

**Changing Pivotal Moments in God-Glorifying Victories**  
Pentecost 10, Year A, Matthew 16:13-20 and Romans 12:1-8  
Preacher: The Rev. Kim L. Coleman, Rector, Trinity Church Arlington

Please be seated.

Let me begin by saying

In Italian: Buongiorno . . .

In Greek: Kalimera . . .

In the Twi (*chwee*) Language of Ghana: Ete-sen

And in the Creole of Sierra Leone: I gladly for see you.

I real gladly for see you.

Good morning church! It's been a long time since we have gathered together with me as your rector and celebrant. Before we turn to God's Holy Word, I need you to know that I am so very proud of this community. I do not have the words to adequately express my response to the wonderful stories I have heard of how this community united together, grew together, and worked together in my absence. You are and have been amazing.

For those who are our guests this morning or who are new to this community, I have been on sabbatical for nearly six months and have traveled extensively around the world. In West Africa, to Ghana and Sierra Leone. To Greece, Turkey and Italy. And of course, to my heart throb, New York City. Home to Broadway and just about anything else you can imagine.

We'll have plenty of time to share with one another about our renewal journeys, but I wanted first to tell you how impressed I am with what happened around here during my absence, how much I really missed being with you – especially during Holy Week and Easter – and how glad I am to be back serving as your rector and celebrant.

Let me also forewarn you . . . for reasons I cannot identify, I'm pretty nervous right now. I have asked our lay ministers to take me by the hand and lead me should I go astray and ask your indulgence should I miss a few words here and there. It's called reorientation folks, and it should be very interesting.

**Shall we pray?**

Gracious God, into your presence we come with a spirit of humility and gratitude, expectancy and longing to know you more deeply through the proclamation of your word and the breaking of your bread. Empower me now to preach your gospel with power and love. Open our hearts and ears to hear your voice. Grant us grace to discern your will for our lives and the courage to follow and obey. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

This morning we want to talk about turning pivotal points of decision-making into God-glorifying victories. It's a conversion process that each of our lessons highlights.

In our Old Testament lesson, a Levite couple (parents to the man we eventually will know as Moses) gives birth to a baby boy during what appears to be the worst possible time.

The Israelites have become a great nation in Egypt. All is well, until an insecure Pharaoh orders all males born to Israelite women to be killed. Terror and murder become the order of the day. But one particular mother defies Pharaoh and hides her newborn son for three months until hiding no longer is possible. She reaches a pivotal point of decision-making.

In our Epistle lesson, the Apostle Paul, author of the Book of Romans, does the same. For eleven chapters he has struggled with the pain he feels over the rejection of the gospel message by the Jews. He has preached salvation by grace. He has tried to explain how a crucified Jesus fits into God's plan to redeem Israel. He has assured his listeners that all things work to the good for those who love God and are called according to God's purposes. But now, now his focus turns from individual to community, from the divine saving grace of God embodied in Jesus Christ to an important outgrowth of that divine saving grace: corporate worship and proper conduct. He makes a pivotal shift.

Then, there are the pivotal questions Jesus puts before his disciples. Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am? These questions come right before Jesus informs his disciples that he must undergo great suffering, be killed, and then rise again. They precede Jesus' pivotal challenge: If you want to be my disciple, you too must deny yourself, pick up a cross and follow me. They carry with them this promise of victory for those who see in Jesus the Messiah. **Not even the gates of Hades shall prevail over your faith in me.**

Pivotal moments in the life of faith happen to us all.

As believers, we are in the very blessed position of standing in the shoes of those first disciples who followed Jesus. We have seen in Jesus the active, living reign of God. We have acted upon what we have seen by coming to the waters of baptism. We form that community of believers who profess Jesus Christ to be our Lord and our Savior.

More often than not we get Jesus as the Messiah, Son of the Living God. He's the one in charge. Even when Jesus disagrees with what we are thinking, praying, believing and hoping, He's the one who uses pivotal moments to clarify for us who we really are in ways that defy our experience, our self-doubts and our insecurities.

Miraculous, God-glorifying victories become possible as we move from our profession of faith to acting upon what the Apostle Paul urges us to do in his letter to the church in Rome: Brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

How easy it is for us to present our thoughts, our ideas, our hearts, even our prayers and then forget that our bodies must come along as well if we want to experience the God-glorifying victories we crave.

How quickly we undervalue and take for granted the work of renewing our minds, minds that sometimes work against the new victorious realities God wants us to experience.

I recall vividly what I went through in deciding whether to go on sabbatical this year or wait until next. As a community of faith, we were at a pivotal point. Good things were happening. We were enjoying one another and our worship together. We were laughing through our Vestry and committee meetings. And plenty of work stretched out before us.

But there was God, calling me to rest. And there I was questioning God. Really? You must be kidding. When we received the full Lilly Foundation Grant I realized God was not kidding but I kept on arguing. This is what I see. This is what I know needs to be done. This is what I think. It would be better if we did it this way. Besides that, I don't really agree with you that I need that much rest.

Earlier in the book of Matthew Jesus explains the necessity of renewing our minds this way: You can't put new wine into old wineskins. (Even ones that we believe to be perfectly fine I might add). The skins will burst, the wine will be spilled and the skins will be destroyed. Put new wine into fresh wineskins so both will be preserved.

That's why we have marriage prep for couples engaged to be married. Renew your mind. You're about to become two in one, not one only.

That's why we have confirmation and new member classes for people coming into the Episcopal Church or contemplating making a deeper commitment to God in an Episcopal Church. Dorothy, we're not in Kansas anymore. Renew your mind.

That's why we come to church every Sunday morning. To learn something new about God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit so that we don't mistake the messages this world gives out for the expectations or mind of Christ.

Experiencing God-glorifying victories requires us to replace our old thoughts, fears, experiences and behaviors with new ones that spring from the Word of God. It's a process, not an event. Often it's the simple things we overlook that matter the most.

Let me tell you how a renewed mind would have come in handy on one particular occasion while I was traveling. Our tour group had arrived in Venice after an early morning train ride and full day of site seeing. By evening, we were pretty hungry. We sat down in the highly rated and expensive restaurant in the hotel, anticipating a feast to beat all feasts.

Glancing through the menu, my eyes spied something familiar. Scampi. Scampi. I knew Scampi. My mind started imagining succulent shrimp in a light garlic and butter sauce. I quickly ordered and began to wait.

You can imagine my surprise when the waiter returned to our table and with great fanfare presented a covered dish. Inside, finely arrayed on the plate, was a serving of crawfish. Not the shrimp scampi I imagined but crawfish I had never eaten before let alone seen spread out on anyone's plate. Instead of my American presumptions and mindset, I could have used a renewed mind right about then.

Just as we benefit most when we have a renewal of mind right down to understanding what God means by living sacrifice.

As living sacrifices, we make available our bodies and alter our minds to understand ourselves by who God is and by what God does for us, not by what we are or what we do for God.

A living sacrifice sets his or her attention to discovering how new names and realities (like Christian, beloved child of God, chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, and God's own people) change the way we live, breathe and have our being.

As living sacrifices, we come to celebrate success as a byproduct, not of what we have done, but of the power of God working in us, a power that is able to accomplish abundantly more than we can think or imagine.

Every time we preface our decision making with our faith, the offering of our bodies for God's use and the surrender of our minds to God's way, not ours; God's thoughts, not ours; God's will, not our will be done, we make way for God-glorifying victory.

But can we be absolutely sure this formula will do more good than harm? Can we trust God not to leave us hanging, hurting, or running away? What makes us so sure the benefits to making ourselves available to God outweigh the associated costs and risks of choosing God first?

Two thousand years ago some people staked a cross on Golgotha Hill. It's the cross where Jesus, the Messiah, the son of the Living God, was crucified. He prayed that the will of God would be the will in him. He offered his body for the ultimate living sacrifice. And what looked like the absolute end, became a new beginning for us all. Because he is risen, we who believe in Him shall rise again, and again, and again, as well. We can call that perfect assurance of God-glorifying victory. Amen.