

Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis  
Founders Day  
August 8, 2021

In the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

What a joy to be back with all of you today! Among many things I detest about the pandemic, one certainly is that it has kept me from frequently making the trip from Jackson, MS up I-55 to Memphis as regularly as I would have liked. So, to be here with you on the day when you are celebrating the occasion of your founding is a great pleasure and privilege. On August 3, 1832, 189 years ago this week, the Rev. Thomas Wright, who would become the first rector, along with 10 parishioners, founded Calvary Episcopal Church. We remember not only these earliest of our forebears but all those, whose faithfulness, sometimes soaring, sometimes just doing the best they could, has brought us to where we are this day! It is a proud tradition, one worthy of our pausing to gratefully acknowledge our beginning.

As some of you may know, the Feast of the Transfiguration falls on August 6<sup>th</sup>, a day when we recall the famous passage you've just heard read. I am delighted that in honor of Founders' Day, your clergy chose to use the lessons for this feast, the Transfiguration, a day full of hope and light, promise and mystery, a day on which God spoke again to proclaim to all those with ears to hear, "This is my son, my Chosen. Listen to him."

I don't suppose you could argue successfully that Memphis is on any kind of mountaintop, but it is on a bluff above a mighty river; and that is not nothing. What I not only believe but know is that there have been many transfigured moments within the life of this community—moments when light has shown brighter than any darkness around. I believe that pairing our founding with this sacred story from scripture is appropriate and more importantly that it is inspirational for us these nearly 200 years after the birth of this wonderful parish.

Who can read or hear this story read without at least a touch of envy, albeit also a bit of fear, that we, like this small inner circle of Jesus' disciples did, might experience an event of such power and radiance? How long has it been since we have experienced a moment of such spiritual intensity that we felt new, transformed by it? If ever there was a time when our lives as individuals and as a culture, including the church writ large, stood in need of transfiguration, surely this is it. Usually, we read this story on the last Sunday before Lent begins. On that day it is an invitation to a time of serious contemplation and reflection, a call that lingers off and on through the year. Even on a celebratory day like today, I don't think it is a stretch for us to have some Lent-ish feelings. Just as we were beginning to think that the end of the pandemic was truly in sight, just as we were marveling at the science of very effective vaccines for which we are eternally grateful, we find ourselves facing another challenging surge. The feelings of fear, distrust, and political rage that have led to this moment in our common life as a country are deeply troubling to people on both sides of the political divide. We frankly wonder if it can be bridged or if this is our new normal.

In a recent article, Richard Rohr, the well-known contemplative theologian, made this statement:

"Living in a transitional age such as ours is scary: things are falling apart, the future is unknowable, so much doesn't cohere or

make sense. We can't seem to put order to it. This is the postmodern panic. It lies beneath most of our cynicism, our anxiety, and our aggression. Yet, there is little in the biblical revelation that ever promised us an ordered universe. It is rather amazing that we ever tried to codify and control the whole thing."

But he continues with some good news,

Chaos often precedes great creativity, and faith precedes great leaps into new knowledge. The pattern of transformation begins in order, but it very quickly yields to disorder and—(*but*) if we stay with it long enough in love—(*it will yield to*) eventual reordering. Our uncertainty is the doorway into mystery, the doorway into surrender, the path to God that Jesus called 'faith.'"

Today's lesson is an amazing story about an occasion of mystery, an invitation for the disciples to enter that which they could not understand. There is no doubt that for Peter and the other disciples this moment was as much a moment of chaos as it was religious ecstasy, more mystery than certainty. Much in spirituality often is. That is why Peter, wanting to control the moment, tried to convince Jesus to allow him and the others to construct three structures that might contain it: "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." What he didn't say but no doubt thought was: "Then we could go get the others who understand and we will stay in this rarefied air, praise you with all that we have, and be an insulated, happy group, in which everyone knows each other's name, everyone looks and believes alike, and can stay here forever." Oh, my Lord, it sounds like he was suggesting three churches on a mountain top for those with magic key to get in!

And don't we understand that desire? But that was never the lesson of Jesus' life. Though he loved the synagogue, it's liturgy, mystery, and intellect, he lived his life beyond its doors, refueled by his frequent visits to the holy space, but emerging into the fullness of his life, lived among God's children in the streets and on the byways. The scripture goes on to say that Peter did not really know what he was saying—that he was missing the whole point. Even as Peter was ecstatically putting forth this suggestion, divine words came from above: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Surely that is the principal lesson of this fantastical moment: listen to him; listen to what he teaches us about how we are to live and love. It is a message that has been heard by many who have come before us, and it is clearly the message that stands before us on this Founder's Day Celebration.

Though tomes have been written about what he said, I end with a brief summary of what I think Jesus might be saying to Calvary at this particular time. I believe if we can do this, we can continue to emerge and grow as a shining light high on a bluff over a fine river.

1. Love our traditions but don't worship them. That is a hard for me. Some of the things about our tradition that I treasure may need to be tweaked, reimagined, or changed. Did I mention that that is a hard one for me?
2. Be clear that Calvary is a place that unflinchingly stands against racism in every case. Even in the second half of 2021 we are still learning what anti-racism really means. It

is not a topic we can say we are tired of; we must keep working at it—because it is huge in Memphis, in New York, everywhere.

3. There can be no outcasts among us. No matter how much upscale development occurs in downtown Memphis, there will always be a concentration of the poorest of the poor right at our doorstep. To be who we are called to be, we must do all we can to make sure that nobody around us, yep on our doorstep, is hungry or thirsty or freezing cold or dangerously hot. Jesus never equivocated on that: the poor are at the top of his list; in them we see Him.
4. And, finally, I think he is reminding us that we must live with a lot of mystery. Jesus spoke most often in parables (riddles) with very few details, but his life was/is an unending invitation into the life and heart of God.

In the name of God: AMEN.