



EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN CONNECTICUT

PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S MISSION

Bishop's Address 231st Annual Convention The Episcopal Church in Connecticut

14 November, 2015

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(The address will be offered as a "TED Talk sermon" on Saturday morning, November 14 at the 232nd Annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut meeting in Cromwell, CT. The scripture is from the Gospel of Mark Chapter 13:1-8, appointed for November 15, 2015, the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28. The "TED Talk sermon" YouTube video and Convention Address are available on the ECCT Annual Convention website for parishes who might like to use these resources for their sermon on Sunday, 15 November.)

Our scripture lesson for this Convention Eucharist, appointed as the Gospel in our lectionary for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost (tomorrow,) the penultimate Sunday of the liturgical year, is taken from the 13th Chapter Mark. Here we encounter Jesus' outrageous prediction of the end times, what theologians like to call the apocalypse. While some might associate the end times with the final weeks of our liturgical year, I believe the Gospel passage appointed speaks directly to where we are as the Episcopal Church in Connecticut today, and where we might be going in the recommendations coming before this convention from the Taskforce for Reimagining the Episcopal Church in Connecticut (TREC-CT.)

Let's look a bit at the context of Jesus' end times prophecy in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has entered triumphantly into Jerusalem. In the temple precincts he turns over the tables of those who have made the holy place into a marketplace. Before cleansing the temple, Jesus curses a fig tree for not bearing fruit; and then after we hear that the fig tree has withered away. The message is pretty clear. The Temple is no longer bearing fruit, no longer serving God and God's ways. Jesus then goes on to underscore what it means to be faithful to God and God's ways noting the great commandment, denouncing the scribes for their emptiness, and affirming the sacrificial offering of the poor widow.



But his disciples seem to have missed the point entirely. Admiring the grand structure of the temple, they remark: “Look teacher, what large stones, and what large building.” The disciples just can’t see that Jesus is up to something entirely different than what the temple had come to represent. He responds: “Do you see these great buildings, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” Wow! Harsh stuff!

Troubled by this statement, Peter, James, John, and Andrew later ask Jesus privately as to when the destruction of the temple will occur. Jesus responds that the signs will be numerous and ambiguous. There will be turmoil all around with wars, nations rising up against nations, earthquakes, and famines. Yet Jesus emphasizes: Do not be fooled by such destruction, for all of “this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. God is birthing something; God will bring about a new thing, even as we anguish over the loss of the temple as we have known it; cry over the loss of all that we have valued, all that we have held so dear, all that we have cherished (dare I even say, all that we have idolized.)

Does any of this sound familiar? Does Jesus’ teaching of the destruction of the temple and the birth pangs of a new reality have anything to say to the Episcopal Church in Connecticut right now? to the Episcopal Church generally? to Christianity in the industrialized West on the cusp of the end of Christendom? I think it does.

We in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut are not hiding from the reality that so much of what we have known as the church in the past seems to be on shaky ground. For most churches in Connecticut generally, and for the Episcopal Church in particular, our numbers have decreased, full-time clergy positions have declined, budgets have shrunk, parishes have closed, and we no longer enjoy the privilege and prestige of being central to the social, political, and economic fabric of our society. Randy Ferebee in his book *Cultivating the Missional Church* (which Bishop Laura and I use in all of our parish visitations) describe this loss as the end of Christendom. Ferebee points out that we Christians are moving from the center to the margins, from the majority to the minority, from settlers to sojourners, from privilege to plurality, from control to witness, from maintenance to mission, from institution to movementⁱ (what our new Presiding Bishop Michael Curry describes as “The Jesus Movement.”)



I daresay that we in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut are embracing these changes and leaning into the end of Christendom. No stone has been left unturned as we seek to participate in God's mission in our neighborhoods in new ways. I want to note a few ways by which the Episcopal Church in Connecticut has sought to become more missional in recent years. And this list is in no way exhaustive. We have reclaimed our common identity as the Episcopal Church in Connecticut with a new graphic image stating our commitment to "Participating in God's Mission." We have moved out of Diocesan House in Hartford into a flexible, open, and collaborative space in The Commons in Meriden. We have reconceived our Annual Convention making it more focused on God's mission, and utilizing new technologies for communication and engagement. We have freed up financial resources for increased parish participation in God's mission locally by reducing assessment to parishes from 12.5% to 10% and rebating accumulated insurance premiums. We have pursued broad based anti-racism and multiculturalism efforts in partnership with VISIONS Inc.. We have redeveloped our website and social media communications while inaugurating CRUX as an annual magazine lifting up opportunities for participation in God's mission. We have revamped the ordination process emphasizing recruitment of hybrid missional priests to serve small congregations. We have refocused the clergy "search process" with faithfulness to God's mission as the top priority for parish transitions. We have developed a new Spring Training program resourcing hundreds of lay leaders each year through dozens of workshops. We have inaugurated a quarterly Leadership Gathering where key diocesan committees, commissions, and councils come together to better serve God's mission together. We have tried on parish-based "missional experiments" in cooperation with the Leadership Development Initiative of the Diocese of Massachusetts. We have emphasized ECCT staff efficiency and collaboration while moving from three to two bishops. And in the budget coming before this Convention we have begun to draw upon the income of our common assets of 35 million dollars held by our Missionary Society to support new missionary ventures. All of these changes are intended to help us Episcopalians be more faithful to God's mission of restoration and reconciliation in the world today, even as the church that we have known in the 20th century ebbs away.

Now coming before us in this Annual Convention are the proposals from the Taskforce for Reimagining the Episcopal Church in Connecticut - TREC-CT. The genesis for TREC-CT lay in resolution #3 of the 2013 Annual Convention calling for greater parish



collaboration in Episcopal Church in Connecticut, and the need to renew the constitution of our Missionary Society while addressing our failed Deanery system. Then Resolution #9 of last year's Convention called for specific "revisions to the organization and structure of The Episcopal Church in Connecticut." TREC-CT has been faithful to this charge.

I am not going to go through the details of the TREC-CT proposal here. We will do that in our next two convention sessions. What I do want to do is applaud TREC-CT for their imagination and faithfulness to the mission of God. The proposal before us is bold and far-reaching and, I believe, responsive to what the Holy Spirit is up to in our midst. It lifts up and empowers Ministry Networks: two or more Episcopalians gathered together, working collaboratively, in God's mission from two or more parishes. It calls for missionaries to serve in six new regions of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut catalyzing, convening, connecting and building capacity for God's mission. And TREC-CT recommends that our governance system be completely overhauled, the first time this has happened since 1973 when deanery were created. Our new Mission Council, if adopted, will draw upon the Ministry Networks and Regions with their missionaries to help us all be more faithful disciples of Jesus as we are sent into the world as apostles in God's mission. Thank you Bishop Laura for helping us reclaim the language of discipleship and apostleship as we seek to be more faithful participants in God's mission

Before closing I want celebrate how the Holy Spirit is raising up and renewing historic resources in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut as we seek to be more faithful and engaged disciples and apostles. Camp Washington, with the leadership of Bishop Laura, a reconstituted Board chaired by Suzy Burke, and a new Executive Director Bart Geissinger, has embraced a new vision where "our place in Morris" will become a year round resource for our formation as disciples, as followers, of Jesus. And the Report of the Cathedral Discernment Taskforce, chaired by The Rev. Harlon Dalton, presents eight far-reaching recommendations so that Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford can help us all become more faithful apostles sent into the world in God's mission. I can imagine at some point the need to raise new money so that Camp Washington and the Cathedral can better equip us all in our lives as disciples and apostles. More on that in years to come.



So there it is. We are living in scary end times filled with both loss and possibility. The temple stones of Christendom are being brought down around us even as we feel the birth pangs of a new church being born. I thank God, that in the new life of Jesus' Resurrection and in the power of the Holy Spirit, God is indeed bringing into being the church God needs to effect God's mission of restoration and reconciliation in the world today. And I thank God that we in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut are partnering with God in that mission. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Randolph C. Ferebee, *Cultivating the Missional Church: New Soil for Growing Vestries and Leaders* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012), p. 38.