

“As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Please be seated.

Good morning! It is my absolute delight to be here with you today, and thank you so much to Fr. Joshua for extending the invitation. My name is Julia, and I am currently in the process of becoming a priest. Right now, I am preparing to start my final year at Yale Divinity School. As such, your rector has invited me to reflect on the future of the church.

Though my being here today has perhaps more to do with scheduling than the lectionary, it seems the Holy Spirit has ensured that the readings we heard today were intended for this very moment. Preparing to work in ministry, I think a lot about the future of the church, and I couldn't have asked for a better set of texts to use for this kind of reflection.

At the top of today's service, we heard the collect assigned for this particular Sunday. We are reminded that the church rests upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. We have a strong, sacred bedrock beneath our feet. When we center Jesus and the prophets that paved the way for him in our lives, we're hard to shake. When we focus too much on the world around us, unpredictable and unreliable, we may start to feel a little off balance.

We forget to plant our feet on the unshakable place that Jesus calls us to.

Now, you may be thinking that when we find that stability through Christ as our rock, we're done. We get to stay rooted in that spot, continuing in perpetual comfort and assurance that we cannot be moved. This is perhaps where our Gospel throws us a curveball. Jesus doesn't serve as the church's one foundation so that we can rest, stagnant and comfortable for the rest of our lives. I think it's quite the opposite.

When a plant feels that its environment is threatened and it cannot rely on the nutrients it needs to survive, it may survive, but it won't thrive. It'll stay exactly as it is for as long as it can. No new leaves, no blossoms or fruit. When a plant has secure roots and a steady source of sunlight and water, it grows tall and blooms and may even completely transform. *That* is what Jesus wants for us. And when we center our lives on Jesus who provides the tools for thriving, we can be sure that he will beckon us to follow.

Today's readings are all about following where God calls us.

Now, following Jesus is not an easy task. A couple of weeks ago, I was at the ordination of my friend Payton, and I was near enough to hear Bishop Taylor offer him one final caution. The bishop said, “I give everyone one last chance to back out, because what you’re about to do is crazy.” I’m sure he said this in jest, trying to ease Payton’s nerves before this tremendous moment in his life, but I’ve heard the Bishop reflect on this notion before. At confirmations and ordinations, he often reminds people that truly following Christ is a radical, counter-cultural, often unpopular thing to do. Following Jesus, putting God before the human powers of this world, rejecting the forces of evil that tempt us, loving our neighbors and especially our enemies as ourselves, these behaviors can be dangerous. And, at a minimum, it’s kind of inconvenient.

Jesus’ disciples were like you and me. They had to-do lists. When Jesus said, “Follow me,” they pointed to those lists, highlighting things mundane and things profound left to do. If Jesus showed up tomorrow and said, “drop everything and follow me,” I’d like to think I would, but I’m sure I’d make similar bargains. “Just let me text my husband, telling him where I’ve gone.” “Ah! The stove’s on, let me turn it off first.” If only we all had the guts of Elishia, who, when told to go back to where it was safer, said to Elijah, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”

God is calling us to a radical life. When people worry about the changes that the church, especially the Episcopal church, is facing, they forget that it is the business of Christ followers to change. Jesus does not provide a steady foundation so that we stay the same. He offers us the gift of sure footing so that we can grow to meet the needs of the world. The disciples were distracted by Earthly things that nearly dragged them away from Jesus. Some days, I fear the church may be doing the same thing.

When people say the church is dying, I think they mean the church is changing. People feel sorry for me as I prepare to enter ordained life because it wasn’t the way it was 50 years ago. Good. I’m not living 50 years ago. My call is to follow Christ, not to maintain a stagnant version of the church that has been. And, remember, we *have* that solid foundation if we center Christ. We don’t have to be afraid of change and transformation and growth. We get caught up, just like the disciples did, on those Earthly things. We love our church communities and we want them to grow and thrive and bloom. That doesn’t necessarily happen when we raise enough money for the capital campaign or find ourselves with more interested applicants to the vestry than there are available spots. It happens when we follow Jesus, truly, seeking where God is leading us.

I will end with a brief note on Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Having just completed my required biblical interpretation class focused specifically on the Pauline texts, I’m always a little bit

cautious when engaging with his words. This letter was written to a specific group of people about a particular concern, so I would not advise taking these words and applying them whole cloth to your life in El Segundo in 2025, but I think the theme of his message supports everything I've tried to communicate up to this point. Through Christ, we have a gift. We have the freedom to thrive and grow because of his steadfastness in our lives. We must not squander it. We cannot just use that gift to better ourselves. The most important commandment Jesus ever offered was to love one another. Paul reminds us of that. We must use the potential we have, our freedom to grow and change, to build up our communities and strive for the collective good. Following Christ is a team sport. We must support one another in our efforts to follow Jesus and bring out God's Kingdom.

Paul says, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." When we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us, we will change. Change is unknown, and so it can be scary. The church is changing. And, if we knew what the future looked like, I don't think it would be real change.

The disciple said, "I will follow you wherever you go." What does following Jesus look like today?

It might look like showing up to a vigil for a community member unjustly taken by anonymous, armed individuals from their family. It might look like a group of neighbors handing out water in the park on a hot day. It might look like this sometimes, people gathering together to listen and pray and study and sing. Together, we'll discover what following Jesus means and empower each other to continue forward toward radical love and justice, even when it gets uncomfortable.

Friends, let us set our faces toward Christ and follow him. May we trust in our sure foundation to keep us steady. The church isn't dying, it's transforming. We may not recognize it yet, but as the Lord lives, and as we live, we will not be left to face this change alone. St. Michael's, the Holy Spirit has called you to this place and asked you to follow. I look forward to seeing where it leads you. Amen.