



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea THE THIRD SUNDAY
The Episcopal Church IN LENT
in Destin, Florida March 23, 2025

A homily by the Reverend James J. Popham

We are living in anxious times. And by we, I mean, our community of followers of Christ called St. Andrew's By-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Destin, Florida. We all know that several weeks ago, the last contingencies were removed from our contract to sell our property. That sale will close on May 1, if all goes as stated in the contract. So our last Sunday service will be on April 27, and the last Episcopal service of any kind here will be on April 30, immediately preceding the transport of the last of our moveable property to our new location at...well, we do not know that yet, though a vigorous search is underway.

We are, indeed, living in anxious times. And we worship a God who I sometimes think takes great delight in walking us to the edge before providing a safe path forward. And that is based on personal experience. So let me share with you three stories from Jo's and my past life where we were staring fearfully over the precipice as God came to the rescue.

In the early 90s, long before we were ordained, we were working in D.C. and commuting from Shepherdstown, West Virginia, on the train every day. On the way home one afternoon, Jo, ever my favorite dreamer, was reading a magazine and said to me, "Look. There is an island for sale. What a great place to do spiritual retreats." I took one look at the asking price and went back to whatever I was reading with a bemused "humph." To make a long story short, one of the several miracles that had to happen for us to acquire Cherry Island was the sale of our house in West Virginia. We listed it in September. By Christmas no one had even come to see the house, and our listing was going to expire on December 31. But on New Year's Eve, one person did come to see the house. He made an offer, and we accepted. On the last day.

When we left the island to go to seminary in 2002, we listed the island for sale. It would not sell until April of our second year in seminary. We closed on a Friday in Maryland, but because of a minor glitch in the documents, the funds for the sale did not transfer immediately.

We returned to Austin, and Monday morning, I was checking our bank account online and discovered we had one dollar left in our account. One dollar. Several hours later the funds were wired, and we lived to eat another day.

In 2009, we had recently been ordained and had been sharing a position and a salary, subsidizing our budget with the last of our retirement savings. Just as we drained the last dollar from our retirement account, Jo was offered her own church, and we had two full salaries in our household for the first time since 2002.

Yes, you may be right. We may be crazy. You may worry that we attract disasters, since we suffered devastating loss in Hurricane Katrina in 2005, were battered badly by Hurricane Laura in 2020, and worked a block from the White House on 9/11. But we also seem to invite last-minute rescues.

Today's Gospel offers a less personal and, perhaps, more reliable message, or, actually, an admonition, which at base is very simple: Do not respond to adversity with more adversity. Do not let anxiety or fear breed conflict or other Godless behaviors.

It is not that evil doers suffer more or die at a younger age. As Jesus said, "Do you think that because these Galileans [that Pilate slaughtered in the Temple] suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" We might often wish that those evil souls who cause suffering to others might die sooner rather than later, but our experience hardly suggests that. Indeed, on the side of the coin, how many great saints suffered greatly.

What the Galileans had done was be the rabble rousers they were known to be. When Pilate had raided the Temple treasury to build a badly needed aqueduct, they had mobbed the Temple. But Pilate had infiltrated the crowd with under cover soldiers, who got overly enthusiastic and beat the crowd to a pulp. The Galileans had resorted to violence, and they had only themselves to blame for their plight. They knew Pilate valued peace above all things. That is how he kept his job. So when they threatened the peace, Pilate's response was predictable...and inevitable.

Moreover, their revolt in the Temple was against Rome. What the Galileans wanted was earthly power, to throw the Romans out and govern themselves.

And Jesus knew them all too well. So he warned them to repent, to turn away from pursuit of earthly power and turn to God, who they believed, as we do was, "from whom all blessings flow."

As Jesus predicted, when the Jewish community took the path to earthly power and rebelled in 70 A.D., the Temple was destroyed, never to be rebuilt. And Israel would not be a nation again until 1948.

So good things can happen to bad people. And bad things can happen to good people. But bad things definitely will happen to bad nations...and bad communities. We are here to realize the Kingdom of God. When our pursuit is Godless, we can expect nothing but a bad end. Whatever our temple may be, it will be destroyed.

We need to hear this. Because how we respond to our current fears and anxieties and uncertainties as a church community, as a community of the faithful, will have discernable effect on the well-being and even the survival of our community.

Yes, our anxiety is palpable, and understandable. But that is no excuse for behavior that incites anger or conflict or fear or invites denial or depression. It is no reason to engage in groundless or thoughtless gossip. No reason to foment or spread rumors and misinformation. No reason for back-biting or edgy criticism. Those destructive behaviors will threaten our temple. They will tug at our cohesiveness and confidence, even at the trust in God we need to go forward, even if the next stop on our journey remains over the horizon.

This is not to scold or condemn anyone. But it is some sound advice. What more could we expect of Jesus?

In 1939, fearing that a Nazi invasion and occupation were inevitable, the British Ministry of Information coined the now well-known meme: Keep Calm and Carry On. We do have a lot to carry on. In fact, we will soon have a lot to carry. And in the final week of April, when we depart here for the last time, we will know where we are going to worship the next Sunday. In the meantime, keep calm. Carry on. Jo is dreaming, and God knows what day it is.

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