

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 31, 2021: Year B  
The Annual Meeting  
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement  
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud  
*Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28*

On most Sundays, our task at this time, just after we have read the passages from the Bible that are chosen for the day, is to reflect on them, in light of the day-to-day lives of those of us who worship and serve God together at The Episcopal Church of the Atonement.

On *this* day, our task has two parts—because while reflecting on Holy Scripture is important work that we do together, today is the one day in the year when we also reflect together on how we *manage* our worship and service by conducting an Annual Meeting.

Last year at this time, I reported on the work of a Vestry retreat held on January 18, 2020—54 weeks ago. Here is what I said: *Two things were identified as most important to us: Christian Formation for Children and renovating our building for our own use, and for the use of the community, which will allow us to generate income for our continued sustainability.* Hold on to those two points for a couple of minutes. I will get back to them.

From today's Gospel reading: *They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.* Another way to say that is that Jesus just sat there in the synagogue and taught, without quoting the religious laws. Jesus carried in his own self the authority of God. That is, of course, what the feast of Christmas affirms. The little child born in the stable behind the inn in the Bethlehem is God become one of us. And it is what the feast of Easter proclaims. The man who died at the hands of oppressive religious and civil authorities, rose again and manifested the Godhead.

I am very often asked this question: *What makes the Episcopal Church different from the Roman Catholic Church?* And I get the same question from the opposite angle as well. *How is the Episcopal Church different from the Congregational or other Protestant Churches?* The answer is really right here in these eight verses from the beginning of Mark's Gospel that we read today.

The difference is *authority*. The people are astounded that Jesus teaches as one who has authority. We Episcopalians understand God's authority differently than Roman Catholics or Protestant Christians. For Roman Catholics, authority is vested in the office of the Pope. Along with the *Magisterium*, the bishops and priests who teach the faith, the Pope expresses God's authority to the people. In the Protestant churches, Holy Scripture stands alone. God's word, God's authority, is found in the words on the pages of the Bible and there are no intermediaries. So, what is authority for an Episcopalian? How do we measure it? Where do we find it?

In the Episcopal Church, in fact, all over the Anglican Communion, that world-wide body of which the Episcopal Church is a part, we say that authority rests in Scripture, tradition, and

reason. And so, like Protestant churches, we respect the authority of holy Scripture. In the Baptismal Covenant we promise that we will *continue in the Apostles' teaching*. That is, we will read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest what the Bible teaches us about God's love for us.

But the *Apostles' teaching* covers more than just holy Scripture. There is the *tradition* of the apostles—the things they did to follow Christ down through the centuries. Apostles are not just those twelve best friends of Jesus. An apostle is *one who is sent*. And Jesus sends each one of us out into the world to love the least and the lost. The tradition of the apostles continues down through the centuries in those who are sent to teach the faith.

So, God's authority is found in Scripture—the written word of God, and in tradition—the history of those who serve the world in God's name. And God's authority is found in reason.

Now it would be easy to say that reason allows us to believe whatever we want, that *reason* refers to how each individual figures things out for themselves. But here is the beauty of the authority of scripture, tradition, and reason: these three work together. They are in fact referred to as the *three-legged stool of Anglicanism*. You cannot have one of them without the other. The authority of Scripture informed and continues to inform the tradition. And the authority of the tradition found in the church working together informs reason.

This year at Christmas, knowing that I love the church and that I am interested in royalty, my sons gave me a biography of Queen Elizabeth II. She is not only the reigning Queen of England, she is also the Supreme Head of the Church of England. Our Episcopal Church was founded in 1787, at the same time as the United States was adopting our Constitution. Indeed, many of the same men who had been raised in the Church of England even while living in the American colonies, developed and wrote the Constitution and then adjourned from those sessions and went down the street to Christ Church in Philadelphia to our first General Convention of The Episcopal Church.

The Episcopal Church is a true daughter of the Church of England. And although we have different sets of canon law, we brought with us to the new world that devotion to the three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition, and reason.

Perhaps all of this is why I was really struck by paragraph from an address that Queen Elizabeth made to the Joint Houses of Parliament in 2002, celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her reign as queen. I am reading from Sally Bedell Smith's biography, *Elizabeth the Queen*.

"Change has become a constant," [the Queen] said. "Managing it has become an expanding discipline. The way we embrace it defines our future." She emphasized the importance of Britain's enduring values of moderation and

pragmatism, inventiveness and creativity, and fairness and tolerance, as well as its tradition of service.<sup>1</sup>

This is what the Supreme Head of the Church of England had to say on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee, in 2002. Now, I know that she was speaking to government officials. And I know that Westfield, Massachusetts is not England. And I know that there are important differences between the Church of England and The Episcopal Church. But I also think that Her Majesty's comment would be a really good one for us to take to heart.

*They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.* Jesus did not simply resort to a listing of religious rules. Jesus taught the people to value some things, like moderation and pragmatism, inventiveness and creativity, fairness and tolerance—and perhaps above all, a devotion to serving others before we worry about ourselves. Whether those are English civic values is not really for me to say, but the fact that the head of the church of England holds them up as examples of who the people ought to be, is absolutely informed by her devotion to Jesus. And it that way, if in no other, she is speaking with authority.

Back to the Annual Meeting—the one today and the one last year. A devotion to serving others before we worry about ourselves is absolutely a value of this Episcopal Church of the Atonement in Westfield, Massachusetts. And in that, we follow in the tradition of the followers of Jesus, beginning with the ones who were astounded at his authoritative teaching. When we gather as a parish to consider the needs of the people who worship and serve God here—we are speaking with authority when we follow in the tradition of service.

But, “[c]hange has become a constant,” said her Majesty. NO KIDDING. 54 weeks ago, the Vestry decided that the two most important things we could do in 2020 would be to develop a program of Christian Formation for our children that we could apply consistently and begin a program of renovation of our building in order that it become more of a center of service in this city.

Accordingly, we set up task forces in both areas. We bought curricula for the children. We developed a plan for teaching on Sunday mornings. We got teachers lined up. And you know that the first week of that plan was March 15, which was also the first Sunday that we could not hold services in person. In the month of February, we met with a parishioner who is an engineer and a parishioner who runs a non-profit in this city, and we listed what expert help we would need to prioritize the building projects that would be required. And by mid-March, well, to riff on the words of the Queen, managing the pandemic became our “expanding discipline.”

And so we have spent most of the past year—49 weeks as of today—embracing the changes that we have been handed. I am not the Supreme Head of anything, and although when I was a child, I told people that I would marry Prince Charles and one day be Queen of England, my ambition changed over the years. Today, I am so grateful to be exactly where

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<sup>1</sup> *Elizabeth the Queen*, by Sally Bedell Smith; New York: Random House, 2012; p. 445.

God has called me to be, doing exactly what God has called me to do. And I get to do it with all of you. And if I speak with any authority at all, it is because like you, and like the Queen of England, I am a follower of Jesus. So, let me say authoritatively that this parish, that is to say, YOU, have met the changes and disciplines of this year with moderation and pragmatism, inventiveness and creativity, fairness and tolerance, but most especially by showing your devotion to service to God's people.

And so, you have attended to the Christian Formation of your children, even while longing to do it another way. And we have begun to do some work on the building, and to realize that we will have to go back to the drawing board before long. And we have added a whole new facet to our lives together, by Zooming and livestreaming. Change has been our constant, and we know it is our future. But we also know it does not DEFINE our future.

We don't know yet when pandemic restrictions will ease. We do not know for sure what the future holds, medically or climactically or civilly. But we do know how we shall face the future together. We follow Jesus.