



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

THE SEVENTH
SUNDAY OF
EASTER
MAY 21, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Dr. Hiber Omer is a physician, a surgeon, in Sudan. As a result of the conflict between the army and the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary group, thousands of people have fled Sudan. The situation in Ukraine is similar. When the nation was plunged into war over a year ago millions of people fled.

Yet, in every instance, there are those who stay behind, those who remain in place to carry on as best they can. Dr. Omer stayed behind because her city was in the hour of its greatest need. And in Kartoum, the hospital is open, the C-sections are performed, the bullet wounds are treated.

Volodymyr Zelensky stayed behind, refusing an offer to flee to safety. And an inspired nation is resisting a foreign invasion with courage and determination, much in contrast to the rapid fall of Afghanistan after Ashraf Gani, the president who promised he never would abandon his people, fled in a helicopter as the Taliban approached.

We might hesitate to begrudge him the instinct for self-preservation. But as Farah Stockman observes in her opinion piece entitled "Leaders Stay, Others Run":

Whenever a place becomes unbearable because of a natural disaster or a war, our hearts go out to the refugees who make the desperate trek out. But it's the people who stay behind who will decide the country's fate. They are the ones who will determine whether refugees will have a home to return to.¹

In a very real sense, we are the people that are staying behind. And we are the people who bear a unique responsibility for making the church hospitable and meaningful to the next generations.

Among the modern prophetic voices was the late Phyllis Tickle, an articulate and prolific sociologist who had a keen understanding of the Church in history. In her view, the Church enters a period of reformation roughly every

¹ *The New York Times*, May 14, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/14/opinion/sudan-medicine-doctors.html> (accessed May 14, 2023).

500 years – and the last reformation was in the 16th century. Not hard to do the math.

So now we are not only due, but in the midst of one of those 500-year reformations, which engulfs not only religion and religious institutions, but culture as a whole. It is an immensely challenging wilderness to navigate and likely will not end until mid-century. And how easy it is to be discouraged by the state of the Church early in the 21st century.

In the midst of global cultural upheaval, millions of people in this country have been fleeing their religious denominations or institutional religion completely. Today, over 20 per cent of the people in our country describe themselves as “nones,” those with no religious affiliation.² That’s nones, n-o-n-e-s, by the way, not nuns, n-u-n-s -, though certainly the number of n-u-n-s – has decreased, perhaps, proportionately to the increase in the number of n-o-n-e-s “nones.” Indeed, the number of nuns in this country has declined by 76 percent since 1950, leaving only about 42,000 nuns in America.³

Every year six to 10 thousand churches “close down, either to be repropounded as apartments, laundries, laser-tag arenas, or skate parks, or simply to be demolished.”⁴ And in a *Wall Street Journal* and University of Chicago study of around 1000 Americans this year “only 39 per cent of respondents said religion was very important to them, compared to 62 per cent who said that in 1998.”⁵

All we have to do is look around at the empty pews. Yet, here we are. We have stayed behind while so many have fled, abandoned, discounted, or snubbed organized, institutional religion.

And it falls upon us to maintain and navigate the Church through this tumultuous period of history.

But you know what Jesus would tell us. In the words of that eminent theologian and scholar Bobby McFerrin, as quoted by our esteemed Michael

² Frank Newport, “Slowdown in the Rise of Religious Nones, Gallup®, December 9, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/406544/slowdown-rise-religious-nones.aspx> (accessed May 8, 2023).

³ Jon Schlosberg, Lindsey Griswold, Haley Yamada, Janice McDonald, and Steve Osunsami, “America’s Nun Population in Steep Decline,” ABC News, July 27, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/americas-nun-population-steep-decline/story?id=87426990> (accessed May 18, 2023).

⁴ Jessica Grosse Newsletter, “Lots of Americans Are Losing Their Religion. Have You?”, *The New York Times*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/19/opinion/religion-america.html> (accessed May 8, 2023).

⁵ *Id.*

Curry in his sermon at his installation as presiding bishop..." Don't worry. Be happy." "Don't worry. Be happy."⁶

When Jesus returned to his father in heaven, about 120 disciples stayed behind - though, to be frank, they would have preferred not to. But that's roughly one disciple for every 30,000 Jews in Judea. Or maybe the equivalent of eight disciples in Okaloosa county. Or less than one in Destin.

Have you seen my birthday card (thanks Walt and Becky) on my desk? It shows Jesus, with cell phone in hand, on Twitter..."12 followers so far. Sweet." Today it would be over two billion. All because a handful of disoriented quizzical disciples trusted that Jesus would have their back, even after he was gone from view.

This month, we are praying and waiting with our United Methodist sisters and brothers to see how many in the congregation of the former Destin United Methodist Church, now just the Destin Methodist Church, will stay behind and remain affiliated with the United Methodist Church, now that they have been left with no local place of worship. They, too, will begin again like Jesus' disciples in those lonely moments after he ascended.

We here at St. Andrew's By-the-Sea also might recall that less than 20 members stayed behind when the bulk of the membership departed to form what now is the Immanuel Anglican Church. Yes, we have ups and downs over the succeeding decades, but we are still here. Still doing God's work in the world and now embracing the challenge of a future crowded with the daunting challenges of this latest reformation of God's one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

But God did not create the cosmos to destroy it.

Jesus did not redeem us to abandon us.

The Holy Spirit is not here with us just to watch.

The church did not emerge as a dinosaur, strong and powerful, but unable to adapt. And that should give us confidence.

We might even note that the tide may be turning already, as the number of religious nones - n-o-n-e-s nones - no longer is increasing and has been stable since 2017.⁷

⁶ <https://genius.com/Bobby-mcferrin-dont-worry-be-happy-lyrics> ; Holy Eucharist and Installation of the Most Rev. Michael Curry as XXVII , November 1, 2015, Washington, D.C., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5YZtmFkNyU&t=8419s> [highly recommended].

⁷ Newport, *supra*.

Then there is the other nun, Sister Joanne Persch. She just turned 88, and many of her colleagues in the convent have died. But she hardly is discouraged:

“Well, I think it's a big mistake to say that religious life is dying,” she says, “And I look around me in our community and I see such vibrant, such life. It's changing and growing into something we can't even imagine.”⁸

My dear friends in Christ. Don't worry. Be happy.

⁸ Schlosberg *et al.*, *supra*.