



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**

*The Episcopal Church  
in Destin, Florida*

**THE THIRD SUNDAY  
OF EASTER**

**APRIL 14, 2024**

**A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham**

Bishop Russell often resorts to this couplet to define how we might best live our lives:

Love Jesus  
and be proud to be an Episcopalian.

We might expand that a little bit to:

Love God and be proud to be a child of God.

Just a little more inclusive, but just as simple.

Psalm 4, which we read this morning also encapsulates how we are to live as children of God in one couplet or verse that has become one of my all-time favorites for its simplicity and power:

Offer the appointed sacrifices\* And put your trust in  
the Lord.

So very simple. So very... terrifying.

The modern version of the "appointed sacrifices" for us as Episcopalians is, indeed, simple and straightforward. We worship together out of the Book of Common Prayer. And our prayer book hardly is anything to be feared. We no longer sacrifice animals to God. Instead, we acknowledge and relive Christ's sacrifice for us in our participation in the Holy Eucharist. And we know that the prayer book not only derives in large part directly from Scripture, but also is the product of centuries of prayer and discernment. Therefore, within the covers of the prayer book, we can be assured that our prayer in its form, at least, is "appointed" and, therefore, presumably righteous.

But the psalmist knew, as well, that worship alone was inadequate. It can become rote and casual. It can be hollow, even meaningless and very likely ineffectual. Or even a hypocritical charade by which we seek to impress others and delude ourselves.

Worship alone means little or nothing in the absence of trust in God. But when “when religious observance is coupled with true trust in God, we draw near to God and experience the benefits of drawing near.”<sup>1</sup> Which begs the question, then, what is true trust in God?

The other night in tossing and turning and pondering and reflecting on what it means to truly trust the Lord, it was, indeed, terrifying. Because I could imagine all sorts of circumstances in which truly and fully trusting the Lord would be unimaginable. Imagine being in a situation in which only violence against another human being would prevent grievous harm to a spouse or child? Jesus condemned violence even at the point of his arrest, knowing he would be crucified. “No more of this,” he said, adding “for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” Jesus fully trusted God, despite fear so intense he had begged God to save him from that gruesome death.

That is true trust in God. That is how we are called to live. It is, indeed, terrifying, not only because it also may involve incredible pain or sacrifice, but also because – and here may speak only for myself – I seriously doubt I could ever summon that perfect trust in God when the life of a loved one was threatened.

I know, I watch too much television, notwithstanding our staff motto at the National Association of Broadcasters, where I began my career as a lawyer, “You can make us defend it, but you cannot make us watch it.”

Yet, as David French observed in his column on Thursday, “The older I get, the more I’m convinced that we simply don’t know who we are – or what we truly believe – until our values carry a cost.

But we do need to ask what “trust in the Lord” means in our day-to-day lives. Let’s start by ruling out one popular approach known as the “prosperity gospel.” It is an aberrant, false, and utterly unscriptural doctrine that implies that bad things cannot happen to good people, only good things can. Or, more particularly, that good faithful Christians, especially those who tithe, always will be rewarded with health, wealth, and material prosperity. If that sounds even a little bit appealing to us, we might ponder for a moment the God fearing souls of the Ukraine, Gaza, and Haiti, who live in the rubble of bombed out and vandalized buildings, scrounge for food to feed their children, have no meaningful medical care, or, if they are especially less unfortunate, have fled to foreign lands that may – or may not – welcome them as Christ would if he were standing at the border.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/psalm-4/>

Yes, of course, God loves us. God wants us to be healthy. God wants us to be safe. God wants us to be secure. God wants us to have enough. And God's vision for achieving that is the establishment of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

And who is supposed to accomplish this formation of God's kingdom? We are. And how has that worked out? Here are some familiar words:

From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the rulers of creation. But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another.

Bad things happen to good people. And we hardly need God to make that happen. We do quite well with that all on our own. Many who embrace an unshakable trust in God remain starving, imperiled, exploited, oppressed, and forgotten. All because we have betrayed God's trust, not the other way around. So much for the prosperity gospel.

Let me temper with some life experience this nearly intemperate critique of the prosperity gospel, which, incidentally, dates well back before the likes of Oral Roberts and Joel Osteen found their way on to our television screens.<sup>2</sup> Jo and I call this experience the magic carpet. There have been times in our lives in which we have correctly interpreted God's vision for us and pursued that vision with courage and vigor. At so often so many things broke the right way and fell into place. All we had to do was hold on tight to that magic carpet.

Is that what we trust God to do? Is it something we expect? Not sure. Often it is more apparent in our rear-view mirrors. Still, we are sure that we can trust God to provide all we need to accomplish what he calls us to do.

And what dare we say about miracles? Can we trust God to provide miraculous cures and rescues? Last week we stumbled on an insightful little movie on Netflix with some sterling acting from Maggie Smith, Kathy Bates, and Laura Linney, called *The Miracle Club*. Three women travel to Lourdes, where they hope the healing waters will cure their ills, physical and emotional. Their expectations of miracle cures were dashed. Three million pilgrims visit Lourdes every year, but, since 1858, only 70 cures have been verified as true miracles.<sup>3</sup> As their parish priest observed

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/prosperity-gospel>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lourdes-france.org/en/>

You don't come to Lourdes for a miracle ... You come for the strength to go on when there is no miracle.<sup>4</sup>

And we can at least trust God for that.

After all, God may not insulate us from ourselves, but God does all we could rightly expect to save us from ourselves, and not just memory, reason, and skill. We can talk. We can walk upright. We have opposable thumbs. That can be a gravely unkind insult to our dogs, but sometimes they need to hear it. Cats, too, we might suppose. And no need to mention tropical fish.

Again, the familiar words we will recite in a few minutes come to mind:

Again and again, you called us to return. Through prophets and sages you revealed your righteous Law. And in the fullness of time you sent your only Son, born of a woman, to fulfill your Law, to open for us the way of freedom and peace.

And, of course, God has put Christ in our hearts and left us the Holy Spirit. Trusting God unfailingly may seem an impossible task. And it certainly can be challenging. But we have the means and, let's hope, the desire. And for that we can trust in God.

Will our trust be unfailing? We know better, sadly. But we also know that even then, we can trust God to forgive us when we stumble and fall, and hold out a loving hand to lift us up. And that hand will extend until it touches our fingertips. We need only grasp it.

We are in the Easter season. Let us then recall what Easter and the resurrection really mean for us. Even in the darkest of times and deepest depths of despair, we can trust God for at least two things that can put everything else in perspective. First, whatever evil has befallen us, it will not prevail. And second, our lives are eternal. The day will come when we reside in God's presence with bodies that are incorruptible. That day will be everlasting. And more than it was anything we did or did not do, it will be because God is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy. God forgives us with abandon and invites us to gather at the heavenly banquet. For that we can trust God without fear or reservation.

And we need not ask God to make it so, my dear friends in Christ, because ...it is so!

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12712604/>