

*The Holy One is my light and salvation;
whom then shall I fear?*

God is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?

*One thing have I asked of you, O God; one thing I seek:
That I may dwell in your house all the days of my life,*

*To behold your fair beauty, O God,
And to seek you in your temple.*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O God, our light and our strength. Amen.

As I begin my seventh week with you as your Interim Rector, I want to thank you this morning for the holy work you have called me into: to examine and to work with you through all the things that have brought the community which is St. Martin-in-the-Fields to the place in which you find yourselves today. First, to come to terms “particularly with your relationships with previous clergy” (in the words of my Letter of Agreement with you). That done, we--you and I--are to continue our exploration by discerning who exactly you, uniquely, are, to figure out, in the words of the tasks of the interim that are spelled out in that LOA, “ what is your special identity, what do you dream of being and doing?”

As those two endeavors unfold, as they are definitely doing, other work emerges: “dealing with shifts in leadership roles that naturally evolve in times of transition and allowing new leaders to come to the fore...” in constructive and healthy ways. All that is aimed at preparing St. Martin’s to be a place ready to move into a future with openness to new possibilities...” with new clergy leadership.

There, in a quite large nutshell, you have what it is you have invited me into.

But wait, there is more! While we are up to that good hard work, it also falls to me to “work with the Wardens and Vestry...” to maintain divine worship, to preach, to educate, to provide pastoral care, to baptize, to wed, to bury the dead; to deploy and supervise staff in the exercise of their ministries; and to Chair the Vestry and support them in their responsibilities.

And if that were not enough, the LOA then circles back around and urges me to “help the congregation deal with its grief and any other unresolved issues arising from the [former] Rector’s departure,” and “to deal with internal conflicts and help heal any divisions within the congregation,...” and finally, in my spare time, “...to align parish life and administration with generally accepted practices...” in the Diocese and in the Episcopal Church.

So, thank you for entrusting me with this ministry, I think.

Many of you have told me, in the many many conversations I am having with you, that you knew very little of what my ministry here was supposed to be, so I thought I would bring it to you all, this way, as clearly and forthrightly as I can--and now I have.

Or at least that is the job description. It shapes what I am doing among you; but I have to shape how I go about being with and among you. That too is part of my job.

So when I was interviewed in the Fall, I told the members of the Vestry with whom I spoke that I would not take on this ministry with you unless it was understood that I would not do it alone. I promised to build out a transition team to work with me, whose members could bring special gifts to all those tasks, and offer me support and advice and wisdom as we all carried out this particular kind of discipleship. And I asked that the Vestry promise to work with me itself as a leadership team, engaging fully in all those tasks. Finally, I said, my goal would be to end my ministry with you and leave behind a St. Martin's in which every member--every single one of you--was as fully engaged as possible in building up this community--this holy community, this Body of Christ, with all the rich and manifold gifts which are so so abundantly yours.

And now I hope you understand that I am not here as a caretaker minister. This work of ours--and it is always our work together--this work is going to take some time. And at the end of it, if we are faithful to the journey, there will be Glory.

The Isaiah who speaks to us today was called, as we are, into an enormous journey of faith, a journey as old as humankind. We have always set out toward unknown futures. The roads before us were, and are, most often excruciatingly difficult. Last week when we were joined by our friends from Afghanistan and Syria, I thought again of how vast and traumatic and profound has been the journey that has brought them "safe thus far." I thought of all the millions of other human families who are at this very moment making their way out of all the hells we have made for them and for ourselves toward something better, toward the hope of safer and fuller lives, toward something better. And I thought of how many of those millions will perish on the way. And yet, in the face of all that, they and we who are human somehow always manage to keep on.

How do we do that? We do it by being faithful and visionary, stubborn and determined, by clinging onto hope even as hope dies in front of our eyes. And we do it best when we find ways to do it together, with generosity and kindness and love, one for another.

So when Isaiah says to God's people that "...that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever..." that "...there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles...will be filled with glory,..." he did not promise the way would be easy. He did, though, promise glory.

"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness a light will shine." There will be glory.

But understand this: not Isaiah, nor any of the prophets and preachers across our whole history as God's people, nor Jesus, understood themselves to be speaking as or to individuals. For them, there was no such thing. For them, there was only ever their identity in the holy community of God's people, gathered up into one thing and moving as a community toward faith's future.

Without that community, there was and is no journey, only fitful lost wandering about, lone hikers lost after dark in a wilderness of woods, no light, no map, no company for a guide. That, though, is not the way of God's people.

We are, I believe, most fundamentally people of community. No one of us ever should make this journey, or venture into this liminal transition exploration, without one or two or three or four or more others walking with us.

We are and must be bound together by God's Light and Love into One Body, and that Body is God's own Self, Jesus Christ.

Turn to your neighbor, to your left, and to your right. Look way up front here, and cast your eyes all the way back. What you see, what you are part of is truly God's Body. If we do not believe that, if we cannot aim to be that, we are lost.

With that in mind, let me return to Scripture, now to Paul, with whom I often find myself in deep argument, but with whom today I feel some sympathy. Last week I noted how he began his letter to the Corinthians by encouraging the quarrelsome new church with words of comfort and affirmation. But I noted that there were things coming that were probably going to be more difficult for those troublesome Corinthians to hear. This week we got to those things.

Now, I am not a chastising preacher. I do not trade in guilt, or try not to, and I long since gave up trying to call myself or any community I have ministered with into perfection, or at least into any kind of moral or bodily perfection. I believe with all that I am that we are, each of us, perfectly the creatures God has made. Oh, we do wander-- or at least I do. And on a bad day, we may behave badly. Yet as members of God's Body, we are made perfectly as we are meant to be. So I will not chastise.

But I do ask you to listen to Paul's appeal to his siblings: Please, he says to them, endeavor "...to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. For some members of Chloe's household," he says, "...have told me about your quarrels." Some are saying, Paul says, that they follow this minister or that leader, or (for the very self righteous, I suppose) that they follow only Christ. To this Paul asks, "Has Christ been divided into factions?" and he answers, "Of course not!"

I will say nothing more about that, except to ask that you think on it in the days and weeks and months ahead as we move into and through our journey together.

Together! Together as this community which is the household of our awesome God. Together as we behold the fair beauty of God, and as we see it in the face of every one here--and everyone there and everywhere--this morning and for all the days of our life. Together, as we behold glory, as of the only Child of God. Today as we call into our present moment, that Child's Life, given to and for us. Glory!

Today that child of God, Jesus, having heard that his cousin, the radical John, had been arrested, did a very smart thing. He left Judea and returned to the relative safety of Galilee. There, perhaps not so wisely, he began to preach repentance--which really means examination and course

correction, forgiveness and repair and renewal. And for a minute he seems alone there in the Galilean countryside. Having taken on the mantle of his cousin, it seems like he might be ready to make his cousin's mistake and go it alone.

But then, as he comes down from the hills to the sea, he sees two brothers fishing. Seeing them, he calls out: "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" And they do. They fold their nets and join Jesus. And then there were three.

A little later, farther along, three more fishermen, an old man and two of his sons, and Jesus calls to them too, and the two brothers get up and leave their dad and their boat and join Jesus. And then there were five.

And that is our entire story, the story of who we are and how we got here and what we are called to do.

We are to announce the Good News that wherever and however we live, we live together, never alone, and we live in God's Holy Place and in God's Sacred Time. And in that Holy Time and Space, which in so many ways is beyond human reason and reckoning, we are healers of every kind of disease and illness, just like that first tiny community that was the Baby Body of Christ. Glory! Imagine that: Glory!

Now if that is true, and it is true, then we are and must become, all of us together, stewards of that ministry, stewards of that community, responsible for its well-being. The beginnings of that kind of radical stewardship of God's Holy Community are precisely in our care and love and relationships with one another.

Where there is brokenness, we are charged with repair; where there is injury, the hard work of recognizing the injury and working to heal any fracture in the community; where there is exhaustion, the grace to step aside and ask for help; where there is newness, the courage to walk into a promised dream, a dream not of nostalgia but of a new way of knowing and being God's Love and God's future in the world, a dream at first just a chimera, but a dream fueled by our common discipleship and faithfulness.

Into that stewardship, I invite you--no, rather I urge you all--to join me. Give all you can, of your life, your fortune, large or small, so that this magnificent community--so rich of human resource and gift of every kind--can move boldly into our future in the certainty that God's arms, and your arms around one another, will bear you safely and lovingly in Light. Into Glory. When Kate Maus or David Collins or Rob Jennings or Harry Gould or any other your friends in the community come calling, and they will, to invite you and your gifts into our common life and mission, please say yes.

This is the home God has made for us. It needs all that we have. God's promise is, the more we give the more we will be enriched. For, as St. Francis rightly says, it is exactly in giving that we, paradoxically, receive.

Here's the truth: The people who walk in darkness, wherever and whoever we are, will see a great Light. Those who live in a land of deep darkness, on them a Light will shine. In this place, in this moment, we are called to be that Light. Glory!

This I know for sure, one thing I have asked of you, O God, and of you, my friends; one thing I seek: that we may dwell in the house of God, which is our truest home, all the days of our life, to behold your fair beauty, O God, and to seek you in your temple. Glory! Glory! Glory Hallelujah! Amen.