

I would like to begin this morning on a personal note, expressing my gratitude for a number of things – first, for the privilege of being invited into your lives to serve as your bishop, and also for the hospitality that you have extended to Kathy and me as we have moved to Lubbock. The Episcopalians of Lubbock have made our transition smooth, and we look forward – not only to years of ministry together – but also to making lifelong friendships. We live on 21st Street – only 3 blocks from Kathy's freshman dormitory at Texas Tech – and my office is located on Broadway between Tech and downtown. The coffee is hot, and there are soft drinks in the ice box, and the door is open.

I would also like to express my gratitude to you, the people of St. Paul's on the Plains, for your nearly one hundred years of service in and through the Episcopal Church in Lubbock and beyond. For 100 years you and your ancestors – “that great cloud of witnesses”—“all the company of heaven” – have proclaimed by word and deed the Good News of God's love. You have made a difference in countless lives, and I suspect this community of faith has made a difference to each one of you, personally.

One of the great pastoral theologians of the last 50 years, a man named Terry Holmes, claimed that the purpose of the Church is “to help people get through the night.” Certainly, the Church is more than that, but just as certainly the Church's purpose includes that. I'm sure that there are both, people from within this congregation and those whom you have served, who can claim: “the people of St. Paul's helped me through a particularly dark night” – some meaning that “dark night of the soul” and some literally meaning a cold, dark, January night. By word and deed you have shown God's love in and through this beautiful tradition called the Episcopal Church, and for you and your ministry I am thankful.

I would also like to take a moment to express my gratitude to your distinguished clergy: Father Jim Haney the fifth (known around the diocese as “Cinco”), and Mother Kiah Webster, and Deacon Fran Bessire. Thank you for your sacrificial service within and beyond this congregation.

Today is the first Sunday in the Season of Epiphany. Now some seasons of the Church Year are well-known, and household words even among the unchurched and people of other world religions. Everyone has heard of Christmas and Easter, and perhaps even Lent.

But Epiphany is a different story. The Day of Epiphany has not yet been discovered by Hallmark Cards. And the word “epiphany” – the word itself – would fall into the category of religious jargon, even unable to be defined by many Christians.

The word “epiphany” means manifest, show forth, reveal, make known. For example, Jesus is an epiphany of God, as He makes God known, reveals God. No less true, Jesus is an epiphany of humanity, as he reveals what it is to be fully human. Fully divine. Fully human. An epiphany of both.

I’m mindful of the simple message of a retired bishop who taught us in seminary, Bishop Mark Dyer of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Bishop Dyer said (along with the Prayer Book) that the Church is an instrument of God’s purpose of reconciliation – and the way we do that is to reveal God. We reveal the forgiveness, the mercy, the grace, the love of God.

In that sense, the Church is an epiphany of God. We manifest God, make God known. We are the living Body of Christ, the outward, visible sign of Christ to the world. As Christians, we are an epiphany people.

I want to suggest this morning that this is an exciting time to be a Christian. That may be a startling suggestion, given that nearly every Christian tradition that comes to mind has experienced the pain of conflict – if not division. But the historians and sociologists of our times agree that we are in a place on the timeline of history of deep sea change.

Phyllis Tickle writes in her book, “The Great Emergence,” that every 500 years the Church has a big rummage sale, and that every 500 years we see deep sea change. Five hundred years ago it was the Great Reformation.

Five hundred before that it was the Great Schism between the East and the West, and so forth, back to the time of Jesus. She labels today's challenging times "the Great Emergence," suggesting that the Church is emerging into a new manifestation, an emerging Church.

Another theologian from Harvard, Harvey Cox, breaks it down a little differently. In his book, "The Future of Faith," he claims that over time the Church moved from "faith in" Jesus, to "beliefs about" Jesus, and now is moving again to something new. He locates us now in what he calls the Age of the Spirit, as Christians hunger more for spirituality than for creeds.

Whatever we call this new period in history, it is largely agreed that we are living during a fundamental shift. We are shifting from seeing Christianity as a "system of beliefs" to seeing Christianity as a "way of life" – a path to full life, the abundant life, which Jesus offers.

One of the early Church Fathers (Irenaus) said, "the glory of God is a human being fully alive." Christianity appears to be returning to its roots as a path to follow toward such a life, a path which awakens us to abundant life. And I believe that is exciting. And further, I believe the Episcopal Church is well-positioned for this shift in perspective, as we have always tended more toward following a path than a set of beliefs.

In our very beginnings in England we chose a path, a way of prayer, a book of common prayer, rather than a doctrinal statement of faith (as did other reformers). To this day we follow a rhythm of life, a practice of praying together: morning prayer, noonday prayer, evening prayer, compline – marinating us in the Anglican way of life. To this day we understand Christian Ethics to be more about character formation than about right answers to complicated questions. To this day we see Christianity as a path to know God, rather than doctrine about God. And that, I believe, is the world's deepest hunger: encountering God, knowing God, communion with God.

Today's Gospel is the story of the baptism of Jesus. It's the event at which his vocation is made known. It is an epiphany. That which was true all along is made known. Jesus' calling as the Messiah is made known to all of the witnesses at the River Jordan.

As the story goes, a handful of people encounter Jesus, and are drawn to follow Jesus. Something about Jesus changes them, and compels them to follow him, and not only that, compels them to tell others. And his following grows until it disappears at the crucifixion, but it gains new life with the resurrection as the community is raised from the dead – changed. And on the Day of Pentecost it grows by the thousands.

From that day forward, people encountered the Risen Christ, their lives were changed, they were compelled to follow Jesus, and as an epiphany people they revealed God to one another and others. They gathered around bread and wine, and told the story of the liberating power of Christ, and the Living Christ was made known in the breaking of bread and in the storytelling, and lives were changed.

And as that newly formed community told the story over and over, they began to write it down. And in time they determined that their writings (their testimonies) were sacred, holy scriptures – out of that community came the New Testament. And over the years, as the community grew, it struggled with what it believed about Christ, and the God revealed in Christ. So, out of the community came the creeds and councils. And as the community grew in numbers it took on a structure with a hierarchy of sorts. By the third century it looked different from the first century church, as it looks different now. All along, lives were changed, and all along the Church changed. To grow means to change.

It all started when a few people dropped what they were doing to follow Jesus, to tell others the Good News of the liberating work of Christ, and how He changed their lives.

It's not part of our tradition, as Episcopalians, to give testimonies – not in any formal sense. We may be an epiphany people, but the “share or die” climate of testimonies is not likely to be our way of sharing. We prefer the old saying: “preach the gospel; if necessary, use words.”

Having said that, a testimony is the story of a life changed. One of the great privileges of being ordained is that we get to hear the stories. We get to see the lives changed, perhaps on a larger scale than the laity. We get to see the light bulb come on. We see hearts melt. We see people gain hope, and along with that, strength. We see faith which leaves us speechless. We see lifelong Episcopalians have dramatic conversion experiences like the Apostle Paul, maybe at a Walk to Emmaus or a Cursillo. And we see others grow deeply, like the beloved disciple John, through prayer and contemplation.

We see Christians from other traditions find new life in our tradition for different reasons, through a variety of means: the transcendent worship, the sense of mystery, the liberating theology, the broad interpretation of scripture, the freedom to question, the thirst for justice. They say, “Home at last. I've always been an Episcopalian; I just didn't know it.”

And, on the other hand, we've seen Episcopalians to whom our tradition did not speak, who moved to a tradition which does speak to them. If we are honest, that feels like failure, and we miss them, and they are always welcome to return. But if an encounter with God and a changed life happens elsewhere, perhaps we should honor that. The Gospel is for everyone; every congregation is not for everyone.

Peter Drucker, a consultant to organizations from businesses to non-profits to churches, says it's hard to measure the success of a non-profit. A business measures its success primarily by its profit. It might also include its reputation, its service, its contribution to society, but at the end of the day the stockholders want to know the bottom line: size, volume, profit.

A non-profit, by definition, cannot be measured that way. According to Drucker, the bottom line for a non-profit (and I would suggest, for the Church) is a changed life. Our bottom line: changed lives.

We have a story to tell and a way of life to offer which leads to an encounter with God, and changes lives. Lives change here. Right here. Within this community of faith, gathered for God's sacred meal, telling our story of God's love. St. Paul's on the Plains: an epiphany people, revealing the love of God ... all in the Name of the Holy Trinity, One God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.