



## Pastoral Address 2022

The Rt. Rev. Susan E. Goff  
Friday, November 18, 2022

“Do not be afraid.” This is the message of the angels, the message of prophets, the message of Jesus himself. “Do not be afraid” is God’s message for us because in these fearsome times, this era of rapid change and uncertainty, fear can blind us and cripple us and make us settle for far less than all that God intends for us.

The criminals who were with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left, were scared to death of the pain they were already suffering and of what might come after death. One, driven by the desperation of fear, tried to manipulate the fear he assumed Jesus was feeling; “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself - and us.” It sounded like mockery as the thief hid behind the kind of bravado that lends hollow courage when shaped by an angry mob. That thief crumbled to the basest human response.

The other thief felt the same terror and refused to collapse under it. Instead, he confronted the mob mentality and challenged the first thief. Then he turned to Jesus in hope saying simply, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” “Remember me” is all he asked. And he received that - and so much more. “Today,” Jesus said to him, “You will be with me in paradise.” You will experience life without fear, life beyond terror, life in all its fulness.

That gift was available to the first thief as well. He could have chosen it, except that he couldn’t face his fear long enough to discover the hope and promise that Jesus gives. He couldn’t comprehend that he might be worthy of nothing less than paradise. He couldn’t even imagine that anyone would remember him - although of course we do every time we tell this story. Fear, left unnamed, diminished the thief’s imagination. Fear, left unfaced, diminishes us.



Now we, the Church, the living, breathing body of Christ on earth today, seek to follow the example of the second thief. Now we reach out in hope to the Savior who loves us beyond our wildest imagining. Now we refuse to be diminished by fear in an age that plagues us with so many fearsome things.

In this past year, we as a diocese named and faced fears that swirl around the mission priorities we articulated at the beginning of this four-year interim period between bishops diocesan, our priorities of Resourcing God's Mission, Racial Justice and Healing, Care of God's Creation, and Evangelism. We have sought to overcome fear and live in such ways that paradise might be glimpsed by us and among us.

We resource God's mission through the work of Covenantal Giving that we adopted at Convention last year. This year the Task Force on Resourcing God's Mission handed oversight of this work to our Executive Board. Since June, the Board has received petitions for an exception to the 8% giving expected for 2023. Thus far, petitions for exception, which include plans to strengthen giving in future years, have been approved for 48 congregations. This process binds us in community with one another and brings the financial fears of any one congregation into the wider context of the whole diocese. As we live into our Covenant with one another - congregation to congregation and congregations to the wider Church - we give from a sense of communal abundance rather from fear of scarcity. We remember that none of us can go it alone, but that we are bound together in faith as one body - the living, breathing body of Christ.

We have also resourced God's mission this year by paying off the last of the debt we carried. We took on this particular debt to incarnate our commitment to ministry with Spanish-speaking populations and make La Iglesia de Santa Maria the second "free standing" Latina congregation in the United States. Now, with paying off that loan, we are for the first time in over 20 years debt free as a diocese. This frees us for new avenues of mission as it reminds us of our undying commitment to the full inclusion of all God's people in the life of the Church, no matter their race, ethnicity, language, gender, gender expression or identity, age, political party, or any other identifier that people in the cultures around us so quickly use to divide us. We remain committed to being one body, the living, breathing Body of Christ.

Our focus on Racial Justice and Healing has remained central in our diocesan life. Fruits of that long-term work will be evident at this Convention as we hear from Bishop Eugene Sutton of the Diocese of Maryland about a vision around repair and reparations and how the Diocese of Maryland is engaging that work. After hearing his words, we will have table group discussion and then entertain questions for Bishop Sutton, Bishop-Elect Stevenson and me.

Tomorrow morning, we will hear a report from the R10a Reparations Task Force about the first year of their five-year task. We will also hear a report from the R13a Shrine Mont Camp ad hoc committee. While the work of that second group is not specifically about race, it is about welcome and inclusion of all people at Shrine Mont. Both the R10a and R13a groups grappled with passionate points of view, differences of opinion, and a desire to labor in faith and love for the sake of God's people, especially our children, our LGBTQ+ siblings and persons of color. It is hard work to speak openly and to listen with care in a society where sharp division and the urge to take polarizing sides have become the norm. As we resist polarization and let go of our fears, we will continue to walk together with Jesus on the way to paradise instead of walking apart on the road to division. I am grateful to these groups for engaging their work in hope and look forward to their reports.

Our Creation Care Task Force continues their committed work to lead us in our second priority area. Creation care is more crucial than ever in this time when we must labor to prevent catastrophic climate change. The task force has presented to this Convention Resolution 1 - net carbon neutrality by 2030. Passing this resolution would align us with the wider Episcopal Church which adopted this goal at General Convention in July. The Task Force gives us resources, including a net carbon tracker that can be used by every family, congregation and organization in our Diocese. The first to suffer from climate catastrophes are often lower income communities and communities of color. Our efforts to prevent and lessen such catastrophes are therefore directly related to our commitment to racial justice and healing. We will have to change some habits to meet this goal - and we will make these sacrifices for the sake of vulnerable populations.

In the realm of evangelism, our fourth four-year priority, we discovered new tools and new opportunities. During the height of the pandemic, when we were not able to gather in person, we learned how to gather virtually. Through live streaming, recorded services, via Zoom or other platforms, many congregations reached more people every Sunday than ever

before. Now that in-person worship is again the norm, congregations continue to live-stream. Some wonder if this continuing encourages people to stay home and whether they should stop. I encourage you to stay the course because seekers are finding their way to the Church through our on-line presence and people are coming to know and love Jesus because our messages are available to them right where they are. That is evangelism at its best - not waiting for people to come to us but going out to them.

As we faced and overcome fears in each of our priority areas, we have also blossomed in other areas. In the past year we gathered for not one, but two Conventions - our on-line Annual Convention a year ago and our in-person Electing Convention in June. Each Convention presented challenges and opportunities, and we grew in resilience as we pushed the edges of what we once thought we could do. We learned out of necessity how to use new technologies which will continue to serve us in years to come.

Our journey of widening and empowering clergy and lay leadership continued this year. While the Bishop remains President or Chair of a number of our diocesan boards, the vice chairs have been empowered to lead meetings and oversee the month-to-month administration of the Board's work. As clergy and lay leaders are empowered, the circle of leadership continues to grow wider. More gifts are set free and seeds of fresh, new ideas are planted.

In this season of so much change in our world, congregations are experiencing their own seasons of change. Tomorrow we will celebrate Church of Our Saviour, Montpelier, as they move from mission to parish status. We anticipate that at least one other mission will make this move at Convention next year. These celebrations always lift us and give us reminders of ever-springing new life.

We also mark the ending of worship life in four of our congregations.

San Marcos, Alexandria, held their last worship service on January 30 of this year, concluding 34 years of ministry. They acknowledged both their grief and their awareness that they could not sustain an independent church life any longer. Many of the congregation now worship with La Gracia at Grace Church, Alexandria.

St. Francis Korean in Dunn Loring has concluded its life as a congregation. When both the vicar and deacon retired at nearly the same time earlier this year, the small congregation

chose not to seek new clergy leadership but to complete their season of congregational life together. Their final service, which included a celebration of their life, took place in September.

St. Paul's, West Point, one of what are traditionally called "historic black congregations," chose to shift their community life when their vicar retired in 2020. The Rev. Vincent Hodge had served them faithfully since 1965. Yes, 1965 - 55 years! Members of St. John's, the once exclusively "white church" in West Point, sent handwritten notes to the people of St. Paul's, inviting them into worship, mission and ministry together. The two congregations are now one. They celebrate that it was about time to overcome decades of racial separation and come together for worship and activities. A final service of thanksgiving, long delayed by the pandemic, will take place at St. Paul's on April 15 of next year to honor their history and their long-serving priest.

St. Paul's on the Hill in Winchester voted last month to end their ministry as a congregation after 60 years. Six years ago, they began a project to tear down the church and build housing for lower-income senior citizens. They entered the wilderness of homelessness so that others could have homes. Now on the property where the church once stood is a complex of 63 apartments. The facility will be opened and dedicated on the 29th of this month when we will honor the sacrifice made by the congregation for the sake of a vulnerable population. Going forward, members of St. Paul's will worship with other nearby congregations.

To all four of these congregations, we say "Well done, good and faithful servants." And we say "Do not be afraid. God is with you even now."

As one mission becomes a church and as four churches end ministry, other congregations are taking risks, without being crippled by fear, to embrace new opportunities. They are exploring and developing new models for how to be Church in the world in a time when the familiar model of "one priest/one congregation" is rapidly becoming unsustainable.

St. Patrick's, Falls Church, and St. John's, Arlington, remain two congregations while sharing one priest.

St. Christopher's and Cristo Rey will share space in Springfield. While remaining separate congregations, they will share in mission together.

Holy Comforter in Richmond began a Spanish language service to reach the growing Latina population in the capitol city.

Three congregations in the Potomac Region - Olivet, Church of the Spirit, and St. Mark's - are working toward becoming one.

Other congregations are in early stages of exploring ways to maintain their distinctive identities while sharing resources and coming together in ministry.

The stories are many, and there will be more to come as we follow, without fear, in the way that Jesus leads.

We continue to face changes due to the pandemic. We are so done with COVID-19, and it is not done with us. As we emerge from a pandemic phase, the disease is now endemic - a reality we will live with for a long time to come. People are still dying, so we still exercise caution at this Convention and at the Ordination and Consecration of Bishop-Elect Stevenson in two weeks - all for the sake of the most vulnerable.

As we begin to recover from the disruptions of pandemic time, we recognize that people are not coming to in-person worship in the same numbers as before 2020. Some people are simply not comfortable being in groups indoors, and some have lost Sunday habits that are hard to restore. Even in congregations where people come to worship in good numbers, participation in other activities is low. All this is on top of the decline in attendance that many churches were already experiencing.

The pandemic didn't so much cause changes in patterns of attendance and participation as accelerate already existing trends. This is happening everywhere across our diocese, across our Church. It is not unique to any locale. And it is not failure. We haven't done anything wrong. YOU haven't done anything wrong. This is simply where we are right now.

In the face of these realities, we're exhausted, many of us. Of course we are; we've been through so much these past few years. We've been through more disruption and change in three years than some past generations experienced in a lifetime.

So here's something you might not expect of a bishop to say in a pastoral address, although I said something similar in my address last year: it's ok not to try to do it all right now. When we don't yet have the bandwidth to start up all of the ministries we did before COVID, it's ok to go deep with fewer programs rather than staying shallow with many. It's ok just to hang out together, because that seems to be what people are most hungry for - relationships with other people and with God.

This season will not last forever. Slowly but surely, through the power of the Holy Spirit, congregations are building up again. Things won't ever be just the way they were before the pandemic; we've been too changed for that. But new chapters are opening before our eyes. New opportunities are being revealed. So we can rest for a while, relax and trust that God has got this. The earth around us is heading into its fallow season; the leaves were marvelous color this year precisely because the trees are going dormant. We know that they will sprout exquisite new life again in the spring. So we can risk letting some of our activities lie dormant for a little while, so that individuals and congregations can be healed and restored for the new seasons that will come.

As you continue congregational life in this challenging chapter, name whatever fears you face before God and one another. Bring them to the light and name them honestly so that they can't fester and make things worse. Name them boldly, asking Jesus to remember you and show you glimpses of paradise even now. And then leave those fears in Jesus' hands for a while.

As we quickly move toward the next chapter of leadership in this diocese under our soon-to-be consecrated Bishop-elect, there are some things we can be sure of:

First: The rapid pace of change will continue. Some change we can imagine. Some changes are not yet on our horizon. Remember that it's change. Not the end. Not failure. The Church is the living, breathing body of Christ and that body, once slain, cannot die again - not until God says, "well done, good and faithful servants" and invites us into the blessedness of paradise. So don't be afraid.

Second: We will be lifted and empowered as we remain constant in prayer, releasing our fears to God. Prayer is a powerful response to God's claim on our lives, a response that changes us and changes the world around us. Prayer opens us to all that God desires and all that God intends us to become.

Third: Knowing that what we experience is change in the Church and not the end of the Church, and remaining constant in prayer, we will be resilient. We are strong because Jesus is our Savior and because God strengthens us. We are resilient because the Church, which belongs to God alone, is the body of Christ living and breathing and moving in the world.

I move to the conclusion of this address with a personal note of thanks. These ten and a half years as Bishop Suffragan of the Diocese of Virginia, and particularly these four years as ecclesiastical authority, have been filled with challenge and deep fulfillment. I experienced moments of fear during these years. I also experienced wonder. There were times during COVID, during cancer diagnosis and treatment, during my husband's hospitalizations and during political wrangling in our diocese when I felt physically and powerfully sustained by prayer and literally held in the arms of God's love. By that grace, given in the context of community with you, I was sustained and lifted up. I thank you for all that we have shared together. It has been the journey of a lifetime for me. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Do not be afraid. When fear threatens, name your fear before God. Face your fear in the presence of God and the Church and strip fear of its hold. Jesus, who remembered the thief who faced his fear, remembers us, too. Jesus is always with us. And in his presence and power, we see wonders we can scarcely imagine; we see glimpses of paradise even right here and right now.

Amen.