

Sermon
Easter 6 C May 9, 2010
The Rev. Poulson Reed

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

The beginning of the 21st century is a period of **unprecedented** change. A century ago, significant change usually took a generation. Today, communication technology and the free market of ideas and trends have combined to bring changes in our society more quickly than we can keep up with them.

In fact, one author has suggested recently that the length of a generation in our contemporary world is more like three or four years, rather than decades. In other words, the children who are born today will have largely different shared experiences than those who were born just four years ago.

It's no wonder that our world feels so unsettled all the time. It's not just that we face economic uncertainty and threats of terrorism; our world, our culture **really is** shifting under us, like tectonic plates in an unstable earthquake zone.

And in the midst of that change, the Church is faring quite poorly. Every mainline denomination is in decline, and the Episcopal Church is near the bottom of that list. We are losing in attendance the equivalent of an entire diocese each year.

Most troubling, we are losing our children. A recent Pew Forum study found the Millennial Generation (those born after 1980) to be the least religious generation on record. Among children and youth (and their parents) there is no longer any stigma attached to skipping church regularly, or opting out of organized religion entirely. And so, unless we offer something compelling, we will lose them. Unless the Church offers something more meaningful than the other competitors for our families' time, we will lose them. We are losing them already.

Now I wish I could tell you today that I know exactly what to do to nurture our families and children and draw new ones. Very few churches have figured this out. If only we could have the clarity of a vision of God's will, like Paul's Macedonian vision in our first reading today, or the vision of the new Jerusalem in our second reading.

Those epiphanies are all too rare, but God does reveal insight to us, if we ask. "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit...will teach you everything," Jesus says. And again, he says, "do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

The astonishing thing about the Holy Spirit is that God continues to reveal God's will to us, all the time. The Spirit will not contradict Scripture or the essential tenets of the faith, but it will give us new insights about how to share that faith with others. At its best, the Church preserves the traditions of faith that are essential, while being open to new vehicles and opportunities in which to transmit it.

I don't have all the answers about how to attract and keep families with children here at All Saints'. But I do know several things. First, it is critical that we do so. This does not mean that we do not care equally about our singles, seniors, or those in partnerships without children.

All Saints' is a broadly inclusive parish, welcoming everyone. We strive to be a wide tent in which many different kinds of people, with differing backgrounds and lives, differing political views and theologies can pray, learn and serve together. But we are an aging church. The average Episcopalian is 63 years old. 63. All Saints' is a little better than that, but not much. Without more children, we face a slow death. That is a fact.

I also know that families deserve the very best that we have to offer. While it was a noble experiment, Church in the Round has left some families feeling like their kids were getting the crumbs under the table.

Worship in a cafeteria with a piano, instead of this holy space and this stirring music and liturgy.

You will know from our e-blast this past Thursday, and the printed materials today, that we have decided to make some changes in our Sunday morning schedule. Among the many reasons to change our Sunday morning pattern, and there **are** many, perhaps the most important is that it gives our children more opportunity to worship in this sacred space, with more of the resources of our clergy and musicians.

Starting in the fall, a new 9am service will be a full, thoughtfully designed, family friendly liturgy, with all of our full-time clergy, at least one of our staff organists and other special music, most of the time. A children's chapel for our youngest, age 4 and up, will take place at the beginning of the 9am in the chapel, with a priest and music by one of our fine organists (yes, it will require some creative timing and a decent cardio workout up and down the stairs for Scott and Sue.)

And then, after their age-appropriate service of the Word, the children will join their parents for the Eucharistic prayer and communion in the main church.

A new 9am service in the church, and other factors, have inevitably moved the other Sunday services around somewhat. But we have ended up with a much more flexible and varied schedule, instead of our two biggest services at the same time, splitting us down the middle.

Given this new flexibility, some parents will choose to come at 11am instead. And I suspect some of you will find that you enjoy this new 9am liturgy from time to time, or all of the time. But no parent will be able to say that we have not provided their children with the very best worship and educational experience that we can on a Sunday morning.

I'll be honest: I don't know how all of this is going to turn out. And I grieve to know that some will find the Sunday morning changes challenging to accept. But I do believe, with all my heart, that God is always with us, guiding us, and giving us that peace which passes all understanding.

Is this service change the work of the Holy Spirit? Only time will tell. But after hours upon hours of meetings, hundreds of surveys returned, and a lot of thought and prayer, we believe this new schedule to be the best way to offer the most varied, most prayerful worship to the most people, with the resources, human and financial, that we have. We believe it is the best way to pass on to our children, and everyone else, the sound heritage with which we have been blessed.

I actually did have a bit of a vision recently about children and worship. It was yesterday, in fact. Yesterday, All Saints' hosted a diocesan children and youth event called the Acolyte Olympics. Young acolytes from all around the Phoenix area gathered for fun and fellowship, and for pizza, of course (for what youth event does not have pizza).

But they also received acolyte training – how to process into church carrying a cross and torches, dignity in worship, helping the priest prepare for communion and so forth. And at the end, we had a Eucharist here. I was the celebrant, Scott played the organ, and some 40 young acolytes worshipped, with about half of them playing a role, under the steady direction of our Head Verger, Tim Hyland.

It was a warm Saturday afternoon, at the end of a long day. Everyone was sweaty and tired, myself included. But what a vision it was. 40 kids, vested formally in their albs, processing in to the loud strains of our splendid organ. 40 kids, taking it all seriously, carrying their crosses and torches and books with dignity. A young girl was the thurifer, censuring us with incense. She admitted she'd never been near incense her whole life, and was mostly concerned not to catch herself, or anyone else on fire!

But she did great. We had a full gospel procession, too, and a fine sermon on the feast day for yesterday, Julian of Norwich. We sang the Eucharistic prayer, and the youth helped with chalices at communion. It was actually a very traditional worship experience. No guitars, no Powerpoint. Very welcoming, but with no dumbing down. Not stuffy, just ancient, deep and meaningful. And so many of the children and parents thanked us afterwards, because they don't often get to worship this way in their home parishes.

A heavenly vision? In a way, yes. Because what is worship, at its best, and most reverent, if not a lesser vision of the new Jerusalem, the world as God will make it, eventually. Who among us has not, in this place, with the light coming in just right, and the music soaring, in a word of Scripture, or a sermon, or the breaking of the bread, glimpsed heaven? A fleeting glimpse, yes, but a moment of certainty that God really does have something wonderful in store for us, when our work is done.

In this world of constant change, of upheaval, there is something changeless. There is, beneath it all, a foundation that does not move, that cannot be shaken. That is where our hope, our peace is founded, for us, for those saints who have gone before, and for the generations to come. Amen.

