

Date Preached	06-Jun-2021	Date Initiated	25-May-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Prop 5, Yr B

" For ... we have a building from God: a house not made with [human] hands, eternal in the heavens. "



As I tore the May page from the calendar in my office this week, I suddenly realized that we have been together for ten months now—we're into the double digits, as it were! COVID, of course, has made them ten oddly-patterned, less-predictable months than we may have wanted or expected, but, thanks be to God, we are finally emerging from the virus' grip on our lives and allowing ourselves to think about what 'normal'—the *new* normal—may look like.

Both words in that phrase—"new normal"—carry a lot of weight. As the pandemic begins to recede (we pray), some things are bound to be *new*. Saint Andrew's is under the care of a new priest ... we have lived through fifteen months of unaccustomed and unwelcome limitations ... and, undoubtedly, there are some parishioners whom we may not see again for a while (or maybe ever), even as there are also a few whom we've happily gained along the way.

But *normal* is equally operative, as well. The life of any community requires a set of patterns and expectations—*norms*, if you will—that gives its members the space to fully participate in what is happening now ... and also anticipate what is coming next. Norms are not handcuffs: There must be freedom to evolve and grow them; otherwise, the community becomes stale. But norms *are* important guardrails that ensure members don't end up stuck in a ditch as their leaders careen down the road, racing on ahead of them.

And so, today, I'd like to speak with you a little about St Andrew's liturgical norms: the things we do and say and experience in this space, every week, that are at the very core of our collective life as the Body of Christ. In doing so, I want to make a confession and offer an apology ... and also, I hope, reset the table a bit, for the good of *our* community.

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It is probably obvious to many of you, by now, that I am passionate about liturgy. It is what first drew me to the Episcopal Church ... carried me closer and closer to Christ ... and fired my imagination in seminary. I firmly believe that worship is the primary way we, as Christians, come to *know* God,* and I am very thankful for all of this. But, I confess, 'all of this' also means I arrived at St Andrew's with a zeal for liturgy that eclipsed my pastoral awareness; that caused me to *impose* new practices *on* you, rather than seeking to *explore* them *with* you.

- Seeing a thurible—an incense-burner—in the sacristy, I assumed you shared my taste for incense ... without pausing to learn that it had almost never been used.

* Liturgy is traditionally called the "primary theology"—both the first and the foremost way we know God: bodily, sensually, experientially ... via ritual rather than doctrine.

- Missing the introits and gospel alleluias—the traditional passages of scripture at the beginning of Holy Eucharist and just before the gospel lesson—that I'd grown accustomed to in my field education parish, I convinced myself you'd cotton to them, too, if I just started saying them.
- Wishing to acquaint you with the richness of options our Church's prayer book offers—different prayers of confession and post-communion prayers, for example—I began cycling us through them without explaining why ... or considering that unless a community's liturgy follows some accustomed patterns—some *norms* ... its members cannot fully participate in worship.

For all of that ... and those examples are merely a sampling ... I am sincerely sorry, and I ask your forgiveness. I have not done right by you as a priest: as the one charged with maintaining the spiritual health and vitality of our parish.

And so, as you may already have noticed, I have committed to simplifying and regularizing our liturgical life. I have wrapped up the thurible and stored it with the parish's archives in the rectory attic. I have excised from our worship some of the additional little rites that were never part of St Andrew's norms. And while the zucchetto—the little black cap I used to wear—holds deep personal and spiritual significance for me, I came to realize that it was a distraction (perhaps even a vexation) to some of you as you sought connection with God ... experience of the Living Christ, in word and sacrament ... through liturgy. And so, I have permanently hung that up, as well.

Going forward, our worship life will still be rich, but it will operate in a narrower, more conventional compass:

- We will still observe the seasons and feasts of the year—through colors, brief festal entrance rites and occasional variations in worship (like beginning with the prayer of confession during Lent)—because these 'tweaks' draw our attention to the full range of emphases and mindsets that the Christian faith comprises. But I will better prepare us for these variations; and will keep other aspects of our liturgy (like the prayers of confession and after communion) consistent.
- We will still pray different eucharistic prayers at the Altar, but they will change less frequently. And again, I will point out when and why—liturgically and theologically—we are taking up a new one.
- And we will still offer several of the additional liturgies our Anglican tradition has bequeathed us: Holy Week and Easter Week services; weekday feasts for saints; unique rituals like our All-Hallows' Eve service and Rogation Procession. I strongly believe that living a Christian life involves learning to straddle the 'dual time zones' of the ALREADY and the NOT-YET: the holy time God invites us into and the secular time this world imposes upon us, and these 'extras' help facilitate this. But our primary liturgical focus remains *here*, on the 'norm' of our Sunday morning worship.

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Today's reading from First Samuel is an object lesson, of sorts, in community norms. God's long-established norm has been that God, alone, is Israel's King. But the Israelites, perhaps unwilling to trust in God's sure providence ... or perhaps seeking to add something to it ... demand a *human* king. They veer away from a fundamental norm of their communal existence: a departure that will ultimately weaken, rather than enhance, the community's relationship with God. Likewise, when a priest, perhaps not trusting that liturgy will *always* reveal God's all-sufficient grace ... or perhaps wanting to somehow amplify it ... changes the community's norms, he risks obscuring its members' encounter with God in liturgy, even as he tries to heighten it.

Going forward, I vow to rely upon the fullness of God's grace in our worship; and to resist the tendency to complicate our norms by adding 'more.' God will lead us, I know, to glorious ends in our common worship. I will, therefore, stop trying so hard to bring them about, for Christ's sure presence among us is the only king we need.



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