

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, \*  
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

About this time, three years ago, my family and I were living in Sewanee Tennessee. I was finishing up my final year of seminary at the University of the South and I had recently completed the dreaded “General Ordination Exams”, also known as the “real reason” that priests go bald (ask Father Josh, me, or our own ER Hare who recently finished his crucible). Our daughter was finishing the second grade, already a voracious reader and at that time, yet still let us pick out her clothes and still thought I was cool. Our son hadn’t even started elementary school yet but had already begun a life of running (never walking) everywhere, kicking, throwing, or especially hitting balls, rocks, sticks, trees etc. to the degree that his pre-school teachers gave him the nickname “Bam Bam” which he hates... sorry Greyson, but I did wait until my last Sunday here to tell everyone about your old nickname... I bet if you know my son, you might agree that this is an apt nickname. About this time three years ago, my wife Sallie was thriving at her job working for the University of the South and we lived in a nice home, we were comfortable.

We were comfortable in that time and place, yet we knew that soon a massive change in our lives would happen. About this time, three years ago, I remember being very stressed out, “where will we go, where will we live, where will the kids go to school, where will Sallie work”? These were the huge life questions that we were pondering day after day. We have children and a whole life in front of us, and, in just a few months we won’t be able to call this place home anymore, where will home be? It was right around this time, about three years ago, that one of my seminary professors sent me a link for a job posting at St. John in the Wilderness in Flat Rock, North Carolina, a church not very far from where I grew up, was apparently looking to hire an assistant priest, a Curate (curates are recently ordained priests, usually right out of seminary who go back to their diocese to serve, and a “curacy” is often their first priestly role) if possible to come serve at this very old, yet vibrant church. My heart leapt when I saw the job posting and I prayed the prayer many of us have probably prayed at some point in life; “I think this is the one God, if it is your will, please make it so.”

About this time, three years ago, I sent an application to some random guy named Josh Stephens. I sent in a few videos of sermons that I had given in seminary, curated my list of references, and planned a visit to come see this church I had driven past a thousand times with my family, yet had never personally been in. I remember about this time three years ago, coming to St. John with Sallie and our children. We were “incognito”, ostensibly visiting a church near where I grew up that I had never attended before. When we came in and were greeted warmly and guided to a seat, we almost immediately struck up a conversation with our new neighbors in our pew ( ) and Brenda Hilliar, with her incredible smile and charm, introduced herself, and offered St. John as a place of community, growth, and love. I have been in hundreds of Episcopal Churches yet, about this time, three years ago, I felt that I had found a place I could call home.

About this time, three years ago, I applied to be the Curate at St. John in the Wilderness and was hired to serve in that role. Since then, this time has been amongst the most formative and special times in my life. Not only does my family fully feel loved and a part of this community, which is so important and I hope that you all feel proud of the way that you love people into this community, but as a first time priest, freshly pastorized,

I have come to deeply love and appreciate all of you and my time here has made me a more confident and possibly competent priest, a more loving and discerning Christian, and frankly a better human being. If you didn't know, and if it isn't painfully obvious at this point, this is a "see you later" sermon. Not a "goodbye" sermon, because it is my hope that although this is my last day with all of you as your Curate, this won't be the last time I see you. I will start my new role as Associate Rector at Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Tryon North Carolina next Sunday and it has been one of the greatest honors of my life to serve as one of your priests here for the past two and a half years.

Saying "see you later" or even "goodbye" when it is appropriate to do so often encourages people to reflect on the time that was spent together. Over the past couple of years, I have had the opportunity to experience so much of the fullness of life in Christ at St. John in the Wilderness. I have had the opportunity to marry a couple who were (and still are) in their 90s. After years of making decisions for family members, they finally decided to make one for themselves and got hitched. It was beautiful.

I will never forget watching Arnold and Marge Smith's great-grandson praying to and playing with the Holy Spirit as he lifted his great-grandfather's soul up to heaven at the end of Arnold's committal. I will never forget the love and support of our vestry and staff when I experienced one of the darkest times of my life. I will never forget the laughs and deep conversations that I have shared with many of you because all of that has fed my soul, warmed my heart, and confirmed that I am doing what it that God has called me to do in my life... To go into the world to love and serve in the name of Jesus Christ (or whatever Deacon Sandy decides to say at the end of our services... lets do that).

Both reflection and looking forward are intrinsic parts of a Christian life. We reflect and look forward in times of transition, certainly... yet our practice, our call, is to continually both reflect and look forward as often as we can. As you may know, I am a part of our men's bible study group here, and every week a group of us join to discuss the scripture readings for the upcoming Sunday. This week, friends, I discovered yet again that the Holy Spirit is always moving, always at work, and our readings for today were further confirmation to me of the Holy Spirits constant presence.

In Bible Study, Will Rodriguez asked, as many others in the past couple of weeks have asked “what will you take away from” or “what have you learned” from being at St. John. My typical answer to these types of questions is that basically, I hope that I helped encourage people to think, but I will try to answer those questions in the context of the study of scripture today.

Part of our practice in Bible Study is to read a scripture passage and then to reflect on a particular word, phrase, sentence, or idea that sticks out to you. In our first reading from Nehemia, the prophet Ezra is “reading and interpreting the law” for the people. He is essentially preaching to the people, yet the line that stuck out to me was “o they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” They gave the sense... so that the people understood the reading. It is my hope that my fairly simple examples of a Christian faith lived in the context of a normal, rural, family farming life have made some sense. I hope that my sermons have encouraged you to think, encouraged you to pray, and have pushed you to grow in your faith, yet in a way that is approachable and makes “sense” to you.

We have discussed everything from washing dishes, crying in your truck to sappy country music songs, more appropriate translations of Greek words in scripture, end of life transformations, and the joy of children's first discoveries. We have discussed life, death, pain, joy, conflict, healing, doubt, faith, loss, reflection, action... and most importantly we have talked about hope. I hope that you pray, that you study, that you work, and that you are continually inspired by God's love to go and serve.

In Paul's letter to the followers of Christ in Corinth, he refers to them as all members of a "body" which is Christ's church. He writes that no member, no individual part of this body is more important than another. We struggled a bit with a part of this sentiment in bible study this week. Specifically, the heart/mind/thinking center is obviously the most important part of our bodies yet every person, every cell or molecule in the body is of equal value. It is hard to wrap the mind around this important principle that Jesus gives us. We know as logical human beings that the heart and brain are scientifically more important than say a pinky toe. One can live, after all, if a pinky toe is lost. The heart and brain are different matters though. We really need those parts. Yet, faith is more than a single carbon-based lifeform. Faith connects us in ways that we cannot fully comprehend.

Although the loss of a pinky toe isn't necessarily life threatening, the whole body feels it, it hurts, we miss it. Each member is a part of the Body. This sense of pain, of loss, speaks to the now of today. It hurts me that I will not be serving as one of your priests at St. John in the Wilderness, yet we are the church, a body in the spiritual sense, and right now I feel sort of like one of our fingers, reached out in a handshake, an exchange of peace.

Although this is my last Sunday serving as your Curate, I hope that we can all look at the almost three years of life together as a gift. This church has given me the gift of purpose, the gift of growth, and the gift of love. I now go forth to share that gift with others, other members of the same body that we are all part of...maybe a blood cell would have been a better body analogy for this sermon, but I think y'all get it. This was exactly the place that I needed to be at this exact time to help me become the instrument of God's peace that I believe I am made to be. Thank you.

That was the reflection part of the sermon. This is the looking forward part. Our gospel lesson from Luke speaks of Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returning to Nazareth, his hometown, to read scripture in the Synagogue.



Now, full disclosure, I am not Jesus. I have to make wine the old-fashioned way, I am a poor excuse for a surfer (which places something that actually floats between you and the water), and my “healing touch” is as peppered as much with Vince Lombardi quotes as with the words of our Lord and Savior. So, if I am not Jesus, and he had (because he soon will) such problems going home, how could I possibly expect to serve the people of Holy Cross Tryon, the church I grew up in, faithfully, confidently, and well if it was so hard for the perfect human, Jesus? My answer to that is you. My answer is St. John in the Wilderness. My answer is that I have grown here, I have been formed here in the Wilderness. I have encountered so many of you at the mountaintops of life and in the lowest of valleys. I have laughed with, ate with, cried with, prayed with, served with, and loved God and my neighbor with all of you. I am so proud to have been amongst you all. I am so grateful for the gifts of love and wisdom that I have received here. I am so thankful to have been your Curate, starting about three years ago.

My hope, our goal, is something that I said in one of my very first sermons to y'all about three years ago. It isn't hard to find, it is right there, near you, just as me and my family will be near to you go forward. Take out your bulletin. Look at the bottom of the cover page. This is our mission at St. John in the Wilderness "To know and love God as He is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, to bring others to His saving love, and to serve the world in His name."

For about the past three years we have done that together. Thank you. It is now time, my friends, my siblings in Christ, that I go into a slightly different part of the world to serve in the name of Christ. I hope that you will be as proud of me as I am of you. God bless you all. I love you. Peace.