

The wounds of Christ are the clue to his identity; they tell us who he is. When Jesus appears to Thomas a week after the Day of Resurrection, he sees that Jesus is the same person who was crucified; the same person whom Thomas knew before. The wounds of Christ confirm his identity; they are proof of Resurrection, of life beyond death. But they are also something more.

The wounds of Christ are a clue to the identity of God. When Thomas hears the invitation to see and touch the wounds, and confesses, *"My Lord and my God!"* (Jo. 20:28), he's saying something more than just this, "If this guy rose from the dead he must be very special, God himself." Thomas is confessing the very character of God. The wounds of Christ are God's wounds, clue not just to Jesus' identity but to the identity of God himself. The wounds are not graven just on Jesus' body, but in the very being of God.

Have you asked yourself what those wounds are doing there anyway, what they're all about? Resurrection means restoration, the eradication of every sorrow, the renewal of all things. True enough, yet the wounds are still there. In the joy of Resurrection, we are never allowed to forget the cost of redemption. Christian faith is faith in the crucified and risen Savior. Thomas' confession is a reminder that it is God who has borne that cost, and continues to bear it. The appearance to Thomas, and the presence of the wounds, shows us just how close to the bone redemption is for us: a cost (that's the root of the metaphor) that must be borne by someone to redress an ancient wrong if justice is to be done. Our God is a God who is willing to give himself, to die and rise again for our redemption. The way to restoration, salvation, and the renewal of all things lies here. Yet Christ still bears the wounds, because the price that was paid was real.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's story, *The Lord of the Rings*, the fate of Middle Earth lies in the hands of the hobbit Frodo, who must return to its place the ring of power forged by the evil Lord Sauron so that it and he can be undone. The difficulty is that the ring has a warping effect on Frodo; the journey and the struggle are taxing and at the end, though the ring and Sauron are destroyed, the cost to Frodo is great. He continues to bear the wounds inflicted by the ring; wounds that have been the cost of Middle Earth's redemption.

Christians grapple with the cost of redemption. How could God be responsible for the cross? Maybe the crucifixion was a mistake, something outside God's intention. A lot of bad theology emerges from a question framed this way. But the crucifixion is not something God inflicts on another; it is a cost that is borne by God himself.

Easter brings us face to face with God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Like Thomas, we recognize the Risen Christ, the identity of the One who has risen from the dead and who offers us new life. God's identity is revealed as well, in the presence of the wounds by which salvation has been won.

Yet we can go further. Isn't something of our own identity revealed in these wounds? Can we see ourselves there? We're a People who have been brought through death into new life through Jesus' own death and Resurrection. There is no Christianity without redemption, without that fundamental transition from death to life. Those being baptized and confirmed today are witnessing to that transition, a living testimony to the power of God's sacrificial love and the reality of new life. It's God's gracious gift to us, and there is no other gracious or more graceful way into the kingdom. We bear the wounds, as well as the joy, of Easter.

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

The Second Sunday of Easter, Year B (Evening), April 19, 2009
Church of St. James the Less Madison

"Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3).

That's how Creation begins, in the Scriptural story: with an outbreak of light that leads to life. It's interesting how the ancient story is echoed in some modern theories of how life begins: with an explosion that generates matter, energy, and light. Whether ancient or modern, the stories of life's origin seem to be illuminated by our ancestral campfires, a technological transformation that was epochal for the human race. Civilization got a leg up from the introduction of artificial light, and our accounts of Creation are colored by it. The theme gets reprised in the Gospel of John, as the writer picks up on the Hebrew Scriptures' theme from Genesis. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"* (Jo. 1:1). The Word is spoken by God, and all things are made through him. And so the Gospel writer continues, *"in him was life, and the life was the light of all people"* (Jo. 1:4). Then, again echoing the Genesis account, *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it"* (Jo. 1:5). Jesus Christ is the great light that continues to shine. The light that shines in the darkness cuts across centuries and cultures; a common theme that is a central metaphor for Christian faith.

God created the light first of all, and he's still fiddling around with it. All you have to do is get up with the dawn in order to see God's creative purpose, to see how God uses the light to illuminate human life and to communicate his presence and purpose. And if God continues to fiddle with the light, so do human beings. Just think about the computer screens that are a part of so many people's working lives, and the television screens that (along with those same computer screens) are a source of entertainment. What we're staring at is nothing more than light manipulated; artificial light that we play with and put to work as a means of expanding our knowledge and communicating more broadly with each other. Light amplified, color deployed, black and white digitalized as a tool of civilization. Light continues to shine in darkness as human beings huddle, not around the primeval hearth but now around the screen.

God continues to use light, of course, to expand our knowledge of him and to communicate more broadly with us. *"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all"* (1 Jo. 1:5). Christians put light to good work when they began to stain glass and to use the natural light of the sun as a means of communicating the story of Faith. For centuries before the development of photography and cinematography, stained glass was the way in which light and matter were used as a means of mass communication. As the day advanced, and the light of the sun moved from place to place with the progress of the day, the story of faith would be told in churches in a vivid way, instantly familiar to our spiritual forebears. The life of Christ and the saints, the sacraments and the mystery of faith, were vividly illustrated. Generations of people learned the faith from this subtle and complex manipulation of light. And of course, as a thing of beauty, stained glass spoke of the beauty of God, telling us something more about the nature of the One who is the source of our life and our worship.

Stained glass continues to illuminate the life of the community of faith. Generous benefactors continue to adorn our churches and to commemorate loved ones, seeking the light perpetual that comes from God. There is no darkness in the One who speaks the Word and lets the light shine; no darkness in our Lord Jesus Christ who lightens everyone who comes into the world. This evening we rejoice in the light, the gift of God which brings life to us and to all Creation.

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

The Third Sunday of Easter, Year B, April 26, 2009,
Church of the Good Shepherd Brentwood

"You are witnesses of these things" (Lk. 24:48).

In the 1952 movie *Narrow Margin*, and in its 1990 remake of the same name (Gene Hackman and Anne Archer), we have a familiar plot: a woman witnesses a murder, and is now escorted back on a train to testify in court. The bad guys who arranged the murder are eager to stop the woman from testifying, and so they plan to assassinate her before she can appear in court. It's an inconvenience that she saw them do it, but it will be devastating to them if she reaches the safety of the court. She's out there on the train, with very little protection, and in the isolation of the train she's strangely exposed. She really won't be safe until she is able to testify to what she has seen. It's that tension between her witnessing of the crime and her testimony about it that provides the action and the thrill of the movie.

Our Gospel today with its theme of "witness" points toward a similar tension that is at the heart of the Easter Season. Christians are witnesses: the risen Lord tells them so in our Gospel today, and the theme is repeated in our first reading from Acts. The disciples are witnesses to what God has done in Christ. *"You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses"* (Acts 3:15), Peter says to the crowd that is gathered around. The disciples are witnesses to the fact that Jesus has been crucified and been raised from the dead. They've seen and heard what has been done.

Yet there's another part of witnessing, one suggested by our movie. The disciples won't really become witnesses until they testify, until they share what they've seen and heard with others. Offering the testimony in court is what really matters in the movie; it's what makes a difference to the bad guys, who really don't care who sees what unless it's going to be used against them in a court of law. It's this testimony, this witness to the truth; that makes evil tremble and changes things for good. It's this witness that makes a difference.

The disciples are charged by the resurrected Christ with being witnesses in this sense; they're charged with testifying to what they have seen and heard. It's not enough to be standing around on Good Friday and Easter Day and witnessing what happens; we have to become witnesses in the other sense by sharing the Good News. The way you became a witness, after all, is because someone witnessed to you: a parent, a Sunday School teacher, or even a priest. Or perhaps a neighbor or friend brought you to the Church of the Good Shepherd for worship one Sunday and you heard the witness of this community in liturgy and sermon and song. The word about Jesus wouldn't have leaked out if the disciples had been content to be witnesses without testifying. Again, without our witness word won't get out; it was true then and it's true now.

It's a good time to remind our confirmands today that they too are witnesses. They have seen and heard the Good News of what God has done in Christ, but they are also called to share it with others. Each of us has his or her day in court, when we need to share the Good News gracefully and persuasively. It's part of your role as witnesses. You don't need to be street preachers to be witnesses. Your witness can be as low key as inviting a friend to church. But your witness is what will make evil tremble and make a difference for good in the life of the world. You're witnessing today to this congregation, and the community in which you live, by your willingness to stand up and be counted. Jesus Christ has been crucified and has been raised from the dead, and this is Good News for the world! He's still alive, you know. There are a lot of witnesses, including you and me.

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

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B, May 10, 2009
St George's Church Nashville

"Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go...'" (Acts 8:26).

The story of Philip the deacon is the story of church-planting: a story that's told in the eighth chapter of Acts, part of which we've read today. Acts tells the story of the expansion of the Church following Jesus' death and Resurrection; the story of how the branches of the true Vine came to grow and flourish. New communities of faith were founded and the Gospel of new life through Christ was proclaimed; as the work goes forward, individuals and society are transformed and a new hope comes into the world. The story begins in Acts, and we here today are a part of it.

Philip was responsible for two parts of this work, and it's in the contrast between them that our lesson lies today. Philip was ordained to serve at table in the Church in Jerusalem, to help manage its charitable work, but he quickly became an evangelist, a person responsible for the spread of the Gospel. He's first at work in Samaria, which is fertile territory for church-planting. The people in that city are already familiar with the Law of Moses; not really Jews but not quite Gentiles either; they become the basis for a wildly successful new church. *"The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did... So there was great joy in that city"* (Acts 8:6,8). The Holy Spirit is active in the Church in Samaria, and through the ministry of the apostles Peter and John other communities of faith are founded in the surrounding villages. This Church takes root and spreads quickly, a branch of the true Vine that is Christ himself. There's a cascade effect that comes from this church-plant, and we get a glimpse through Philip's ministry of how faith in Christ was caught and spread in the Mediterranean world in the first century: through communities of faith.

Now we come to the other part of the story. If Jerusalem is ground zero for the proclamation of the Gospel, and Samaria is the first concentric circle leading out from that beginning point, geographically close and spiritually familiar, then Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch takes the Church right out to the edge, to the outer orbit of Jerusalem. Instead of the spiritually fertile territory of Samaria, Philip is brought (literally) to a wilderness road at high noon. There's not much around. Philip encounters just a single person, a foreigner, someone who is passing through. Neither the site nor the situation is very promising for the creation of Christian community. Yet the Scriptures are read and interpreted, the Good News proclaimed, and baptism celebrated, before the Ethiopian eunuch makes his way home.

There's a legend that this court official was the nucleus of the Church in Nubia, a person responsible himself for the spread of the Gospel. Whatever the truth of this story, these two stories in Acts suggest that the Gospel is proclaimed and the church planted in different ways, as shown through the ministry of Philip the deacon, and also in our own day. There are different patterns; and some things that don't fit easily into one work really well in another. Sometimes we need to take the wilderness road. Some things that don't look too promising for church growth can turn out to be very important indeed, from God's perspective.

The presence of this large confirmation class is a reminder of the crucial importance of vital Christian community like St George's in the sharing of the Gospel. Remember how God has touched you through the ministry of the members of this Church! But Philip's story reminds us that the Holy Spirit's work goes way beyond the doors of Christian community. Don't discount the effect of casual encounters outside the Church in the spread of the Gospel. You're part of the ripple effect that has been spreading out from Jerusalem for centuries, and that wave has now come to you, to bear you up and send you forth. Like Philip, we need "to get up and go" if we're going to be faithful. Don't forget to take the wilderness road, and share the Gospel with those whom God sends you. You never know what a difference it will make.

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

Celebration of New Ministry, Richard Zalesak, May 17, 2009
St. Peter's Church Columbia

"We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Rom. 12:5).

Ministry is something that should never be undertaken alone, but always in concert with others. We're always related to others as we go about doing the Lord's work. When Jesus in Luke's Gospel sends the disciples out to share his ministry, he sends them out two by two. Jesus chooses twelve apostles, colleagues who symbolize the People of Israel, a community that serves the Lord. The call to ministry is a call to common ministry, a ministry in which we partner with others in doing a common work.

There are a number of partnerships that are operative here today. First and foremost in our minds this evening is the partnership between Rector and Parish, between priest and people. We're celebrating a New Ministry, but it may not be the ministry you were thinking of when you drove over this evening: not the ministry of Richard Zalesak, chosen priest and Rector alone, but the new ministry of priest and people together. Something new is happening here, a new ministry indeed, but it is new ministry that emerges in partnership, a new mix of ordained and lay leadership by which God has chosen to work in a new way here in Columbia at St. Peter's Church.

Priest and people will need to work together in order to carry forward the many ministries that God wills for you to accomplish here in this place. This is a historic church, one of the Diocese of Tennessee's foundational communities of faith, and God has placed you upon a firm foundation of faith in Christ to carry forward in this new time your ministry as a Christian community. You're meant to proclaim the Gospel, welcome newcomers, form them in the faith, and send them out in mission to the world. That mission will bring you back to proclamation and service to the world. God's using you, this community of faith, in a new configuration of priest and people in partnership, to do his work. This brings into view the primary partnership, our own relationship with God.

For priest and people to be partners, you'll need to remember Paul's admonition in our reading this evening. *"Love one another with mutual affection"* (Rom. 12:10). The kind of love for one another that the Apostle is calling for is a sacrificial love, a love that is modeled on Christ's own willingness to lay down his life for his friends. In the partnership that is Christian community, vast amounts of forbearance and patience are called for; a willingness to give of one's self for the others that does not only extend to the relationship of priest and people, but to all the members of the congregation with each other.

There's another partnership that ought to be highlighted tonight, and that's the relationship of parish and diocese. St Peter's is one of our oldest parishes in Middle Tennessee, and as such it has gifts that help to anchor the rest of the Diocese and to resource it for the work we do together. You've brought Father Zalesak to the Diocese of Tennessee, a priest with gifts as pastor and teacher and a broad and deep experience of ministry in the Church, and for that we are deeply grateful. But the Diocese of Tennessee has not forgotten your chief treasure. God has given this congregation wonderful gifts in the people of St. Peter's. You are placed in a part of the Diocese where the Episcopal Church needs to be, and we're calling on you for your leadership in doing the work that God has placed before us in Middle Tennessee.

For in truth, we are one Church here in the Diocese of Tennessee; as Paul says in our reading this evening, *"We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another"*. As his Body, we're living out the life of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, here in this place; living it out together as the diverse parts of a single Body. That means, as Paul writes, that we belong to each other; we are members of one another. Now that doesn't mean that we are all the same, or that we are all carrying forward precisely the same ministries; there are different ministries and different gifts within the Body of Christ. Yet we are one Body as the Church of Christ; we are engaged in one ministry; we have a common life and a common call in Christ. The Diocese of Tennessee is simply a microcosm of the great Church of the Creeds, itself one Body in Christ.

Our Diocese doesn't reside in Nashville, at Diocesan headquarters at number 50, Vantage Way. If you want to see our Diocese, you have to look at St. Peter's, Columbia, or any of the other parishes and missions and chapels and convents and schools and other institutions that make up the Diocese of Tennessee. That's where the life of our diocese takes place; it's there that the reality of the Church is present; it's there that we carry out our mission and accomplish our ministry. So there's a great responsibility and a great call placed before this parish of St. Peter's Church. You have chosen well in calling Richard Zalesak to be with you as pastor and priest in this next period in your life. Remember to love one another with mutual affection, and remember that you are not in this on your own. If you rely on God, and your relationship with him, there are great days before you at St. Peter's Church

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

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B, May 16 & 17, 2009
Grace Church Spring Hill & St. Philip's Church Nashville

"You did not choose me but I chose you" (Jo. 15:16).

Today's a great day for St. Philip's Church [Grace Church], as we celebrate confirmation and reception into the Episcopal Church. We tend in our speech on an occasion like this to talk about the actions we take, the things we do, or even the gifts we receive, as if we were doing the choosing, as if we were the chief actors here. The spotlight is rightly on these folks today, but not for that reason; the spotlight is on them because of what God is doing, in choosing them. There's a witness being given here which we rightly celebrate, but what's chiefly highlighted is the action of God. Jesus chose us, we didn't choose him, he reminds us in our Gospel today; and even if it feels to us like we're the ones making the choice, the real truth is that Christ chose us a long time ago, and made it possible for us to be here.

So what has he chosen us for? At the very least, he's chosen us to be members of the Church, but there's something else here that we need to pay attention to, and that's friendship. *"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."* (Jo. 15:15). Membership is one thing, but friendship is something else, something more. In the prophecy of Isaiah God calls Abraham his friend (Is. 41:8), but in the Scriptures it is Moses who is the prototypical friend of God. *"Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend"* (Ex. 33:11). When Jesus in our Gospel today talks about the disciples as his friends, he's building on this tradition.

Friendship in our Gospel and in the tradition about Moses is built upon intimate conversation, a sharing of self and a meeting of heart and mind. The conversation we have with God is called prayer, the conversation that nurtures our relationship and guarantees that our relationship will grow and deepen. What sort of relationship would you have with someone you never talked to? Lack of communication is a classic relationship-killer, and it's true in our relationship with God. Friends can even argue with each other; Moses certainly did, when he spoke to God. Note that conversation is not a monologue: it is a two-way street that requires both speaking and listening. So it is in our prayer. We need to both speak and listen to God, which means we need to leave plenty of time for quiet so we can hear what God is saying to us.

That's the call, what Jesus has chosen us for. We're made for intimacy with God, meant to share the mind and heart of Christ. But remember, we didn't initiate this relationship, Jesus did. He chose us, and made us his friends by laying down his life for us. *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"* (Jo. 15:13). Jesus has a lot invested in this relationship. It came at a high price. None of us could have claimed to be God's friend: it would be presumptuous to do so. It's not our claim, however; it's his. None of us can know why Jesus has chosen us to be his friends, but he has.

There's a final point. If Jesus has made us his friends, then we're called to friendship with each other. *"I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another"* (Jo. 15:17), Jesus says in our Gospel. The Church is a fellowship, a communion, a community. We're called to friendship with each other, to life in community. Friends have common concerns and a common love, and a common commitment to each other. Our common life in the Church is a common life, marked by love, self-sacrifice for the other, and a common destiny with God.

It's a great day for St. Philip's Church [Grace Church]: a day of welcome, a day of commitment, a day in which Christ chooses us and claims us as his friends. The spotlight's not on us, but on Jesus Christ himself, who laid down his life for his friends.

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

The Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year B, May 24, 2009
Trinity Church Clarksville & St. John's Church Clarksville

"Jesus prayed, 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world'" (Jo. 17:6).

In German-occupied France during the Second World War, the French Protestant village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon became a center of refuge for Jews fleeing extermination at the hands of the Nazis. In spite of the huge risk that came with sheltering the Jews, Pastor André Trocmé and members of his family and congregation and others in the village hid or helped to safety an estimated 5,000 people, mostly strangers who had come from outside Le Chambon to find refuge. What happened in the village was quite different from what happened in other places during the War. Pastor Trocmé and others created a sense of community rooted in their congregation, through pastoral ministry and bible study; that enabled the people of the village to welcome those in danger and to put into practice the Christian virtues of hospitality and sacrificial love. Philip Hallie writes in his excellent book, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*, "In Le Chambon in particular... an effective pastor is especially precious because he keeps for his parish a little place for the love of God and one's neighbor in the middle of a cruel, powerful outer world." In at least one French village, in the midst of desperate times, such a "little place" of refuge was created and came to birth.

Jesus is doing some of the same sort of pastoring in our Gospel this morning, praying for the community he has chosen from the world so that it might be just such a place of ministry and love. God has given him a little band of followers who have been chosen from the world in order to give glory to God. When Jesus talks about "sanctifying" himself in our Gospel today, he is talking about laying down his life for the sheep. Christian service is sacrificial. It's modeled on the Cross. It requires risky behavior in the face of the world's hostility. Jesus has not snatched us out of the world, for we remain in that awkward space. Here in this world, the "little place" of refuge is not created easily, but only through practical acts of love and ministry like those practiced in the village of Le Chambon.

Note that there is ambiguity in John's Gospel around the notion of "the world." Christians are chosen "from the world" but only for the sake "of the world." Jesus gives his life "for the whole world," not for some small group of people who are fleeing from it. Yet John's Gospel, and the story of our French village, holds up for us the value of communities of faith that witness to the truth in the face of difficulty and trial.

It's to just such a community that Christians belong. We are in the world for the sake of the world, and we give glory to God by helping to create a space within it for the love of God and the love of neighbor. Our practices as a community of faith are meant to turn the world upside down. We welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, work for justice and peace. There are needs all around us. Jesus Christ gave his life for the world, and by his Resurrection triumphed over sin and death. Binding up the wounds of the world is nothing but the practical application of the truth of Christ's Resurrection life. We're given new life so that we can share it with others, in practical ways like those French villagers, as a witness to our faith in Christ who has risen from the dead.

Those confirmed and received today are helping us to build that community of faith. They are witnessing to the power that is within the risen Christ, who chose us out of the world to be his own. We are all enlisted in the little band of Jesus' followers, and those who re-affirm their faith today are reminding us all of this truth. Members of the Church are supposed to make a difference; we are meant to be sanctified in that same sacrificial life that Jesus led. Our Lord asks us today what we will do, for the life of the world. That question we take away with us today, as we see within our midst that "little place" of refuge and witness taking shape once again.

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Trinity Sunday, Year B, June 7, 2009
St. Paul's Church Murfreesboro

"We are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17).

Everybody has a family of some sort: the people we have sprung from or the people we hang out with now. Some families are of the conventional sort, and some are not so conventional, but we all have them. There are choices that we make in forming families, but also a great deal in family-making and family-sustaining that has nothing to do with choice, either ours or anybody else's. Nobody chooses their family of origin; and even if we've chosen the people we hang out with now, the very process of being a family is not just going to depend on us but also on the others involved, and on a mutual commitment that is bigger than any one person's choice. To a large extent, family is a "given." Even where we've chosen, or even where we've walked away, we're still "related."

The ancient Roman world had a similarly complex family life, though a bit different from our own. The wealthy Roman household included slaves as well as free persons, slavery being the economic engine that drove Roman society. Sometimes slaves would be given their freedom but remain within the family. Well-fixed Romans also practiced adoption, a way of supplying a male heir and guaranteeing the continued prosperity of the family. Adoption also allowed the promotion of humbler members of society to the ranks of the wellborn, and also allowed wealthy families to cement alliances between themselves.

It's from the life of the ancient Roman world, so different from our own, that the Apostle Paul borrows when he talks about slavery and freedom, adoption and inheritance. God has chosen the members of the Church to be his children; they have been adopted as heirs, as coheirs with Christ. In the household of God they are no longer slaves but free people, but only through God's choice of them through grace. Paul is talking particularly to Gentile Christians, who were not a part of the family of Israel but have still been chosen by God to be members of the Church. The inheritance that Christians share with Christ is the hope of glory, which only comes through sharing in Jesus' suffering and death. By the leading of the Spirit, Christians are able to say, "Abba! Father!" and claim their kinship with God.

Here's where we get "family resemblance." By baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection, we've become members of the household of God. Now we're a part of the family. Trinity Sunday gives us an idea of what we're involved in. We've been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; we're adopted by God and given his name as our own. We're made in God's image at the beginning of Creation, first of all; then Jesus claims us as his own by giving himself for us upon the cross; and we call upon God as Father through the power of the Holy Spirit that has been poured out upon us, over and over again. We're "related" to God, and related to each other as members of his household.

It's in this sense that the Church is a family. We didn't choose this family, but God chose it for us. We're adopted, true enough, but no human agent made that choice. The family of God is made and sustained by God's choice, and by our own capacity to grow into the full stature of Christ. We're involved in a commitment to each other that goes way beyond the sort of choice that any one person could make. Being a family involves each one of us. Our confirmands are helping us today to remember how precious Christian community is. This is our "hometown", the place where we belong, where people know who we are and recognize their kinship with us. God has chosen us, and this is his house. We've been created, redeemed, and sanctified by grace into God's family; and it's here in this community of faith that we live that out.

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

Proper 8, Year B, June 28, 2009
St. Ann's Church Nashville

"Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." (Mk 5:39).

Human life has a definite trajectory: we're born, we live our lives, and in the end we come to an end with death. It's a familiar pattern, a story as old as the human race; it's so obvious in fact that we hardly mention it, though this trajectory of life followed by death colors all human life and all human civilization. Cultures from the very beginning have been shaped by the limited nature of human life, coming to grips with our finite status in a number of ways. As human beings, we know what this world of limited time and limited capacity is like. It's instinctive; in our bones if you will. And it's not just us, as individuals or as the human race. Science talks about entropy, the tendency of the universe and all things within it to run down and come to rest. There's a character in one of Woody Allen's films who can't sleep at night after he learns that millions of years from now the sun will explode and the world come to an end. Ridiculous, of course, to be anxious about that; but we know that we are often anxious and fearful as a result of finite nature and our uncertainty in the face of it.

Our Gospel today challenges the trajectory of human life; it challenges our assumptions about our nature as human beings; it challenges our fear and uncertainty. The Good News of Jesus Christ that we hear read each week always challenges the familiar model of human life, as Jesus teaches and heals; but our Gospel today is one of a tiny handful in which Jesus actually reverses the pattern of life followed by death that lies so close to the bone. When Jesus comes to heal Jairus' daughter, he's too late; death has intervened, and so death must be reversed. The pattern that we've come to know, the familiar trajectory of human life, is now put into a different framework which gives a new perspective.

What happens in the raising of Jairus' daughter goes beyond an act of individual compassion in the face of human loss and points very clearly to universal human issues of life and death. Jesus has power to restructure our reality, to reorder human nature, to set us off in a new trajectory. Life is not followed by death, but instead life is triumphant and victorious. We were made for something larger than a life that comes to an end. The Creation that God has made is not fated for destruction, but will be renewed and restored. The raising of Jairus' daughter points us toward the Easter story, toward Jesus own death and resurrection, and the gift of new life that is given to God's People.

Over 150 years, St. Ann's Church has been carrying out a ministry that reflects this new trajectory of human life. Volunteers and staff at the Hope Exchange program at St. Ann's will know what I'm talking about. When I was reading to the students on Wednesday morning I could only think of the new life that is being showered upon them by God through this program; and of course not only on them but on everyone involved as staff and volunteers. Sin and death have a powerful grip on the world; they've set us in a trajectory that is about as old and stale as anything can be; but by God's grace, shown through this program and others like it, that familiar pattern is reversed and new life is given to God's People.

It's been an important weekend for St. Ann's Church and the Diocese of Tennessee; historic, you might say, in a number of different ways. But I know that you will not lose sight of the daily work that goes on at this church; at the small and sometimes unsung acts of grace that sustain your ministry and make it effective. God has blessed St. Ann's Church, and he has made you a means of blessing for others. Your real work lies outside the doors of this church, as it always has. God has given us this time to be renewed and inspired for the life giving work that lies before us.

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

Proper 12, Year B, July 26, 2009
St. Mary Magdalene's Church Fayetteville

"But immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'" (Mk 6:50).

When we're "heartbroken" it's often the result of having "loved but lost," yet people are broken-hearted over other things as well. The heart's involved when there's a lot at stake, when our own selves are wrapped up in the issue; and when our hearts are beset strong emotions surface. Then again, to "take heart" is in some sense to hold the heart in check, to summon the will to go forward courageously in the midst of strong emotion. To "harden the heart" is something yet again: to close ourselves off from mercy and pity, to deny compassion and our own humanity, even to the point of becoming "heartless," unable to "have a heart."

All of this is at play in our Gospel reading today. The disciples on the Sea of Galilee are not "broken-hearted" in the conventional sense, but their hearts are beset by fear of loss, by emotions that surface because their own lives are in danger. God doesn't want us to be terrorized, but there are times when our broken hearts open us up to God's power and presence in our lives. That day on the Lake was just such an occasion, as the disciples were made aware of their dependence on God. Their hearts were broken open by the danger they were in. Sometimes God can't get our attention any other way, and I guess the disciples were just the sort of people who often didn't get the point, people who needed broken hearts.

The heart once broken, however, often turns hard, and so it is with the disciples. Our Gospel tells us that they were astonished that Jesus calmed the sea, yet they did not understand what they had seen, and their hearts turned hard. They did not understand what Jesus had done when he fed the five thousand, and they did not really understand what the calming of the sea meant, beyond their own safety. They're still wrapped up in themselves, in their own needs and their own wants, and they really can't "have a heart" for others or for God.

Jesus' word to the disciples is to "take heart;" that is, to gather their courage and to move ahead in relationship with God and in obedience to him. The biblical notion of "the heart" encompasses the emotions and the will; it's the place where we discern what's of ultimate significance, those things that really matter to us, and act. Our hearts may be broken and beset, but Jesus calls us to take them in hand, to respond to him with all that we are and all that we have. That's courage: a word, of course, that's also rooted in "the heart." The panic stricken soldier has to "get a grip," and so does the panic stricken disciple. We don't want to end up with hearts that are hard, but with hearts that are encouraged: with hearts, that is, that are full of courage and hope.

This past week, coming back from the General Convention, I've been thinking a lot about the life of the Church. I think that as disciples ourselves, our life in Christian community involves our hearts in every possible way. The experience of Christian community will certainly break your heart; it also has the ability to turn your heart to stone if you will let it. But of course, we've got to "have a heart." As disciples we need to take our hearts in hand, to get a grip and respond with all that we are and have to what God is doing all around us. As disciples we need courage, because God is ultimately reliable.

The lessons I've learned this past week are ones that will do any Christian good, I think, especially those who are becoming confirmed members of the Church. This is a moment of turning to Christ, and a moment of great courage. Like the disciples on the Lake, we need to "take heart" at every point in our Christian journey; we need to summon all the faith, hope, and love we've got so that we don't end up with stone cold hearts. God is good and true, and faithful to us. There is new life through the Resurrection of Christ if we have hearts that will receive it.

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

St. Mary the Virgin, August 15, 2009
St. Mary's Convent Sewanee

"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God..." (Is. 61:10).

Imagine that: the whole of one's being dedicated to and centered on God! That's my gloss on the words of the prophet Isaiah, who's inviting himself and all the People of God to exult in him with the whole of who they are. Not just part of who they are, even a substantial part, but every part. We're so used to the dangers of lip service and hypocrisy that a part of us winces with the knowledge that such a call may be too high for us; we struggle with the feeling that perhaps we ought to be aiming at something less demanding and more attainable. Maybe decency's enough; maybe just being good's enough. (Actually, when it comes to holiness, in-decency may be a better formula than decency in arriving at the prize!) We hesitate to point toward a higher goal in the light of our own inadequacy, which not a one of us wishes to deny.

Yet here we have it, the prophetic word, in the shadow of this great feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Our Gospel today, the Song of Mary, reminds us that the Scriptural witness at this juncture offers her to us as just such an example of a life wholly responsive to God in every part and fiber of its being. Mary's Song is modeled on other Scriptural texts that invite the People of God to exult with their whole being in God, echoing the prophetic word. The feast puts before us someone who is able and willing to say "yes" to God through grace; a person who testifies to the transforming power of God in every part of human life.

Love is the key: the holy desire that focuses the whole of who we are on God. Here I want to rely on two witnesses to underscore the prophetic testimony. First, the poet Keats, who may not have been a theologian but certainly got it right theologically when he said, "A fact is not a truth until you love it." Jack Webb's police character in "Dragnet" liked to say, "Just the facts, ma'am," but when it comes to God we dare not restrict ourselves to the facts. All our knowledge of God has to catch fire with love if it's going to be true for us: that is, true in the sense of being well-aimed and reliable, hitting the mark. For our whole being to exult in God the whole of who we are will have to be transformed by love. We have to be united to God, and that is always a matter of love.

Second (in case we're becoming discouraged), bishop and theologian St Augustine, who said in one of his sermons, "It is yearning that makes the heart deep" (Tract.). We yearn for God; and it is the yearning that will be the means by which we arrive at perfect knowledge and love. The yearning comes before attainment. Our hearts are deepened by desire. Our whole being may not yet exult, but as we yearn for God, we set our feet upon the way that leads to the heavenly heights.

We may be inadequate to such a holy purpose, but God is not. We may want to settle for decency or goodness, but God will not. The call may be a high one, but the word of invitation is addressed to us all. We're called to exult in God with the whole of our being; we're called to holiness of life. Love and longing are the keys, and Our Lady and the saints point us the way.

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

Proper 15, Year B, August 16, 2009, Laymen's Conference
All Saints' Chapel Sewanee

"This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." (Jo. 6:58).

"Food for the journey:" that's the kind of "bread" that Jesus is. When Jesus calls himself *"the living bread that came down from heaven"* (Jo. 6:51) in John's Gospel today, he's thinking of the journey that God's People took many years before: the ancient journey of the People of Israel, who travelled from slavery in Egypt into the freedom of the Promised Land. Recall for a moment the nature of that journey. The People left hurriedly, under cover of night. The Passover meal that evening was eaten "on the hoof," as it were; unleavened bread was prepared because there was no time for yeast to do its work. The People were pursued by the Egyptian army, so there wasn't a whole lot of free time. And once they were in the desert between Egypt and their destination the journey was extended; as a result of human sin, it became a time of wandering for forty years, in a wilderness with scanty provisions for the host of Israel. There were many enemies and many difficulties as well.

Yet God provided for them. He was with them every step of the way. He defended them from their enemies, and satisfied their needs. He brought flowing springs out of the rock, to quench their thirst; and he gave them provisions over and over again to satisfy their hunger. The most mysterious of these foods was "manna": a substance that formed each morning like dew in the camp, and which could be gathered and eaten by the People. Mysterious indeed: "manna" actually means "what is it?". *"He...gave them grain from heaven,"* it says in the Psalm, *"he provided for them food enough"* (Ps. 78:24-25). Food for the journey; food that ceased when the People arrived at their destination, but that was absolutely necessary for them while they were on the way.

It's in this sense that Jesus is "the bread from heaven." Like the manna that appears every morning to satisfy the needs of the People, so Jesus is with us every step of the way. He's made himself our life by becoming the One who sustains us on our journey. The Scriptures reveal him. We see the evidence of his shaping power and beauty all around us, not just in this sacred space but in the temple of nature. I used to laugh at folks who told me they encountered God on the golf course or in a sunrise, but I laugh no longer. And of course the Eucharist itself, that Sacrament we share this morning, has become an enacted sign of the "bread from heaven," of that "daily bread" which we ask for from God, as Jesus gives himself to us in his Body and Blood. We live because he is living bread, our provision and satisfaction and the source of our own life on this journey.

So where are you travelling? What challenges lie on the way? Who's with you on the journey? These are some questions we can take away today. The great thing about a weekend like this is that it gives us a chance to step back and to re-connect, not just with old friends who are with us on this journey, but also with ourselves and with the God who made us. Folks, this is the "altar call." This is a time for reflection and re-connection. You know the challenges that are before you, and the particular contours of the road that you must walk. We're all capable of getting lost on the way. We are all on a journey, however; all on that same road that will lead us back to God if we will let it. The food that will sustain us, the "bread from heaven", has been prepared. The gift has been given, and if we take and eat we will live forever. We will come at last to the Promised Land, to the destination prepared for us by God.

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

Proper 16, Year B, August 23, 2009
Church of St. James the Less Madison

"The people said to Joshua, 'The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey'" (Joshua 24:24).

This week my oldest son began his college career: moved hours away and took up residence in a new place, began to take courses and to meet new people, started to adjust to a new life and new responsibilities. His family has shaped him and equipped him as best we could, but now he's in a slightly new orbit and we're observing him from afar. It's a time of transition, for him and for us, but also a time of renewed commitment. There are new tasks that must be taken up, values that must be uncovered, discovered, and re-affirmed, if this project of maturation and education is going to move forward.

Today we catch the People of Israel at just such a moment of transition and commitment. Joshua, who had brought the People into the Promised Land and led their army successfully for years, is about to pass his baton on to others. It's time to re-commit to the God who had brought them there in the first place; they need to remember their past and re-commit now in the present, so that they may have a future in the land that God has given them. Times of transition, especially transitions in leadership, are times in which anxiety rises; there is great potential for good, but also uncertainty and the fear of the unknown. Joshua wants to make sure the People have reconnected with what is most basic and fundamental to them: that is, God's Covenant with them and their own commitment to God.

Think for a moment about some of the great times of transition that people encounter, perhaps that you've encountered. Remember the first job or the new school or moving to a new home; remember ordination or marriage or the birth of a child. We know about transition, the movement from one thing to another, and we know that transition comes with commitment. When you begin something new you necessarily close off other possibilities: you can't attend two colleges at once, can't be faithful to two people at the same time (though God knows that's been tried). Real transition demands commitment: taking vows, signing a mortgage, or undertaking new responsibilities.

Note where the rub is in our first reading today. Joshua tells the People, *"You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you..."* (Joshua 24:19-20). Joshua's not threatening them, or telling them they're going to fail, though it might sound like it. What Joshua is really telling them is that commitment leads to transformation. If they take this step they will never be the same. God won't let them remain unchanged. He's going to work his will with them; he's going to stand by his covenant and never let them go. There's the real rub: God's passionate commitment to us that invites our own commitment and our own transformation.

The story of commitment and transformation played out in our first reading finds its perfect fulfillment in the story of Jesus Christ himself. Here we discover the commitment of the cross: the willingness to set out in a direction of complete sacrificial commitment for others that leads to redemption for all. Here we discover transformation, as death is turned into life through his glorious Resurrection. Here, in Jesus Christ, we actually discover what Joshua seemed to exclude: that is, forgiveness and healing for the People of God.

God is inviting us to commit to this cause. We too are looking for transformation, and we're honored by the re-commitment of others in the celebration of Confirmation today. We see transformation made visible as people respond to God's covenant with them. We have our own commitments that we are called upon to make, and today we all have the opportunity to re-affirm our baptismal vows. God is offering us forgiveness and healing. He will not consume us, but he will transform us, and re-create a People he can call his own.

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

Proper 17, Year B, August 30, 2009
St. James' Church Sewanee & Christ Church Tracy City

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

A lot of energy is expended in Christian faith on "true" and "false," and rightly so. We all want to have the right faith, believe the right things, to invest our lives in what is authentically true and good. A false faith is one that deceives, that is not true; a faith which is not reliable and not in sync with the "real" reality. It is possible to invest one's life in a falsehood, and the soul trembles at the prospect.

But let's get our definitions right if we can. The sort of "true religion" that we prayed for in our Collect for the Day is rightly contrasted, not with other people's religious faith (the Muslims, or the Jews, or even other wrong-headed Episcopalians, whoever they may be) but with false commitments on our own part. As comforting as it is to project falsity on to other people's beliefs, the Biblical witness more typically focuses on what is false within us. So it may be that in Biblical perspective the Gentiles worship "false gods" (as indeed they do), but in that same perspective our own temptation to "false religion" has far more to do with hypocrisy, the gap between the truth we believe and the life we live. It's all too possible to become a misbeliever in God, but I bet the greater danger of falsity in religion for most of us has much more to do with a falsity within ourselves.

That's what's not in sync with reality: that is, we're out of order. This is what Jesus is getting at in our Gospel today. *"For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mk 7:21-23).* What's within our own hearts is enough to create the gap between the truth we believe and the life we live.

So what is "true religion" for Christians? The real challenge is to live the faith we profess, to leave off hypocrisy and to walk in newness of life. We're only going to be able to do this by grace, by God's free gift, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's a matter of the heart, for the discontinuity between the words we say and the deeds we do is rooted there. Our hearts need healing, and it's only through transformation and not accommodation that we will cease to be hypocrites.

This brings us back to our second reading today, where this sermon began. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Here's another slice of true religion, "the fruit of good works" that our Collect also prays for today. "Religion" itself refers to "connection", to the ties that bind us to God and to one another. True religion, pure and undefiled as the Apostle James says, calls us to the service of our neighbor, to a life that is lived in response to the call of God. My fellow hypocrites, our healing lies with one another.

These words from our second reading give a practical program for every parish and every Christian community. We need to focus on the connections that bind us together, on the service that we can afford our neighbors. This is part of the transformation that lies ahead for us. We're in this together. Those being confirmed or received today ought to know in advance: we've laid it all out today. The true religion that we're called to is meant to transform us. We're looking for the fruit of good works that come from this change. We come to this altar to receive God's grace for the task. Our confirmands are giving us their own witness to this astonishing Gospel truth.

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

Proper 19, Year B, September 13, 2009
Church of the Messiah Pulaski

"He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'" (Mk. 8:34).

Dr Baker's Medieval History class was the "make or break" course for History majors at the college I attended: you had to get at least a "C," and the course was legendary for its toughness. Baker tended to speak softly and mumble, so the front rows were packed (uncharacteristically) with students straining to catch a word. When Baker announced the first test scores you could read the body language as students crumpled in their seats and threw up their hands in despair. Not only was the delivery hard to hear, but the intricacies of medieval history were difficult for the sophomoreic mind to come to grips with. Then, a week before the final, Baker added an additional book to the reading list, which sent everyone to the bookstore and the library in hopes of gleaning a little genuine medieval wisdom. Of course the book was the key to the entire course, containing the knowledge that once assimilated would provide the ticket to successful completion of the course. Could knowledge like this really be digested in a week? This harrowing educational experience was a rite of passage for not a few of us in the fall of 1978.

I don't know if teachers are allowed to carry on like this today, but there's an echo of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark in this story. In Mark's story of Jesus' ministry, of his death and resurrection, the disciples who Jesus calls to be with him often get it wrong: they come up with the wrong answer, jump to the wrong conclusion, or undertake the wrong action when they are with him. How can folks be so consistently wrong? One possibility is that the disciples are "thick": they are like the Keystone Cops who never do anything right. Like Peter in our Gospel today, even when they get it right they almost immediately turn around and get it wrong. Peter gives the right answer when in answer to Jesus' question, *"Who do you say that I am?"*, he says, *"You are the Messiah"* (Mk 8:29). He's passed the test. But when Jesus starts to talk about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die and rise again, Peter rebukes him. But who, after all, is teaching this course? Jesus lets him know how it's going to be, because he knows what's ahead for him.

My point is that it's not that the disciples are stupid, or that Jesus just needs smarter or more faithful disciples in order for all the pieces to fall into place. My point is that the material is difficult, and hard to understand. Mark is at pains to tell us that Jesus speaks in parables, and that he does so in order that folks won't be able to get it. We do suffer from a sort of learning disability as Christians: we're afflicted with sin, and that makes us hard to teach. But Jesus keeps tacking on stuff that's hard for us to grasp: the idea that the Messiah might have to suffer and die in order to rise again. It's hard to come to grips with; even if we are able to get the drift of what Jesus is saying we may still find this teaching difficult to understand, or even offensive (as Peter does). The Messiah is supposed to throw the Romans out of Judea, not allow himself to be crucified by them. The disciples feel the need to redirect Jesus when they are confronted by things they cannot understand.

That's where we are today. Not only is it necessary for the Messiah to suffer death and be buried in order for new life to come, but it's also necessary for us to take up our cross and follow him. Imitating Jesus, as intimidating as that is, is what we are called to. The promise that is held out to us is that by dying we will live; that by following him on the way of the cross we will receive the new life that God longs to give us. That's the basic pattern of Christian life, of parish life, of the life of Jesus' disciples. In this class, we sit in the front so that we can hear every word. We buy the book and we look for the pattern. Our hearts and our minds will be challenged. But our teacher is faithful and won't let us fail.

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

Theodore of Tarsus, September 19, 2009, Episcopal Church Women St. Bartholomew's Church Nashville

Today we commemorate Theodore, an early Archbishop of Canterbury in the seventh century who came from the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor, in what is now modern Turkey. Tarsus was also the home of the apostle Paul, before he took to the well-maintained Roman road that passed through the city and started to change the world, so Theodore was following in some celebrated footsteps in doing his own apostolic work. Tarsus turns out to be located on a fertile semi-tropical plain by the banks of the Cydnus River, not far from the Mediterranean Sea; a seaport in ancient days when shipping could still go that far up the river, but more noted for being at the critical gateway leading through the Taurus Mountains that linked the European and Asian cultural spheres. Those mountains, snow-capped at times, are always visible in Tarsus, and help define its history. Tarsus was the staging area for Roman armies moving east: Julian the Apostate, the last great retro-pagan Emperor of Rome is buried in Tarsus, a convenient place to come to rest as his defeated forces escaped from the Persian army. Tarsus was also the crucial crossroads for Muslim armies moving West some centuries later: in fact, the city where Theodore had grown up had only recently in his own time been conquered by an Arab army. Any longing for the sunny land of his origin that Theodore may have had when he arrived in cloudy, misty Britain must have been tempered by the knowledge that he in effect "could not go home again."

I'm telling you about Tarsus because it's a crossroads: not just geographically but also in some other important ways. We see the great tide of history coming in and going out in the story of this place: a story of conflict but also of encounter and transition, of battle but also of journey and connection. Theodore of Tarsus was born at a crossroads, and his ministry took him to Rome and then (in his late 60s, an impossibly old age in the seventh century, after a life devoted to prayer and scholarship) to Britain, to the very ends of the earth (from his perspective). He was called to a difficult ministry, to uniting a Church that was divided, and to finding ways to minister in the midst of war and violence. Theodore found a Church at the crossroads, and set it in the direction it needed to go. He brought people together at the place of encounter and connection where their paths intersected. And that place of intersection where it all came together was the Cross of Christ, the authentic and original "crossroads" that brought the People of God together and sent them forth on their journey.

Today we are at our own intersection and our own crossroads, as Church Women from all over the diocese of Tennessee come together for worship and prayer, for instruction and to conduct the business of the Church. There is always transition at a crossroads; sometimes conflict (we know about this in the Church, don't we?) but always the enrichment that comes from encountering each other and connecting in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Crossroads often have "way stations," places where travelers can rest and refresh themselves in the midst of the journey. Our gathering today might be such a "way station," where we eat and drink Christ's Body and Blood so that we can continue to travel, and come to the place where we're supposed to be. We have our challenges in our day, as we look at the life of the Church and the world in which we live, but we're on a road that is well-travelled, with some great companions. Along this road in the dust we can see the footprints of Theodore of Tarsus, and know we're headed in the right direction.

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

Proper 20, Year B, September 20, 2009
Church of the Holy Cross Murfreesboro

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mk 9:37).

Children and youth weren't valued much in Jesus' day. I don't mean that their parents didn't love them or care about them, because they did. What I mean is that there was no "youth culture" celebrated by society, no understanding that "children are the future" (as we say). In fact, people didn't see the future as necessarily an improvement on the past, but that's another subject. Age was esteemed, rather than youth; the past was valued, rather than the future; so when Jesus pointed toward the child in the disciples' midst who should be welcomed and served, he's really pointing toward the welcome that needs to be extended, the service that must be rendered, to those who are the least valued in society. Children and youth were "no account", but to Jesus they counted a lot, not because youth is better or the future more valuable (far from it!), but precisely because of their humble status.

Note that Jesus is not just making a personal appeal to the disciples as individuals, but creating instead a pattern for the life of the Church. *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all"* (Mk 9:35). The disciples are to "order" their life around service; if they're going to be "first of all," they'll need to place themselves last. They'll need to minister, to serve others, rather than seek to be ministered to. Now that's some priority in ordering the life of the Church! That's the pattern for the life of the Church: to be servants of all, especially those who count for the least.

So what are the opportunities for ministry around Holy Cross Church? How are we going to be of service? How are we going to orient the life of the community around the "child" who is in our midst, the person most in need? Years ago, a priest I know asked his parish, "If our church disappeared overnight, who in the community would notice?" It's a good thought experiment. When my friend asked his parish this question they realized that nobody would notice apart from Church members, and from that moment on things began to change.

The Church is "mission-oriented;" it exists in order to carry out its mission. It doesn't invent a mission in order to justify itself, but it exists in order to transform the lives of the people who minister and those who are ministered to. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between them. The mission comes first, but everything else will follow.

Holy Cross Church has already had the opportunity to engage in the thought experiment my friend recommends. In fact, it wasn't even an act of the imagination, since this church almost did disappear. So we at this church know what a difference a community of faith can make in the lives of folks. But the challenge remains: who are we to serve? Who are the least in our midst?

If we order the life of the Church around mission, we'll not only change the world, but we ourselves will be changed. This happens because in doing this ministry we are in the presence of Jesus Christ; in fact, as we welcome the least of these, we welcome Jesus himself. *"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mk 9:37).* Ministry is Christological and theological: it has everything to do with drawing closer to Christ and to God, and being transformed in the process.

So those who are being confirmed and received today should know what they are getting into. These are great days for Holy Cross Church, as it discovers its ministry, and as you discover your ministry too. Look for those in need; welcome the least; seek to serve. Answering this call will change you, and draw you closer to Christ.

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

Feast of St. Michael & All Angels, September 27, 2009
St. Michael's Church Cookeville

"War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon" (Rev . 12:7).

For my money, the movie *Ride with the Devil* is one of the best films ever made about the Civil War. Note the title. The movie's set in Missouri, far from the main battlefields, and chronicles the vicious struggle that marked the war in that border state. In the movie we follow a couple of boys who end up fighting for the South (including "Dutchy," played by Tobey Maguire), and we see the butchery that's inflicted by both sides as neighbor kills neighbor in a bloody guerilla war. I don't mean "neighbor" metaphorically: people who sat down to eat together days before visit terrible savagery upon each other. The film comes to a climax with the Confederate raid on Lawrence, Kansas: a massacre that set the stage for the lawlessness of the American West. Frank and Jesse James and other famous American bandits got their start on this bloody raid. Like a troop of avenging angels, in the film the Rebel cavalry kill the townspeople indiscriminately and then burn the town. They're evening the score, getting their own back; but at the end our hero is disgusted and realizes this war will only consume him and everything he loves if he sticks with it.

Our readings today place a struggle before us, a spiritual war, as we celebrate the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels today at St. Michael's Church. Part of the traditional role of the angels, spiritual and immaterial creatures, is to defend humanity, which is both spiritual and physical. The war that's being fought in our reading from Revelation is a war fought in heaven, a spiritual civil war fought between the host of heaven led by Michael the Archangel, and the great dragon who symbolizes the Devil. Whatever division humanity's involved in, whatever conflict between good and evil, is a conflict that involves all creation, the spiritual as well as the material. In the Baptismal liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer we renounce "all spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God:" that is, the Devil and all his works. All too often we make the mistake of equating the material with evil and the spiritual with good. But as everyone knows (or should know), the greatest wickedness is often spiritual, coupled with appeals to exalted goals, high ideals, or a great cause. When men go to war, they almost always see themselves on the side of the angels.

So what does this mean for us? What do we have to do with the "war in heaven?" Our temptations may be different, but all of us are involved in this civil war because the border lies within each one of us, the dividing line of hatred and enmity. We can't afford to project evil out onto others, even the Devil, without recognizing the illegitimate claim he has made on each of us. There's rebellion in our own spirits; we're divided against ourselves.

So back to the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln appealed to "the better angels of our nature" in his 1861 Inaugural Address. Lincoln was hardly an orthodox Christian, but he was wise and discerning about human nature. The address that God makes to us in Baptism is to our better nature, the nature God gave us and which Christ has redeemed. Those being confirmed today are being asked to re-affirm the vows of Baptism, to re-commit to the cause that God calls us to. There is a civil war being waged, but it will not consume us; the lines of division run through us, but we will not be overcome. God knows us and hears our prayers. He will give us grace through the sacraments; he will send his angels from heaven to defend us and to help us in the struggle.

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

Proper 22, Year B, October 4, 2009
St. Francis' Church Goodlettsville

"The LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner'" (Gen. 2:18).

Everyone knows what a bad marriage looks like, and it's this image that comes to mind when we hear Jesus' teaching on divorce. Poor communication skills (to deploy a modern perspective); furious anger and old fashioned enmity ignited by those durable perennials alcohol, money or sex; or perhaps just "irreconcilable differences:" all these things can make a marriage a terrible burden to bear. So when we bring these two things together, marriage and the teaching about divorce, we find Jesus' words to be yet another burden added to the first. *"Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate"* (Mk 10:9).

But if we know anything about Jesus at all, we know that the Lord did not come to impose new burdens on top of the old. In fact, he castigates the Pharisees for placing heavy burdens on people's backs and being unwilling to remove them (Matt. 23:4). So whatever's going on here, it cannot be about a burden imposed.

When it comes to marriage "we always marry the wrong person." In other words, most of us project onto the person we take in marriage a lot of expectations that have very little to do with the person right before our eyes. One day we discover that we are married to a real person, the "wrong person," who couldn't possibly live up to our unrealistic expectations. And that is when marriage really begins, in an encounter with the other person whom we have pledged "to love, honor, and cherish" until we are parted by death.

Marriage is the foundation of human community, for every society is built upon the household. In childbearing and childrearing it is each generation's bid to add values and a sense of history to the propagation of the species. But Jesus in this teaching invites us to consider it under another heading, of marriage as a "school of charity," a relationship in which we learn to love. It's an invitation to enlarge our hearts and embrace a person who is like us, but yet unlike us in some fundamental ways (men are men, and women are women, after all, even if we can't be very precise about what that difference is). This love is the very means by which the human race and all society continue. But from the perspective of the Gospel, it is an opportunity for grace; an opportunity given those who are called to marriage to lose the hard heartedness that goes back to Adam and Eve in the Garden. It was there that our first parents learned all about sin and about its disastrous and death-dealing consequences for the human community. It is this hard heartedness that Jesus is talking about when he mentions Moses. We don't want to get stuck there. We need to learn to love.

Jesus isn't placing burdens on us, but he is trying to get us back on track. He's recalling us to God's intention in making us male and female, different yet alike, and recalling us into community with each other. He's asking us to employ the gifts of faith, hope, and love in living together. He's addressing our hearts, which are the source of the human malady. He's lifting our eyes from our own contentiousness to see another set of possibilities. We were made for each other, and there can be no turning away from each other in heaven. Jesus' teaching is not a burden, but an invitation to start training our hearts. We're going to need those hearts in the kingdom of God.

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

Proper 23, Year B, October 11, 2009
Church of the Holy Spirit, Nashville

"For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God" (Heb. 3:4).

It's a tough time for builders. The Tennessean is full of stories about new developments that are not full, about projects that are half completed, about unpaid bills and discounted debts. A builder takes a risk in this financial environment. There's a development I pass everyday on my way to work that has already gone bankrupt for lack of tenants. It's also difficult for builders to find work, because credit is tight and everyone has put their plans for expansion on hold. As a result people lose their jobs and times get harder.

Our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews points us in the direction of building, when the writer mentions Moses, who *"was faithful in all God's house as a servant"* (Heb. 3:3). Here the letter is looking back at the Book of Numbers, where God describes Moses as one who *"is entrusted with all my house"* (Num. 12:7). God speaks to him directly, clearly and not in riddles, and Moses sees his face. He is found trustworthy by God, one who is faithful to the Lord. The house that he is given charge of is the House of Israel, God's People. He is a servant in God's House, serving the People that God has given him. Yet he is not the builder of the House. The true builder is God, and the House he is building through Christ is the Church.

There are "bricks and mortar" that we call "the church," but the true Church of God is not a physical structure but the People of God themselves. The Son of God is the head and cornerstone of the House, and construction begins with his death and resurrection. In Jesus Christ we, like Moses, see God face to face; and in Jesus Christ God speaks clearly and distinctly. We have been built into his House by being incorporated into the Body of Christ through Baptism. We look around at the buildings at Church of the Holy Spirit, but we do not see "the Church" unless we turn our eyes to the people who are sitting in the pews.

It's a good time to remember this. Buildings are important, and we have some fine ones at Holy Spirit, but the real House of God is made up of people. We're seeing God build his House today as new people are confirmed. They are reminding us of the great truth that God is the builder of the House. People are affirming the promises of Baptism and God is blessing them through his Holy Spirit. We can see the House of God taking shape before our eyes.

God is the builder, but he calls us to be faithful like Moses. This is the message to all of us, the newly confirmed and everybody in the Church as well. We have to be trustworthy. The Letter to the Hebrews calls us *"holy partners in a heavenly calling"* (Heb. 3:1). God is looking for us to cooperate in the work of building that he has begun. We are not the builders, but we like Moses have to be found faithful. The glory is Christ's own, but we're called to reflect it. He's worthy of honor, but it's up to us to proclaim him. This is how God's House is built.

So let's come back to builders, because God is a great builder. Unlike us in these hard times, God's credit is never exhausted. His plans for expansion are never put on hold. He never runs out of either work to do or energy to accomplish it. In his house are *"many mansions"* (Jo. 14:2), and he intends for us to live there. The question for us is: How can we be found faithful? How can we join him in this work? How can we be a part of the Church that he is creating?

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

Holy Matrimony, Cynthia Seeliger & Chris Seifert, October 17, 2009
Wrightman Chapel, Scaritt-Bennett Center Nashville

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jo. 15:12).

At the end of Tolstoy's novel, *War and Peace*, after all the adventures of the many characters have been completed, we're given a few chapters that are set years later, an epilog that shows Nicolai and Maria, Pierre and Natasha, at home with each other, old married couples surrounded by their children. Extraordinary experiences have shaped the characters; they've experienced loss and discovered love: remember, it's a big novel, so there's a lot of living and a fair amount of dying as Tolstoy tells his story. But there at the end, Tolstoy gives us a charming and insightful glimpse of married life. "Natasha and Pierre, left alone, also began to talk as only a husband and wife can talk, that is, with extraordinary clearness and rapidity, understanding and expressing each other's thoughts in ways contrary to all rules of logic, without premises, deductions, or conclusions, and in a quite peculiar way. Natasha was so used to this kind of talk with her husband that for her it was the surest sign of something being wrong between them if Pierre followed a line of logical reasoning. When he began proving anything, or talking argumentatively and calmly and she, led on by his example, began to do the same, she knew that they were on the verge of a quarrel... Just as in a dream when all is uncertain, unreasoning, and contradictory, except the feeling that guides the dream, so in this intercourse contrary to all laws of reason, the words themselves were not consecutive and clear but only the feeling that prompted them" (*War & Peace*, Epilog I, C. 16).

We can all recognize here what Tolstoy is talking about, whether we're married or not. The intimacy of marriage generates a form of communication that transcends what is purely linear and logical. It's like doing the "bump" on an iPhone, the app that allows data to be transferred from one device to another by simply bumping them together: how do they do that? People who've known each other for a long time can communicate this way, but of course it is husband and wife who discover most profoundly how logic often isn't very helpful when communicating with each other. Tolstoy, in his little portrait of Pierre and Natasha at the end of the novel, suggests another motive power in relationship, the "feeling that guides the dream." That feeling of course is love, not just for Tolstoy in his novel, but for any Christian who's listened carefully to John's Gospel and Jesus' teaching.

Love is the motive power in John's Gospel, the means of communication. Jesus tells us in our Gospel today that we are to love one another as he has loved us. Cynthia and Chris are being invited into an intimacy where love will be required. Intimacy without love is at best deadly dull, and at its worst hellish. Desire, friendship, a willingness to sacrifice for the other: all will be needed in this relationship. John's Gospel sets before us the sacrificial love of the cross as our great model. God communicates his love to us in that sacrifice, in his willingness to give his Son, and that sacrifice becomes the basis of all human intimacy and communion. Marriage is the place where we learn these lessons of love and are transformed by them. It's a school of charity, the place where we learn what it is to give for each other. There's no doubt we bump together in marriage, because there is plenty of friction, but even our trials are the means by which we come to know each other and to love each other.

So here's what we wish for Chris and Cynthia: years together that will draw them ever closer, intimacy that will allow them to read each other's minds, communication that will allow them to defy logic and laugh at each other while they do it. Our prayer for them is that intimacy will breed love, and that communication will become that deeper communion with each other that will lead to communion with God. May the love which is at work in them in their married life not only transform them, but also be a means by which they are able to reach out in love and care for those among they minister. May the feeling and will which guides this dream of relationship, the dream which God has for these two people, be love and nothing but love.

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

Proper 24, Year B, October 18, 2009
Calvary Church Cumberland Furnace

"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

You go to the pawnbroker to get something back, something in hock that you need to redeem. You go to the bail bondsman to raise the money you need to get someone out of jail. You pay a ransom when you're in a tight spot, when someone's in danger, and there's a price to be paid. Most of us don't spend much time in these of kind of situations (thanks be to God), but like the plot of an Elmore Leonard novel they're familiar enough to get our attention.

All these ideas are related, and all capture something of the meaning of Jesus' words in our Gospel today. Ransom, redemption, bond: all illustrate humanity's situation and what God has done. We're in the hands of a kidnapper, we're deeply in debt, we're in the dungeon and need to get free; but there's also some justice in our situation, the idea that we've gotten ourselves into trouble and can't free ourselves. These ideas don't begin with the letters of St. Paul, but they're embedded in the Gospel itself. Put aside for the moment the question of who's kidnapped us, or why we owe a debt, or what crime we've committed in order to get put in jail. Christian theology has continued to play around with these questions for centuries and offered some thoughtful and inventive answers. The point is that we're in an awkward spot, in the middle of a mess, in need of being bailed out.

But this isn't really our story, according to the Gospel of Mark; in the best sense, it's not about us. It's really about the one who scratches together the bail, the one who redeems the ticket, the one who raises the ransom. Our Gospel puts the spotlight on the Son of Man, not on our plight, and the story is told from his perspective and not from ours. The emphasis is on the gift that has been given, the margin that's been extended, the ransom that's been paid.

Then there's something we need to notice before we move on, something that marks our Gospel out from every related idea that we've looked at here. The ransom that's paid by the Son of Man is no external price tag, but the life of the Redeemer himself. The cost is not something but someone, and the Gospels return to this idea over and over again. Jesus in the Gospel of John says that *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"* (Jo. 15:13). It is a sacrifice of self that pays the price. The Son of Man himself is the ransom, a price paid on the cross.

So where does this leave us? Well, we've been ransomed and redeemed, but what then? It's here that we come into the spotlight. Again, Jesus words provide the clue to what our vocation is and what we're called to be. *"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve..."* As Christians, we're to pattern our lives on his life, our service on his service. We're called to be servants of others for Jesus' sake. The call of God is service of the world.

Remember, we all live on the margin given to us, on forbearance of others, on the slack that's extended to us who are all in need of one sort or another; that's the reality of the human condition. The Gospel call turns this reality into intentional ministry, as we give of ourselves to others, helping to create a life together and a community where the ransom has been paid and we are all forgiven and in right relationship with God and each other. What happens, week in and week out, at Calvary Church and at St. James, is the living out of Jesus' call to serve the world in his name, and the constitution of this community of service around the altar of Christ.

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

Proper 25, Year B, October 25, 2009
Trinity Church Winchester

"The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again'" (Mk 10:51).

If you've been out seeing the fall color, you'll know that when things hit their peak, just a day or two can make a difference. In other words, you have to be in the right place at the right time to see what there is to see. Then again, there's the issue of line-of-sight, which any veteran can tell you about. You can be very close to someone or something, but if you're on the other side of the hill or down in the valley, you're not going to see it. You might as well be a thousand miles away for all the good it does. It's a matter of perspective, and you don't have to be blind to miss out.

Our Gospel today, however, is about blindness, about the inability to see. Blind Bartimaeus is Everyman. As human beings, we're suffering not from a physical disability but from blindness of a different sort. His plight symbolizes our own. We lack the capacity to see things as they really are. We can't orient ourselves because we don't know the way forward or even what the next step will bring. We're morally blind. The most perplexing part of this is that we don't know the extent of our incapacity. We think we can see, but we can't, and this leads to chaos.

At least Bartimaeus knows what's going on. He knows what ails him, while we don't have a clue. *"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"* (Mk 10:47), Bartimaeus exclaims. He knows the reality of his situation, and begs for mercy and healing. He gets up and gets going because in the supremely important sense he can see. His moral capacity is unimpaired. He can navigate, so he's going to end up exactly where he's supposed to be.

Knowing our need, the extent of our incapacity, is a key. If Bartimaeus symbolizes what ails us, he's also the key to our healing. We need to see things as they really are. In that sense, we need to be at the right place at the right time, to have the right perspective on ourselves and the world around us. We're in need of mercy; we're in need of help. And we need to put ourselves in the way of grace, to be open to what God can do to heal us and restore our sight.

For that to happen, we need to encounter Jesus Christ. We need to have him in our line-of-sight. Or, to vary the metaphor, Jesus is the lens through which we're able to see. We come to know him in his sacraments, outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. We enter into relationship with him through prayer, in the conversation that brings us together and makes it possible for us to share our minds and hearts with him, and his own mind and heart with us. And we come to love him in the members of his Body the Church, and in all the neighbors that God has given us. In doing these things, with God's help, we come to understand the world as it really is. We'll be there at the right moment to see the glory that's being revealed. We won't miss anything. God heals our blindness, our moral incapacity, and we are able to see.

That brings us back to Bartimaeus. The Gospel ends with the man once blind, with his sight restored and following Jesus on the way. Our confirmands today should pay attention here, because the route that's being travelled here is none other than the Christian life, the road that we travel with Jesus. That's the journey our confirmands have embarked upon. They can navigate and so can we, because we're all on the road together with Christ.

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

All Saints' Day, November 1, 2009
All Saints' Church Smyrna

"These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14).

In December 1944, General William Slim, wartime commander of British forces in Burma, led a counter-offensive that brought his army back to the town of Shwegyin, on the banks of the Chindwin River in Western Burma. Slim had commanded the troops that had been expelled from the country by the initial Japanese invasion in 1942, a traumatic and humiliating defeat for the British. Slim was a modest man and a good prose stylist, and he wrote about his wartime experiences with some ability and grace. Here's Slim as he tells the story: "Shortly after we had recaptured it, I visited Shwegyin. There, still lying in the amphitheatre of hills on the river bank, were the burnt-out and rusted tanks that I had so reluctantly abandoned in the Retreat, two and a half years before. As I walked among them, resavouring the bitter taste of defeat, I could raise my head" (Defeat into Victory).

It's quite a scene, isn't it? The field of desperate battle, revisited years later with the signs of the struggle still in evidence; the scene of bitter and agonizing defeat, now redeemed. In the scene by the riverbank there's the memory of the past defeat, and its visible tokens, but also the consciousness of the transforming blessing of defeat turned to victory. That, by the way, is the title of Slim's military memoir, Defeat into Victory. As Slim puts it, now he could raise his head.

There's something of the same flavor to the scene we're given in our reading from Revelation. We see the members of the persecuted Church, who have come through the great ordeal of martyrdom, now clothed in white and gathered around the throne of God. The evidence of the ordeal is incorporated into the vision that comes to John of Patmos. The robes of the great multitude have been made white by the blood of the Lamb, blood that's been shed in sacrifice. God's promise is that they will hunger and thirst no more; no scorching heat will strike them and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Like the burnt-out tanks by the banks of the Chindwin, the evidence of defeat is still there, yet all has been transformed and made new.

The early Christians discovered their call in the midst of persecution, in the face of terrible challenges to their faith in the crucified and risen Lord. The Roman authorities were willing to make them scapegoats for every evil in the Empire, and were fundamentally opposed to the Church's allegiance to a King who challenged their very power. The experience of persecution informs our Gospel for All Saints' Day, in the blessing that Jesus pronounces. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt. 5:10). We're discovering our own calling as Christians in the face of new and different challenges to our community of faith. All Saints' Church knows what a challenge is. Those being confirmed today are reminding us that in the midst of challenge we are called to discover in our own lives the presence of the crucified and risen Lord.

The experience that General Slim wrote about, the vision of bitter defeat now wondrously redeemed, is also our own experience as Christians. You don't need to be a martyr to know what it's like to be beat up and ground down. We're often living right in the midst of the metaphorical burnt-out hulks of our own past mistakes. But remember our commitment to the crucified and risen Lord, the One who has passed through death to life. The Gospel is about forgiveness and redemption, about the tears that are wiped away and the lives that are redeemed. Where in your own life is defeat being turned into victory? If you can come up with an answer to that, and I know you can, then you're ready to join the great multitude that is gathered around the throne and forever sings God's praise.

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

Proper 27, Year B, November 8, 2009
St. David's Church Nashville

"For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (Mk 12:44).

It's a situation as old as human history: poverty, singling out women and children disproportionately and with devastating effect. I know this phenomenon is familiar to you at St. David's, because of your sponsorship of Mekong Blue, a women's cooperative project in Cambodia that's seeking to empower women economically. Others know about it too, as the vulnerable place of women and children is just one point addressed in the Millennium Development goals. You might call it a public scandal, yet many people in our own day miss this point. But today we can't miss it. When Jesus calls attention to the poor widow in our Gospel, bringing her small offering, he's drawing the eye to a feature of life that often goes unnoticed through its very familiarity. The offering is everything she has, all she has to live on: a tiny margin that quickly vanishes. It wasn't an isolated case, either, in Jesus' day: large numbers of single women, like the poor widow, and children, lived on a similar small margin that disappeared in times of personal or societal stress.

This feature of life had already worked its way into the Biblical witness: for instance, the story of Ruth (our first reading today), about two single women reduced to poverty by the death of the male breadwinners and forced to become refugees in a strange land. Then again, when the prophet Elijah is sent by God to the widow of Zarephath in a time of famine, she's about to go home to prepare a final meal for her and her starving son. The same sorts of stories that we find in our bibles, stories of poverty and hunger and homelessness effecting the most vulnerable, are repeated over and over again in our own day, on television screens and in news reports of all kinds, to the point where the human mind can scarcely absorb it and we ourselves are almost overwhelmed.

Jesus takes this familiar story of human powerlessness and poverty and turns it into something unexpected: a sign of hope, a parable of human faithfulness and willingness to risk. The poor widow gives to God all that she has. Notice that there are two coins, and both go into the treasury. If the widow had been hedging her bets, she would have put one coin in, which would still have been extremely generous, going way beyond the ten percent tithe. But the widow is a risk taker, who gambles all that she has on God's faithfulness and sustaining power. Not a bad lesson in Christian stewardship to take away today. The widow is faithful to God, offering all that she has and indeed all that she is to the God who is trustworthy and who has the power to save even when life itself is under threat.

God's pattern is to call upon the powerless to demonstrate his own power. Women and children are among the humble that are singled out in Scripture as God's favorites when it comes to making a point. The story of the Incarnation itself is just such a case, where an unwed mother and a child in the womb become sacrament and sign of God's grace and favor toward the human race. Mary's willingness to risk empowers people through God's grace and leads to an end of despair. She says "yes" to God, and God takes flesh and form in the midst of human life. Mary throws everything she has into the treasury, so to speak, holding nothing back. God relies precisely on the powerless in order to make his presence known. And the sooner we realize our dependence on God, our solidarity with the poor widow of our Gospel today, the better off we'll be.

So what risks are you willing to take in order to let God work through you? We feel vulnerable, but that's how God works. In the face of risk, we move ahead, trusting in God. There are stories like the tragedies in our newspapers that can reduce us to fear, and perhaps there are times when we're right to be afraid; but God will not leave us there, deprived of his grace and power. The Good News is that God is mighty to save, and we're able to step forward in faith because he is always reliable.

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

Proper 29, Year B, November 22, 2009
St. Mark's Church, Antioch

"I am the Alpha and the Omega", says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8).

It's supposed to be the case that when preaching became a standard part of the liturgy in the sixteenth century, Vestries installed hourglasses in churches to measure the passage of time. There's no suggestion, mind you, that preachers felt limited by the hourglass; in fact, preachers would get to the end of the hour and turn the glass over again for round two. Hard to believe, but there it is. If nothing else, the presence of the glass was a reminder that time was passing, even if it might seem, listening to the sermon, that time was standing still.

Time features in our second reading today, though not in an obvious way. God calls himself "Alpha" and "Omega," the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and the point is that God holds all time in his hand: "*who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*" All of time is laid out in this passage, untold centuries past as well as the present, and the times yet to come that are unknown and simply conjectured at, at this point in time. All time is laid out before us, yet all time is encompassed within the One who is both "*the first and the last*" (Rev. 21:6). So it seems like a long time to us, yet both the first moment and the last are eternally present to God.

Christian theology places Jesus Christ himself, "*the King of kings and Lord of lords*", at the beginning of history and at the end. "*Through him all things were made*" it says in the Creed, which goes on to tell us that "*He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.*" Christ Jesus himself is both the source and ending of all time, so we live our lives in him, in "the meantime" between the first instant of creation and the moment when it's all wrapped up.

So how are we going to live "in the meantime," the time between one event and the other? The sand is running through the hourglass, whether we can see it or not. St Augustine wrote in his *Confessions* that he had no desire "to devour time or to be devoured by it" (IX.4.10). It's a vivid image for moderns, isn't it? We are so conscious of our time, about managing it and multi-tasking, yet never have people been mastered by time like we have, "devoured" by it. There's a notion there in Augustine's description that if we waste our time it will end up wasting us. It's not a pretty sight.

Christians, however, live in God's time, which is different from our own. Our time is one blessed thing after another, "*chromos*," with whatever rhyme and reason we can detect supplied by human reflection; while God's time is "*kairos*," the time in which God acts and we respond. Its rhyme and reason are supplied by God, and this time cannot be scheduled by us.

Yet "*on this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it*" (Ps. 118:24). There is God's action and our response: the pattern of grace, which takes place now. We're seeing it displayed in Holy Baptism and in Confirmation. God is acting and we rejoice in what he has done. The Sacraments we celebrate are major milestones in God's time, a moment when our time becomes God's time, and we are claimed by him.

We've been given this time between Alpha and Omega, between the beginning and the end, for a purpose. There's nothing "mean" at all about this meantime. Time's a wasting, but it won't waste us. This is not a time that can be measured by the sands in an hourglass. Instead, it is God's time, the generous margin he's given us, and the time has come for us to pay attention and to respond.

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

Advent 1, Year C, 2009, November 29, 2009
Church of the Advent, Nashville

"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory" (Lk. 21:27).

Charles Dickens' novel *David Copperfield* begins with Chapter I, entitled "I Am Born." Not every book or film begins at the very beginning of the story (like this one), but we're used to a story starting there (wherever that might be) and proceeding on to the end. Even stories that start in the middle, and "flash back" or "flash forward" to tell their tale, are moving in a familiar direction, which is forward in time, no matter how the story is told. That's how books and movies go, even the most avant garde, because that's how your life and my life go: forward in time, from beginning to end. We emerge from the past and move into the present.

Notice however the way our story goes today: the story, that is, of the Church Year. It's the First Sunday of Advent, the first day in the Christian Calendar, and instead of beginning with a chapter entitled "I Am Born" or even with a chapter leading up to Jesus' birth (which we might well believe to be the beginning of the Christian story), we start somewhere else: with a vision of the Son of Man coming in glory at the end of time. This "coming" is linked to the Day of the Lord, a day of victory for YHWH which initiates a time of universal peace and of restoration for God's People, the children of Israel.

Our first reading from the prophet Zechariah gives us some of this background, the "back story" you might say. God's coming rearranges everything, even the topography of the Promised Land, but most of all it brings an end to the old order and the beginning of a new order. As Zechariah says, *"And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one"* (Zech. 14:9).

This is how the Church Year begins. Jesus paints a picture of the Messiah who comes to establish God's reign, the Son of Man who stands at the end of the Biblical story. Jesus is the Messiah whose coming again at the end of time is the fulfillment of the Day of the Lord foretold by the prophets, and the fulfillment of Jesus' vision itself. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come," and our Gospel today delivers on that prayer. The Church Year begins with the end of the story, with the promise of victory and peace.

Now you might think that the Church Year is just starting the story at the end, and then unfolding the rest in an extended flashback that brings us to Holy Week and Easter, to death and Resurrection, the climax of the story. It's certainly gotten our attention with a dramatic vision, but there's more here than that. There's actually a clue to the nature and character of God. God is the God of hope, the God of the future; he is the King of a Kingdom which is immortal and imperishable, but which is only now emerging in our time. God's kingdom of peace and reconciliation is our future, and the future is where the Messiah lives and reigns. In God's time all of this is already fulfilled, but from where we sit it is still to come.

The Church Year begins the story with a vision of the future, God's future, because our story as Christians begins with Jesus Christ and ends with him as well. Our present seems to emerge from the past, to build upon it and even to supersede it; but in Christian terms our present has its source in the future. Our story, the story of salvation, is emerging from the future, not the past; a future where Jesus Christ is enthroned and the Kingdom is established.

We too live in hope, in the future, but God is also present and active now in our lives because the future has a claim upon us here and now. Advent, with its vision of Christ coming again, reminds us that the future is powerfully present in our midst. Our confirmands are the signs and symbols of the reality of God, involved and active in our lives, and of the promised future. The promises and vows which are enacted here are the visible evidence that the future is both coming and present already, changing lives and making God's presence known.

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

Advent 2, Year C, December 6, 2009
Christ Church Cathedral, Nashville

“Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look towards the east, and see your children gathered...”
(Bar. 5:5).

Overthrow: the capture of the capital city Jerusalem and the end of the monarchy. Destruction: breaching of the defensive walls and the burning of the Temple. Exile: dispossession and involuntary removal from the Promised Land at the hand of the Babylonian Army. These were epochal events for the People of God. Even after the return from exile in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the rebuilding of walls and Temple there were loose ends and unresolved issues for God’s People, a sense of exile that was now not external but internal, a displacement that was not physical but psychological, or rather more properly, spiritual.

The reading from the Apocryphal Book of Baruch today testifies to this sense of displacement. Most likely written years after the event, and even after the return to Jerusalem, the book witnesses to the acknowledgement of sin and loss that still marks the life of the People of God, to the exile that was still going on. That sense of exile continues to reverberate and resound in the life of the Church, the new Israel, recounted each year in the prophetic readings of Advent, as we contemplate in them our own sense of displacement, our own loose ends and unresolved issues, our own sin and sense of loss.

Yet there is promise here as well. *“Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven”* (Bar. 5:1-3). What’s present in our reading is present throughout the Prophets: the promise of return from exile, of restoration after loss, of renovation after destruction. Our reading prophesies the people returning from Babylon, on a road made accessible and clear by the action of God. The Temple will be rebuilt, the walls raised up, and the People reborn to serve the living God. Yet Baruch reminds us that even after their return, the People still looked for something more. For the Church that “something more” is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

If we know what exile is, then we also know what it means to come home. There’s the home we remember, distant in time perhaps for some, but still a present reality in the great hall of memory. I remember my grandparents’ house on the St. John’s River: distant in time but accessible still. There’s the place where we live now, home in its proper sense. I guess I know where that is: they even leave the lights on for me on occasion! Then there’s the home from which we venture forth in order to break new ground, the place we hope to return to at the end of the day or the week or whenever, depending on how much groundbreaking we’re doing. There it is, homecoming: what the Prophets hoped for and the thing for which we still pine.

They say you can’t go home again, and I think I know what that means: that the past is past and not to be repeated. But there’s also the sense for Christians that we can go home again; in fact, that we’re expected to make the journey and we’re supposed to arrive. The journey home is not always easy: in our reading it requires the leveling of mountains and the filling in of valleys. Behind us lies overthrow, destruction, and exile, but the way home lies ahead; it requires transformation and the embrace of the Cross, but it brings new life. We can go home, but the journey will not leave us unchanged.

That brings us to those preparing for Confirmation or Reception or Baptism, who reach a significant point on their journey today. Today represents a milestone on the road back from exile, a way station leading to the heavenly Jerusalem. Your journey is reminding us of the journey we’re all on, a journey that is leading us deeper into relationship with God. The homeland we seek is the Original, the one we find reflected in every homecoming we’ve ever enjoyed. Can you make out the path before you? Can you see the City that lies ahead? It’s our true Home, and it awaits our return.

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

Advent 3, Year C, December 13, 2009
St. Barnabas' Church, Tullahoma

"At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD" (Zeph. 3:20).

In the T.V. drama *Lost*, a group of people survive the crash landing of their plane and come to rest on a strange island, far from home and apparently far from rescue. The island's strange because mysterious things happen there: even though it's a tropical island, the survivors encounter a polar bear, and there's a "monster" of sorts that no one can see but which roams the island wreaking havoc. I lost the thread of this drama after the first season, but the theme of shipwreck and the desire to return is an old one in life and literature; at least by the time Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, the notion of the shipwreck and enforced residence on a desert island far from home was well established in fiction. Shows like *Lost* and even *Gilligan's Island* continue to reprise the theme, which is a variant on the narrative of exile and slavery. The story is a part of the human condition. Take us to a land that is far away and we will pine for our homes and long to return.

Ancient Israel knew this theme well. Enshrined in the Old Testament prophets is the foretelling that God's chosen People will be overcome by enemy invasion and will be forced into exile in a strange land. *"By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, * when we remembered you, O Zion" (Ps. 137:1)*. Even before this, ancient Israel, from the time of Moses on, knew what it was like to be *"a stranger in a strange land" (Ex. 2:22)*, because the People of God had been wandering for years. From the time of the Exile and even before, the Promised Land becomes the longed for destination, the home that has been lost and must be regained. So it is that the prophet Zephaniah could anticipate not only exile but also the promise of return: *"At that time I will bring you home... when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord,"* as we heard this morning.

Note for a moment the way in which the familiar stories of shipwreck or crash landing add to or elaborate on the exile narrative, drawing the eye to details that we might have missed at first glance. We might think that Ancient Israel knew the way home, while the survivors on *Lost* don't even know where they really are. Then again, life was strange in the land of Babylon, an enemy country where the People of God could never be at home; but by the time we get to the mysterious island of *Lost* we are really in a dangerous place where we're not even sure which way is up. But danger and disorientation are also a part of the story of exile.

Here's where we're reminded of some truths of the human condition, reflected in the television drama, and also reminded of the real promise of the Gospel which fulfills the hopes of Israel. We too live in a dangerous and topsy-turvy land, and we too cannot find our way home. We're lost too, if you will; in exile from the Paradise that God created at the beginning of the world. Troubling and unbelievable things happen in this place of our exile; at times it seems that there is hardly anything we can rely on, and no sense to be found, not even within ourselves. We sinners are just as flawed as the world we inhabit. If you're like me, you recognize yourself in this larger human drama.

But God's grace is good, and his love is never-failing. The promise announced by the prophets is addressed to us as surely as it was to Israel. God has sent Jesus Christ to fulfill the promise, to lead us out of this strange land and to bring us home. Where in your lives can you see Christ leading the way? That's a good question to take home today. We're on a journey that leads to the coming kingdom of God, and as we gather round the altar we're at a way station, at an important marker on the way forward. God makes his presence known in this sacrament; he makes it a milestone which points the way Home. Through it, in this Advent season, may God bring us at last to the destination.

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

Advent 4, Year C, December 20, 2009
Church of the Epiphany, Sherwood & St. Agnes' Church Cowan

"And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Lk. 1:45).

A lot of people believe in the power of positive thinking; that is, in the idea that if you have an "upbeat" attitude, it will create a context in which good things will happen for you and for others. I'm not sure you can really prove this, though I think that a positive approach is better than a pessimistic one, as long as you're in touch with reality and are not trying to fool yourself. Wishful thinking isn't good when you have important decisions to make, though it's good to be looking for positive things to happen. After all, none of us wants to be the person on the sidelines predicting the worst.

Our Gospel today portrays a moment of faith and hope, something quite different from positive thinking. Here we see the Virgin Mary paying a visit to her cousin Elizabeth, when both are pregnant and not yet delivered of their children. Mary has taken an incredible risk in saying "yes" to the angel, when she is unmarried and in a very precarious position. Elizabeth, and the child in her womb (John the Baptist), testify in our Gospel to Mary's faith and her hope for the future. *"Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."* Mary believed that God would deliver on his promise by sending the Messiah, and that he would do it through her. She looked forward to the future, that time of fulfillment, with hope.

Mary depended on the power of God, and it was a blessing to her. Faith means not depending on our own powers or on our own abilities or even our own optimism, our own belief that everything will turn out all right. Faith is always rooted in the specific promise of God: in this case, the promise of God in Jesus Christ. The Lord spoke to Mary, as Elizabeth says in our Gospel. She believed even when there was no reason to believe, no reason for optimism. Mary's in touch with the reality of her situation, and she's not given to wishful thinking. She has an important decision to make, and she's not fooling herself. You might say that Mary was not optimistic, but she was faithful.

This capacity for faith is within each one of us, but faith itself is a gift from God. It comes through grace. There's a piece missing from each of us, an empty space within us, that's only filled by faith, by belief in God; or rather, belief in what God can do. I think that's what "belief in God" really means: not belief in the existence of God, in some abstract sense, but a quite specific faith in what God can and will do for us. We are blessed, like Mary, when God gives the gift.

Advent is a time in which we stretch ourselves in this same faithful direction, learning to trust in God and to look toward the future in hope. God has made some promises to us, after all: to be our Father, to send the Savior, to gather us into the kingdom he has prepared for us. These are specific promises that we recall every time we say the Lord's Prayer. *"Our Father, who art in heaven... Forgive us our trespasses... For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever."* In Advent we have a time of waiting which develops that capacity for faith, and teaches us to turn toward the future with hope.

So in what direction are you stretching toward? Do you need to develop the capacity to trust God some more? Has God given you some challenges to faith in your life? Like Mary, we all need to be able to say "yes" to God; we all need to believe in his power to act. We need to be in touch with the "real reality" that is rooted in God's capacity to send the Savior. No matter what situation we are in, we cannot count God out. The "real reality" of God's saving power is even now about to break into our world, through the angel's word and Mary's faith in God.

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

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2009
Christ Church Cathedral, Nashville

"While all things were in quiet silence, and night was in the midst of her swift course, Your Almighty word leaped down from heaven out of your royal throne" (Wis. 18:14-15).

The Christmas story begins in darkness and takes place at night, not only with the shepherds in our Gospel this evening, but also in the old church tradition that tells us that the Savior was born at midnight, at the time of deepest darkness and of greatest silence. The tradition most likely has its roots in the text from the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon that began this sermon, with night *"in the midst of her swift course,"* and the conjecture of Christian tradition continues to bring worshippers (in the words of the hymn) out "upon the midnight clear" even tonight.

There is significance here in our midnight excursion, in its silence and darkness and mystery. Anthropologist and Naturalist Loren Eiseley, in one of his marvelous and idiosyncratic books, *In the Night Country*, reminds us that human beings evolved as creatures of the day, not of the night. It's not our natural element. "Man, who bumps his head and fumbles in the dark because of his small day-born eyes, fears the ghosts of the dark above all things. As a consequence," says Eiseley, "my confession is that of a man with night fear" ("Big Eyes & Small Eyes"). Eiseley goes on to elaborate on the dangers and insecurities of the night, but he also has another story to tell. He identifies himself as a child of the night, of the "dark, brooding, but creative void" out of which the "external" and "boisterous" world emerges. Eiseley's words, not mine. "I believe," says Eiseley, "that... we mirror in ourselves the universe with all its dark vacuity and also its simultaneous urge to create anew, in each generation, the beauty and terror of our mortal existence" ("The Mind as Nature"). Eiseley was not a Believer, an apologist for religious faith, but he had a keen sense of the loose ends and left over bits of existence that Scientific Rationalism still can't explain to most folk's satisfaction; at least, to those folk who care enough to wonder.

Wonder, too, is a part of our capacity as human beings; a capacity which points beyond ourselves to something else. As we look out we're not confronted by a meaningless void of still darkness, but by a mysterious and creative Presence that brings to birth a Savior. This night is pregnant with mystery and wonder. There's stuff going on out there, in the deep darkness, things that we cannot see and that we can scarcely credit. The Presence may be cloaked in darkness, but the Savior is revealed in human flesh, as one of us incarnate in our midst. The Savior reveals Presence to be in fact Personality, Divine Personality, extended to us as Grace and Love.

We may not have been made for the night, but it is in the midst of this night that humanity is remade and fashioned anew. This night contains mysteries that we cannot plumb or fathom. *We are "fearfully and wonderfully made"* (Ps. 139:14), according to the Psalmist; in beauty and in terror, according to Eiseley. And so it is that we are even more fearfully and wonderfully remade, according to the awesome and beautiful pattern that is revealed tonight in the manger. We gather tonight at the altar in order to receive the Life that has come down from heaven, given anew in Christ's Body and Blood: a Sacrament that will become a part of us and transform us and make us inheritors of everlasting life. That Life is made tangible tonight, and placed within our hands. Priest and poet Richard Crashaw put it this way:

Welcome to our wondering sight
Eternity shut in a span
Summer in winter, day in night!
Heaven in earth and God in man!
Great little one whose glorious birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Christmas 1, Year C, December 27, 2009
St. Anselm's Church, Nashville

"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (Jo. 1:12-13).

Just as the world is moving on after Christmas, the Church is just starting to get cranked up, with serious theological reflection on what the festival really means. The Twelve Days of Christmas give us time to think about the birth of the Savior, to reflect upon its meaning for us, free perhaps from the demands of holiday shopping and visiting and partying. It's only the third day of Christmas today, so we've got some more time to catch up and consider what this birth means, just in case we've been pre-occupied; a chance to sing the hymns again and to hear the story once more.

What we hear, however, is something a bit different, another take if you will on the Nativity story. On Christmas Eve we hear the familiar tale, of shepherds and angels and the holy Child born of the Virgin Mary. But what we have today is something else: the beginning of the Gospel of John, telling us of the Word who is with God in the beginning, and who comes forth to take flesh and to live among us. That Word, of course, is Jesus Christ, and today we're hearing the story told in a different way. In our Gospel we don't have a star guiding the Wise Men, but instead a great light which shines in the darkness without being overcome. We have no shepherds or angels, but instead John the Baptist, the one sent from God to testify to that light. We don't have a Child born in a stable, but instead the good news that all who believe in him can be born again.

That's the meaning of Christmas for us: re-birth. I know the story of Christmas is all about the birth of Christ, "the reason for the season," but it's also about the new birth that comes to us, who are born again by adoption and grace through baptism. God takes human flesh in Jesus Christ and claims us for his own. The birth of Jesus Christ makes it possible for us to become children of God.

We're in need of re-birth. Our world lies under a great cloud, the burden of past human sin and wrongdoing which has gotten us so tangled up that we can hardly live. We can't seem to do the good things we would wish to do, and we can hardly avoid those bad things that we would not wish to do. The human race seems stuck, individually and collectively. We're in need of re-birth, of a fresh start, and the birth of Jesus Christ is the beginning of the process that leads to a new birth for us.

"Re-birth:" it's what we need. If you know music you might know trumpeter Kermit Ruffins and the Rebirth Jazz Band from New Orleans. "Rebirth:" what a great name for a band. They've got a number called "Make Way for the Rebirth," with a tuba accompaniment, suitable for the marching band parade-style New Orleans sound. The Rebirth Brass Band got its start doing street performances in the French Quarter, so I imagine that "Make Way for the Rebirth" started out as a way to clear the street! "Make way for the Rebirth," repeated like a chant line by the musicians: Gospel words if you take them the right way. The Band was named years before Hurricane Katrina, but if there ever was a place that testified to re-birth, to the need for it, it's New Orleans.

Still, for all of us there's the burden of our past sins and our need to overcome them, which God does for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the re-birth it brings to us. We are all children of God through adoption and grace, and as children we are heirs to the promise. Re-birth is our legacy, the gift that God has given us through the birth of Jesus Christ. We too need to "make way for the re-birth".

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