

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
June 23, 2024  
All Saints Episcopal Church

Good morning!

This past Tuesday, June 18, was a milestone for me. It was the anniversary of my ordination to the diaconate—that is, becoming a deacon, the first step before being ordained to the priesthood. I was the first woman to be ordained a deacon in the Diocese of Tennessee (which encompassed the whole state at that point—now the state is divided into three separate dioceses).

This particular anniversary is a pretty big one for me, because this is my 45<sup>th</sup> one—45<sup>th</sup>!!—anniversary! I'd like to say I was only 6 when I was ordained, but... I was... 25. You can do the math!

There were three bishops for the Tennessee diocese—spread out across the state. The suffragan bishop of the diocese (who took care of the western third of the state) came to ordain me. I don't know if the diocesan bishop (the “head” bishop), who resided in the middle of the state, where Nashville is and where I lived, told the suffragan he had to do it or not—but he had taken a stand against ordaining women priests. Yet, there he was. That was the beginning of my journey.

I had graduated from the seminary in Sewanee, Tennessee. The service was held at St. David's Episcopal Church in Nashville, my home parish, on a Monday night. Harry Pritchett, a priest who was one of my teachers and a good friend, preached the sermon. He was a dynamic preacher, moving left and right in the pulpit, up on his toes and back on his heels, waving his arms back and forth. He was a ball of energy then. But the bishop fell asleep.

After my ordination I was sent to a downtown church in Knoxville, to become a deacon-in-training. My jobs were: to answer the doorbell during the week, asking what the person needed. However, I had no authority to help the people—I had to go to the rector and lay out the reasons why we should help them. And if he said “no,” I had to go tell them no.

My other jobs were that I had to put paper and pencils on the table for each member for vestry meetings, but I was not allowed to sit at the table. And I had to make the lemonade or hot chocolate for the gatherings after church services, even though there was a designated person to do these things.

Even though I was a deacon, I wasn’t allowed to read the Gospel unless I was sitting on the correct side of the chancel, which depended on who was preaching that day. The rector preached three out of four Sundays a month; the fourth Sunday was either the assistant priest or a deacon. And during football season, the deacon was supposed to make hospital calls on Saturdays, so the priests could go to the home games!

I thought it would never end.

Needless to say, there have been both good times and bad times over the years. Sometimes, when things seemed to be going along smoothly, dark clouds would appear, and one of those storms of life would break loose out of nowhere.

If the storm didn’t last too long, and my life got back to whatever was normal fairly quickly, I would be able to go back to business as usual easily. But if it was a storm that thundered loudly, and shot lightning across the sky and poured sheets of rain, disrupting my status quo, and changing the course of things, I would call out for help. “Why is this happening to me? Doesn’t anyone care?”

In today's Gospel lesson, the disciples found themselves in a similar situation when they were sailing across the sea with Jesus asleep on the stern. A rough storm blew in suddenly, and though they were experienced fishermen, the storm soon overwhelmed them and the boat was in danger of sinking. They became afraid and woke Jesus up to say, "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

I would guess that the same situation applies for many, if not all, of us. Whether there have been literal storms, or storms in our lives, there are probably times when the storms felt like they would overwhelm you or me. Perhaps you have also cried out for help, "Why is this happening to me? Doesn't anyone care that I am in danger of perishing?"

Why is this happening? The answer is: because it is what it is. Weather happens. Our abuse of the planet affects how we live. And those choices affect other choices and so on and so on.

But these events are not—I repeat, NOT—parts of some plan that God has for each of us that controls what happens to us for the rest of our lives. If such were the case—if God did have plans for all of us—why should we bother trying to make decisions on our own?

And if hurricanes or floods or tsunamis or tornadoes or heat waves are God's plan; if cancer or heart disease or Alzheimer's are part of God's plan; or war or famine or corrupt governments or lack of education or being forced to flee one's country is part of God's plan for us, then I'm pretty sure that I do not want to believe in, or trust, or have faith in, or love, a God like that!

What God offers us is not a stranglehold on our choices for our lives. God offers us a life of freedom—freedom to choose, freedom to risk, freedom to love and be loved. God even offers us the option of not believing in the God who created us. God loves us that much!

God does not cause the storms of life. God does not inflict them on us. And God does not swoop down to stop them willy-nilly for some people but not for others. What Jesus did for his disciples in terms of calming the storm is part of the mystery of God—the mystery of feeding thousands of people with a few loaves of bread... the mystery of healing the sick... the mystery of casting out demons. Not magic tricks. Not a plan. It's a mystery!

What Jesus does is to be with us. In times of storms or in times of tranquility, Jesus is a companion—not a good ol' buddy to make us feel warm and fuzzy inside—but in the truest sense of the word: he is one who shares the experiences of another, especially when these are unpleasant or unwelcome. One who shares our joys and our sorrows. One who understands what it is like to be afraid. One who offers us shalom—completeness, fullness, and peace.

And of course, we know the way this works: because Jesus offers us his companionship, his shalom, we are called to offer it to others. To let others know that they are free—free to choose, free to risk, free to love and be loved. We are called to stand by them through the storms of their lives, to share their joys and sorrows. To calm their fears. And to offer them shalom.

Were the things that have happened to me... or you... during the last 45 (or however many) years—were they God's plan? I don't believe so. But I do know that God has been with me for both the good and the bad times, and continues to be with me... and with you. God is with all of us. Shalom.