



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

***The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida***

**THE EIGHTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST**

JULY 14, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

If we find ourselves in the presence of God or Jesus or an angel, what would be the first words we would expect to hear?

“Do not be afraid.”

Or as our outgoing presiding bishop often says, quoting no less than Bobby McFerrin, “Don’t worry, be happy.”¹

But don’t those reassurances always precede something frightening? Mary, you are going to have a baby! And in the Episcopal Church traditionally, the most frightening prospect is ...change.

Why would we mention that today? Because, apparently, thinking differently is all the rage in the Episcopal Church these days. Several weeks back Jo launched her sermon from the Apple posters of Amelia Earhart and Pablo Picasso, among others, all reminding us to “think different.” Then last week our new presiding bishop-elect wasted not a minute in calling the Church to “think differently.” And coincidentally last week my *Gem* pointed to some examples of how our Gen X sisters and brothers – and children – think differently about worship than we do.

And thinking differently about anything portends...change.

Think differently. Don’t worry. Be happy. Do not be afraid.

In the 60s Bob Dylan told us, “The Times are a Changin.” Are we wondering how long it will be before we have “AI” written sermons? Well, at least they would be intelligent.

The late Phyllis Tickle, an articulate and prolific sociologist, who had a keen understanding of religious and cultural change, posited that the Church enters a period of reformation roughly every 500 years – and the last one was in the 16th century. Not hard to do the math.

Likewise, in her recent column in *The New York Times*, entitled, “Are We in the Middle of a Spiritual Awakening?”, Jessica Grose, quotes

¹ <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> (accessed Jul3 11, 2024).

Brent Wright, an Indiana-based hospital chaplain, who also believes that we're in some kind of transitional period. When we spoke, he said, "Those of us who are living right at the cusp of this shift are the ones bearing the burden of the cultural assumptions that came before us that we're breaking out of, but then bearing the uncertainty of what does this mean?"²

Change – again, a word that invariably breeds anxiety among Episcopalians. But then again Bob Dylan, Steve Jobs, and our children and grandchildren are telling us if not in their words, then in their absence from our pews, that change abounds – and we have to think differently.

But let me suggest something else seemingly contradictory in the midst of all this talk about change and its demands to think differently: We already are different. In fact, we are different just in that we are here in church this morning. Most people are not. Only around 20 per cent of people in our nation are in church on any Sunday morning.

But that hardly is the only way we are different. The reading from the letter to the church in Ephesus this morning offers some pertinent hints. First, it calls us followers of Christ as "adopted to himself" – meaning adopted by God. Under Roman law that applied in Judea at the time of Christ, persons who were adopted were essentially new persons. They took on all the rights of their new families and were relieved of all debts and obligations connected with their previous families. The meaning was clear. God has adopted us. We have become God's children, rather than children of the world. Our worldly pasts are left behind. And this means, too, that by the grace of God, we are a forgiven people.

Second, as a guarantee of our redemption, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. Remember how at Baptism we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever...forever! The author uses a very meaningful word for guarantee that is more directly translated as the "earnest" of our redemption, a word common to Greek business as a partial advance payment that guaranteed the full payment on delivery or completion of the deal. Even today, we make an offer to buy a house and put down earnest money to guarantee we will go to closing and complete the sale. So the Holy Spirit is seen as the advance hint of what we are assured when we ultimately enter

² *The New York Times*, July 3, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/03/opinion/spirituality-religion.html> (accessed July 3, 2024).

in the full blessedness of God. Moreover, the Holy Spirit reveals God's will to us and enables us to live it.

Finally, as followers of Christ, we are chosen by God to reveal Christ to the world. We always think of the Jews as God's chosen people, and, indeed, they revealed the one true God and the value of religion to the world. But we can say with the same confidence that the Greeks brought an appreciation of the beauty of thought and form to Christianity, as well as some philosophical ideas that influenced Christian thought. Indeed, Christ may have come into the world when he did precisely because first century Greek philosophical thought was able to accommodate the understanding of God and humanity that Jesus brought to the world, including the distinction of body and soul, for example.

And the Romans gave the early Christians in Judea the knowledge of law and the science of government and administration. Rome had its emperor, and the Roman Catholic Church still has its pope. That's a bit glib. But should we be surprised that the church became an hierarchical institution within decades after the resurrection.

God chooses people. God chooses peoples. We are chosen, and that makes us different.

So, what does that mean for us today? We are different. We are chosen. And now encouraged to think differently. We might even wonder whether the empty pews around us suggest we should have started thinking differently in the last century, rather than starting to play catch-up in this century. Our 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, after all, is 45 years old. But, as a Church, we are trying to reach missed generations.

For example, last month, the General Convention amended the Constitution and Canons of the Church to include a number of updated liturgies and texts within a broadened definition of the Book of Common Prayer, which does not require approval of an entirely new singular all-inclusive volume.

And to be fair, we did begin ordaining women 50 years ago, and the Episcopal Church has been at the forefront of inclusiveness and nondiscrimination with respect to issues of race, sex, sexuality, and gender. None of that has come without controversy. Thinking differently is one thing. Doing differently can be a challenge.

Phyllis Tickle likened this time of thinking differently to a great rummage sale. We are sorting through everything we have, everything we do, everything we believe even, or at least, how we express our beliefs...and

we're discarding what no longer fits. We are distilling down to the core. And then determining how to reform and rebuild.

Part of that for us is our effort to develop our property. What do we keep? What do we let go of? What do we build? We will lament what we give up. And we can tremble a bit at the uncertainty inherent in change. But we cannot lose sight of the need for change. Or lose confidence in God's inspiration and vision for us.

After all, if the infant church community in Ephesus was up for it, so are we. We are God's children, even if by inheritance, endowed with memory, reason, and skill.

We are forgiven and can show God's forgiveness to a world that yearns for peace and reconciliation instead of conflict and violence,

We are blessed by the Holy Spirit and assured of the joy and peace of eternal life, a message that can only resonate with a world seeking escape from death, destruction, disillusion, and despair.

Our message is one of love and compassion, peace, justice, and mercy. And who could quarrel with any of those.

So, don't worry. Be happy. Do not be afraid.

As President Franklin Roosevelt so famously said in his first inaugural address in 1933, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."³

But, mainly, my dear friends in Christ, remember this:

God did not choose us to fail.

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³ National Archives, "FDR's First Inaugural Address Declaring War on the Great Depression," <https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/fdr-inaugural/images/address-1.gif> (accessed July 11, 2024).