

Holy Cross Sunday, September 14, 2014
The Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring
The Rev. Elizabeth A. B. Tesi

This is a very special day for you here in this church, the Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross, on this day in 2014. Today, we celebrate Holy Cross Day, one of the Holy Days of our Church calendar. It occurs on September 15, but because we are the Church of the Holy Cross, we have transferred its celebration to today, this Sunday. This Sunday is our name Sunday, the feast after which our church is named. And most specially this year, we are turning 35. This is a big deal. Thirty-five just feels like a special number. It means you have been here long enough to have made your mark in the world. You have seen a city growing up around your ears, and you have seen the culture change. Holy Cross was founded just before the Great Recession of the 1980s, and now has also weathered this second "Great Recession," which I believe history will call a Depression in the books years from now.

How many of you here today are founding members of this church? You've been here from the start, when St. Dunstan's began a little church plant and seeded it with members. What was down the road from you—there was no Merrifield, no Mosaic District, no Target? What was up the road from you? Was Tysons there already? It certainly wasn't the huge mall with the many complexes all around it. I don't know when the Orange line came to Dunn Loring/Merrifield, but I have just lived through the opening of the Silver Line at last, through Tysons Corner. When I come around the bend on the train, we emerge from darkness into a sea of twinkling lights from the many buildings, and as you get closer, you see how many of those buildings are actually under construction. In another five years, I bet I will visit and say, "My goodness, how built up this place has gotten!"

In the last few months, I have noticed a tremendous uptick in the foot traffic from the nearby Merrifield apartments. You began as a church that was a driving church, and you are now a church that is walking distance from local dwellings, and people are starting to walk here from nearby apartments. What an opportunity you have to be the people of God in a modern world.

So let's talk a little about the Gospel. The Gospel, remember, is the "good news". What is our good news in today's readings? I'll give you a little trivia. This particular reading is usually read during Lent. It speaks very directly of the Crucifixion. Jesus speaks of being "lifted up," and by that, he is speaking of his death. In our culture, when we "lift up" a person, we are usually praising and exalting that person. It compounds the irony, then, that our Messiah is speaking of the most shameful death of the time—a slow, painful death, stripped and tortured to death, nailed to a common executioner's device—when he was "lifted up." What take-away message does the author have in mind for us?

I so often talk about how the Gospel has two motives: there is the motive of the characters within the story, and there is the motive of the author outside the story. In this case, the motive of the author is quite strong. The crowd serves as a foil: questioning in an almost academic way. But look at how they question: typically with crowds and disciples in the Gospels, they never get it right. They never know exactly who Jesus is. They never know what questions to ask or what to call him. But here, they absolutely knew who he was—the Son of Man. They knew that he was going to be leaving, and they seemed to understand that meant by death. They are so much more savvy than the traditional crowd. This is a clue. The author, John, is speaking directly to us, the listener.

The crowd asks the same question that I think the ages have continued to ask: how can the Messiah leave us? Isn't the Messiah forever? In later years, we would wonder when the Messiah would return. How can our faith last when the Messiah is not here to lead us and guide us? This question remains poignant as we face a country that is sunk pretty deep into corruption and stalemate. There is so much happening in our world that feels wrong. Working people who are not making wages sufficient to provide homes and food. Educated people who cannot find work sufficient for their education. Sick people who have curable diseases who cannot afford treatment. Well people whose schedules are so filled they cannot find time for rest and recovery. People whose skin color is still... still... a problem for the neighborhood they live in. Where is the Messiah when we really need His Divine Guidance?

Jesus ends his brief statement today with a strong challenge: he calls us to walk with the light, so we might not be overtaken by darkness. On an old phone, I had this game called Tiny Wings. It was a sliding game, where you had the bird with its tiny wings sliding down hills. If you hit the hills just right, you gained speed and points and could slide through many levels of the game. If, instead, you are like me and spend too much time attempting to apply real-world physics and rules like gravity to computer games, you will not hit the hills correctly and you will slow down. As you slow, the screen is overtaken by darkness and the bird falls asleep—game over.

That was the vision I had in my mind as I read this. The darkness is not pursuing us like a cheetah, predatory and breathing in our ears so we know just when it will catch us. It's simply letting the natural progression of our lives and the world catch up with us. The darkness just slowly catches up with us almost before we are aware it's there upon us. One moment, we are sliding down a hill and the next, twilight is upon us before we have a chance to react.

Jesus calls us to remain active—to keep walking with that light so that we don't get caught in the darkness.

That's where I think it is a most marvelous time for you to be the Church of the Holy Cross. You are such a young church right now. You are only 35. You are about to start a new era. You are

still squarely in a light-filled time, even as the world around you is dark. You are in a growing area: this past week, one of our parishioners shared a census breakdown that showed that while DC had experienced growth of something like 12%, Merrifield was growing at a rate of 35%! And this was before the Silver Line opened. You are in the area where people are coming in flocks. We can't keep up with the people who walk by the doors. We have walk-by visitors regularly. We even have walk by visitors of other faiths who visit to learn more about us. It begs a simple question: where is God calling you in this world, right now?

This is a question we are going to begin asking in our annual picnic and fair, immediately following church, but it's also a question that our Messiah has challenged all of us to. Walk with the light. Find what God has called you to do, and do it, with all your heart. That question of call is one that drives me most strongly, right now, as I listen and wait to hear where I will next be sent after our time together has concluded. So please, walk with me, and help me listen with open ears to the many, many places of ministry and work in this world that our God is calling us to.