

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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PROVOKED

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Text of a Sermon preached the 25th Sunday after Pentecost
November 14, 2021

DANIEL 12:1-3 | PSALM 16
HEBREWS 10:11-25 | MARK 13:1-8

Provocation. What a marvelous word. In itself it contains the idea that we were not doing anything, perhaps being very patient, but then suddenly moved to action. I am told that in Columbia your waiter may ask you: *provocale gustar un cafecito?* Can I provoke you to enjoy a cup of coffee? Can I interest you in a cup of coffee? One minute we are still, watching, waiting. The next, we are provoked. Stirred up.

We have been provoked. Around the world we are still understanding the changes resulting from a pandemic that is not over. Several months into the pandemic in the spring of 2020 I provoked my bishop. Frustrated with only being able to communicate online, missing the true communion of the church gathered in prayer and worship, I suggested to some parishioners that they might take bread at home, and break it while I broke the host here at church, and in that way share communion more deeply. That has come to be known as virtual communion.

The only problem, virtual communion is not a thing. It is what we call a heresy, a false teaching. But let us just put it this way. There is no communion without real bodies in the room, real flesh and blood people touching, sharing bread and pouring out the wine of their lives so that as we drink from the cup of the passion, we too become one, and committed to each other. Like I said. Virtual Communion is not a thing.

The Bishop quickly emailed me and said in a very wonderful way: ‘I am sure I have heard wrong. You certainly are not entertaining this idea.’ I wrote back. Well, no bishop, now that you say it, of course not. It was not my intention to mislead or cheapen the sacrament. I understand. We must have patience. He said: Of course. I know your heart. All is well.

And then he said one last thing. A directive that was full of so much love. He said: Forget everything but this. Just prepare for the day when people will return. Do everything with that in mind. Pray, wait, be provoked, act with that in mind. Prepare for the day that the people will return.

We have been provoked. We are still in this pandemic. We are a new congregation, a new people gathered by our bishop, just a short three years ago after this great building had been closed and its previous congregation dispersed elsewhere. We are new young seedling needing so much more water, sunlight and time to sprout and grow. And in this past week we have learned of more change. Your pastor who gathered you does not have much more time left among you.

Think of how the disciples must have felt, sensing the mounting drama developing in the last week of Jesus' three year ministry with them. Jesus was getting into argument, pronouncing judgment, and now this! He provoked his hearers as he predicts the destruction of the great temple. Now he has their attention. By the way he says, wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, pandemics – this is only the beginning!

The bishop asked me to prepare for when you would return. And after Easter, a celebration I had to miss because my family had COVID and I was in quarantine, you did. But it has only really been about six months. The wheels that set our meeting in motion were started in the middle of the pandemic when it was not clear that you would return.

Jesus prediction about the temple is so very hard. He is trying to prepare us. He is telling us that we will need a revolutionary kind of patience. A patience that is more than resistance or mere endurance.

This patience will also have to be a passion. It will require that we share what we have with each other and pour ourselves out for each other, and keep focused on him. He will return. Every time we gather in his name. Every time we break the bread and drink the cup. He is in the midst of us.

We must not walk to the left or the right, trusting in false Messiahs. We must not flee out the door hoping to escape the good works he has called us to do. We must keep focused on him.

The book of Hebrews and the Gospel of Mark share one very interesting thing in common: they were written before the destruction of the second Temple in 70 AD. They illustrate the moment when the focus of the worship of God's people shifted permanently from a building and system of sacrifices to a spiritual community of people gathered around their bishop and the pastors under his or her care.

The great St. Irenaeus was the church father who was like the younger generation of Israel who got to enter the promised land. He was taught by the great Polycarp who sat at the feet of St. John. St. Irenaeus gave us the rule of faith, which said we must be guided by both Scripture and Holy Tradition, and that the tradition itself was

first and foremost made up of accepting all four gospels, not just one gospel, not just our favorite gospel, and our confession of the Apostles Creed.

He wrote a book called *Against the Heresies*. He also said: “where the bishop is, there the church is also.”

We began our meditation considering a brush with heresy, of thinking that we can choose our own way and change the traditions out of expediency. We live in a culture where choice is king. Not just because of a pandemic, but for a long time now, we have fooled ourselves into thinking that gathering together as a church, as body of believers, is optional. In the coming meta-verse we will be even more tempted to think we can go back to our houses, shut the door, and find real worship, real community in the virtual world.

Rather, if we understand what Jesus will accomplish, what the writer of Hebrews means when he says “we now have confidence to draw near”, then we will resist draining and diluting the act of worship as a flesh and blood, face to face, sacrifice.

We will instead, every Sunday, enter the sanctuary, break the bread, and drink the cup that has been poured out for us. We will keep focused on the Bishop’s direction to fully return to a full life of faith together. We shall hold on to each other in faith, hope and love.

Before the walls came tumbling down, the writer of Hebrews urged us to “enter the sanctuary.” In hindsight, this is provocative, stirring, essential. Listen one more time and be provoked.

“Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”