

Ponder anew What the Almighty Can Do,  
Who with Great Love doth Befriend Thee.

An installation Sermon for the Reverend Mary Susan Allison-Hatch.

by

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Numbers 11:1-17;24-25. John 15:9-16. Luke 10:3-9

Certain words of a hymn keep playing in my head “... ponder anew, what the Almighty can do, who with great love doth befriend thee.”

These words seem especially appropriate for today. We are invited to ponder anew the meaning of ministry in the light of the God who befriends us.

Today, you are installing the Reverend Mary Susan Allison-Hatch as your pastor.

Today, you, the members of Trinity Episcopal Church move forward with Christ’s ministry in this place. Ministry is the work of the whole people of God. No one person can do it all alone. It is the community’s ministry that is being newly installed through the leadership of the pastor.

No one person can do ministry alone. And no one knew this better than Moses. Moses’ ministry was full of challenges. His ministry was surrounded by the murmurings of the people, their disappointment, complaints and criticism. In the midst of this ministry, Moses was faced with God’s enduring question— “Is there any limit to my power”? This question is also your question Trinity. Ministry is the work of the whole congregation, & the whole Body of Christ. Today, we are here not only to install your new minister, but to also “ponder anew what the Almighty can do” in your midst.

The Lord said to Moses, “Is there any limit to my power?” [Numbers 11:23].

And, we, with Moses, might ask ourselves, “is there any limit to our complaints and dissatisfaction?”

A few weeks ago I was worrying about shipping personal items back from the UK to the USA. I too had my share of complaints about the cost of postal services in the United Kingdom, about the weakness of the American dollar against the pound. I also wondered, what shipping company would be the most trustworthy? Which had the best track record? Would all of the packages I shipped arrive without damage? Some of these were questions and some were complaints. But all expressed concerns about the things we entrust to another.

When things happen according to our expectations we are happy. No more worry. But when things do not happen as we expect, then we grow anxious, sometimes we become unhappy and begin to search for the reason why things are the way they are. We may complain.

Moses was faced with complaints and criticism. He argued with God. Listen.

“Why are you treating me, your servant, so miserably?”

“What did I do to deserve the burden of a people like this?”

What religious leader or church community has not asked some version of this question?

Moses, continues... 12”Are they my children? Am I their father? Is that why you have told me to carry them in my arms—like a nurse carries a baby—“.

” I can’t carry all these people by myself!”[ Moses complained.] “The load is far too heavy! I’d rather you killed me than treat me like this. Please spare me this misery!”  
[Numbers 11:14-15]

We do not always hear the conversation between religious leaders and the Divine presence. But here we are invited back stage, so to speak and privileged to hear the struggles of a spiritual life.

Moses’ chief complaint was this, “I cannot carry all these people by myself! The load is far too heavy!”

And indeed it was, and is. The people need to be involved. Ministry is about sharing the load. It requires risk & accountability, thoughtfulness & taking responsibility. It is about caring and sharing one another’s burdens. No one person can do it alone. If the people expected God to do it all for them, then they are mistaken. If Moses expects to do ministry all alone, then he is mistaken.

Moses wondered why God had given him all the work to do. And God told Moses to tap the resources of the people and come up with 71 leaders who could help shoulder the burdens of the many others. Each one help one; and everyone helps all.

No one person can or should do this alone. It takes a whole village, a whole congregation to help do the work of the kingdom. Even then, there will still be complaints and great challenges. But there will be more people to shoulder the task and more hearts, minds & hands to help build the beloved community.

The past may sometimes be remembered as the good ole days when the challenges of the present appear to be too demanding and heavy. But the present is where we must do God’s will & experience God’s presence & power. This ministry is never easy.

Moses knew that this call to ministry would never be easy. He knew that it is much easier to duck complaints, than to face them. To face complaints takes courage.

Moses knew that it is much easier to listen to and love only those who love and agree with you.

He knew that it is always a challenge to love and show genuine affection toward those who are different and difficult, who undermine, disagree and fight and drag-their feet in many ways. It is hard to love when that is the case.

Ministry, extends to all of the people...all of the time. God’s work of love in ministry is not easy. We need God’s power to do it.

Moses found that complaints seem to never cease, criticism abounds more than gratitude, but God’s power is always available. The temptation to see only the complaint is ever present; the possibility of never hearing or acknowledge complaints and criticism can undermine ministry.

But the real challenge in this Moses story and in ministry is to hear the complaint and view it anew, in the light of God's amazing grace and powerful presence. We need God's presence and power to bring new light to our endeavors, wider justice to our vision and deeper compassion to the challenges we face.

“Ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with great love doth befriend thee?!”

Ministry, really is a challenge of the whole people of God. Ministry is the whole community, the beloved community who seeks to faithfully perform God's will in the world.

This is what God called Moses to do. Moses was not called to do grand-stand performances. Nor are you. Moses is not called to be the Barry Bonds or the Tom Brady of ministry. Nor are you. No, Ministry is about summoning the whole congregation, the faithful, to do the work of the realm of God amidst the present sufferings of our time.

This brings us to the Gospel lesson.

We are called forth and sent-out as lambs in the midst of wolves. (Luke's gospel). To be lamb-like does not seem to be a typical trait of Americans. If we learn anything from political campaigns we want our leaders to be tough, armed and ready to protect us from the perceived enemy. Shoot first, ask questions later. We do not want lambs in charge.

But this is what the gospel calls for—be lambs among wolves. Do not return hate for hate, or trade evil for evil. We often pray “... and deliver us from evil...” Evil destroys relationships and individual lives. It is a poison, a toxin that is very hard to resist.

The anti-toxin is to fight evil on terms other than its own. The way to answer evil is to differently engage it.

We are called to be a remedy by breaking it's death grip, by not giving it more power than it already has in your life, in the life of Trinity and in the life of the world.

In order to live out this ethic, we need the help of others and be a community of faithful witnesses.

Living in an evil world, but not as an evil persons is a part of the work of ministry. Do not require an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Is this an impossible ethic in a world of unprecedented violence? The gospel lesson instructs: We cannot take money or traveler's, bag, or extra scandals. I can imagine that today, the list might include: no bottled water, credit cards, backpack, cell phone or handheld computers. We have become so dependent upon material things, gadgets and our technologies that it is hard to imagine life without them. The gospel calls us to what seems like an impossible life style.

The Gospel encourages us to be generous, to depend upon the generosity of others, and ponder anew, the generosity of God. “Stay in one place,” the gospel encourages. “Eat and drink what (the host) provides for you. Do not hesitate to accept hospitality...”

Doesn't this run counter to everything we know—be strong, self-sustaining, bold & independent, strike-back and be fierce like a wolf when need be?

Trinity, Christian ethics calls us to be a different presence in the world. It calls us to

do lasting work. It calls us to a new and deep joy. It calls us to provide an alternative to violence, corruption; to alleviate suffering by helping others.

John Wesley, the Methodist hymn writer, put it this way:

“Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can.  
(John Wesley 1703-1791.

This is lasting work. It brings deep joy.

Rev. Mary Susan Allison-Hatch & Trinity you are challenged & befriended by God’s amazing love to do this lasting work.

We live in a world where things last for only a short time, then they pass away and are soon forgotten. The hymn captures it: “We fly forgotten as a dream... dies at the opening day.” But you are called to do lasting work.

In the midst of the passing we can do work that survives the ravages of time. This is possible when God’s message of love abides in us and we abide in God. When God’s love abides in us, we abide in each other, when we abide in each other God’s message can abide in the world. (John’s gospel). This is the work that last from generation to generation But no one can do this work alone, or in isolation.

We must work together and be a thoughtful community that helps to lift the heavy burdens of others. Sometimes those burdens are physical—people have bodily afflictions, health issues that soon become financial & insurance burdens.

Sometimes the heavy burdens are relationship issues that can become heavy emotional issues that can lead to mental health challenges.

Sometimes, the burdens are deeply spiritual. The issue may lay between the individual soul and God; and we cannot move forward successfully until we are right with God. We remember that Moses’ quarrel was primarily with God and secondarily with the complaints of the people.

Reverend Mary Susan and Trinity, the church community is the place where all three (the body/physical, emotional/mental, and the spiritual) can be cared for. This is a treasure we have in earthen vessels. We must ponder this treasure anew and discover what the Almighty can do. For sure, the work of ministry opens us to complaints and make us vulnerable to others—as was Jesus before the powers of ancient Rome. But do not be afraid, God has befriended you with a love that excels all other love.

Reverend Mary Susan Allison-Hatch, you have come to be among the people of Trinity Episcopal Church for such a time as this. And they have called you into partnership with them.

You are joined together in ministry to walk together, talk together, worship & pray together and do the lasting work.

There will be times, when like the early disciples, money is tight and complaints are plentiful;

when burdens are heavy and a sense of discouragement & cynicism seem to weigh you down.

In times such as these, ponder anew what the Almighty can do with your leadership and that of the Trinity community.

“Is there any limit to God’s power”, God asked Moses

God’s amazing love can bring you through the thin places with surprising resiliency. And you may wonder how new life grew from the thin places of discouragement and heavy burdens.

Your leadership will grow in partnership with the people of Trinity. You must care and pray for one another. When you do that a deep current of love & joy will carry you through the rough places of discouragement and over high peaks of despair.

You will come to see again and again that it is God’s light that shine out of the darkness that surrounds you. And, Trinity, you will come to know yourselves as faithful witnesses to God’s new life in a world where wolves are real;

Complaints are plentiful.

Fear runs rampant,

and violence appears to increase.

But you need not be driven back by any of these things. As a community of leadership, you can serve God’s deeper purposes with renewed strength.

So, go ahead, Trinity, ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with great love befriends you.

Thanks be to the God who saves us through Jesus Christ. Amen.