



**ST. COLUMBA'S
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

Stay Alert; and Joyful; and True
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St. Columba's Episcopal Church
Washington, D.C.
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Advent, Year C
[Luke 21:25-36](#)

Our faith is found and made alive by the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus is the heart of God. Mysterious and true. It is the Spirit who brings Jesus into our presence this very morning and calls us to live and to know the power of God.

Our faith is found and made alive by the person of Jesus, born to Mary and Joseph, in the small village of Nazareth. Jesus, flesh and blood, called sinners and the outcast his friends, and cared not for wealth or power. And it was Jesus who, when the religious and political establishment made it a crime to forgive the debts of the poor and to break bread with the unclean and shameful, it was the person of Jesus who took on the mantle of criminality and lawlessness. Who refused to compromise with authority and took his case and his broken body to the cross.

But though the powers of the world that thought that death could stop the uncompromising love and forgiveness of God, they were wrong. And Jesus was raised. And by the power of God Jesus will be raised. When we walk in this path—of mercy and

peace and justice—we raise Jesus. The Spirit swirls again in our hearts and in this place. This is our creed and our greatest hope.



Or so I would have said! You see this morning I'm hosting—during the forum hour—"stump the chump" – a "ask me anything session". Questions about the bible or religious belief. And I've been soliciting questions all week and thinking about the questions in the past I've been asked after identifying myself as a priest in various ways.

One of them went like this. During seminary I was visiting a church on Sunday morning that had a lot of foot traffic from downtown and as I walked in, I could tell the person next to me had likely not been in a church in a long time. We sat down together and I said to him that though I was visiting this church, too, for the first time, I was studying to be a priest and knew the Episcopal church pretty well and could probably help if he had any questions.

Now of course I had in mind logistical questions. Like where to find the music or when to stand or kneel, or go up for communion. I probably could figure guess where the bathrooms were in a pinch. You know the important stuff! The stuff that can make you feel out of place when among strangers. And I felt that I had really done my job. That I was really leaning into being “a minister” for “Jesus.”

We sat down and collected ourselves and just as the processional him ramped up he leaned over to me and said—with the gravity of the entire world on his shoulders—*Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?* [pause for laughter] For real. That really happened. I made one of those deer caught in the headlights faces, mouth agape. And the thought literally crossed my mind that I was being punked and perhaps on camera—that this was something that they did maybe to every student from the seminary at some point.

And what I would have said—if I had the time and space to think and pray and reflect—is what I did just say at the beginning of this sermon. *The power of divine love over the powers of death bit* – don’t worry I’m going to say it all again in just a minute, at the end. But what I did say was, *Abbbbbb, I don’t know.....* And the moment was lost. I thought I would get another swing at it after the service but just a few minutes before we went up to communion, he got up and left. Walked out of the church. And as far as I know, my *Abbbbbb, I don’t know.....* was perhaps the last word he ever got on the death and resurrection of Jesus.



Before I was a priest I was trained to teach philosophy in college. And one of the reasons I chose the priesthood is that this profession hopes to span the whole of life—to see it all as connected to the divine. Birth, death, the mundane and the spectacular, the pain and the anxiety, the joy and the stillness and the peace. All of it is fair game. All of it is the stuff, the atmosphere of what we do. Of course I feel deeply indebted to my professors who did chose to teach and patiently handle me through my awkward late adolescence. But for me, in part, the draw to the priesthood is precisely in its overreach.

And something that tries to pull in all of life, can be really difficult to clearly define and articulate. When we’re asking questions about faith, where do we start? Where’s the beginning? The earliest records we have of people struggling to answer this question go back to nearly the beginning of history. They go back to beginning of questions themselves.

So where do we start? Let me suggest something practical. And I’ve had it printed out for you to keep or take home or recycle. It’s the bulletin. I got into the priesthood for the mundane and there is nothing more mundane than the bulletin. But in the bulletin we put our entire selves – or at least all that can fit into eight pages. Twelve on important days! This bulletin tries to incarnate our most basic values.

For instance, half of it is the liturgy of the word. Half of our service is about reading and listening to stories not about ourselves. Many of the stories are strange. Their origin is not European but Middle-Eastern. Not written by heirs of the Enlightenment but by an ancient people, who in many ways saw the world as

fundamentally different. This strangeness is not a feature to overcome but a feature to celebrate. A tool, in part, to educate ourselves about how others—through a vast expanse of time—have seen the world and understood God’s place in it.

But these ancient, strange people, also, were people. Made of flesh and blood. And so many of their hopes and fears—their mistakes and anxieties—are exactly ours.

This week we hear Jesus preparing his disciples for “distress among the nations.” He tells them that “people will faint from fear . . . of what is coming upon the world.” I read those words just as I was hearing about the new COVID strain in south Africa. Just as I began to feel again that familiar lurching in my heart.

For some, religion is a kind of sentimental escapism. But a close reading of our sacred texts shows an unflinching realism about the challenges we will face and the courage—the faith—we will need to face them. Not only as individuals but as a community.

I think similar thoughts about the prayers of the people and confession. In these we tie our hearts together. We listen and name those who are sick, those in need. We celebrate in the thanksgivings of our community. We confess our shortcomings, we acknowledge the power and danger of a world divided by sin and the power of death. But in all of this it is our commitment to walk through it—the whole of life—together that defines us.

That we will stand shoulder to shoulder and defend the dignity of every last one of us. That our values as a church are found and purchased by our care and friendship with the outcast and the lonely and the sick. That this place is the place we bring the great sadness that lies in our hearts. Our own tragic failings.

Our stories of abuse. Our depression. Those things hardest to name and share. None of it is separate from the life of God.

In our baptism we say again and again that no matter what will come, we will be a people of God. Speaking out into the world the words of Jesus. Peace. Mercy. Forgiveness. It is for this reason that Jesus tells his disciples in the gospel today to stay awake and to be alert. That even when the heavens shake, to not let our hearts be weighed down, to not be drowned in worry.

And thus we must sing. We must give ourselves space to let our hearts soar. To be unbound and lifted up. To acknowledge that we cannot do it ourselves and thus we open our hearts to each other and thereby share in the power of God.

It is advent. The beginning of the beginning yet again. The creeds we read in this service are not facts entered into evidence but are promises we commit to making true.

With Jesus we refuse the power of death. With Jesus we proclaim a gospel not of shame but hope. A gospel not of greed but sacrifice. A gospel not of condemnation but forgiveness.

Jesus is here in our midst. Hand outstretched. Beckoning us to this great resurrection. Amen.