

Listening Anew

October 23, 2020 • *The Annual Convention of the Convocation*

James, Apostle and Martyr

Text: Hebrews 12:12: "Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed."

IT WASN'T supposed to be this way. Just a year ago we were together, dancing. Just a year ago, we had so many plans. It is hard to believe that more than half the year since then has been a year... like this. A year of fear, and isolation. A year of closed buildings, Zoom worship, or gatherings that make us stay so far apart that we can hardly see each other, let alone be the communities we know ourselves to be.

The good news in all this is, we have, together, overcome the hardships this pandemic has handed to us. The church may have left the building, but God did not leave the church.

The clergy of our churches have been passionate, and creative, and inventive, and relentless in keeping our communities connected and together. Our wardens have managed unparalleled challenges in managing the business of our congregations. Our supporters have come to our assistance in new and significant ways.

Since March, the Convocation—led by the Council of Advice—has worked every day to find ways of supporting the ministry of our communities. We created an emergency fund of grants and loans, and surveyed all of our communities to see what help they might need in a financially uncertain time. We developed a grant program to help strengthen the digital ministries in our congregations. We've applied for, and received, grants to strengthen the Convocation's own capacity for digital ministry.

Now, we are in the midst of a second wave of infections from the virus. For the first time in our history, we have to conduct our Convention—our great annual tent of meeting—without actually meeting together. The good news is, over the past seven months we've learned a lot about how to do this. So, yes, we will get through this, and yes, the work of the Convocation will carry on.

But there is no question that the future that lies before us is very different from the past that lies behind us. Social change is usually gradual. The pandemic of coronavirus, and the shattering of our complacency about racism and the church's implications in system of white supremacy, has accelerated the pace of change in unprecedented ways.

These changes set before us the reality that when we finally emerge out of our long isolation back into the daylight, the mission God is calling us to will be changed, too.

As one of my colleagues in the House of Bishops is fond of saying, God has a mission, and God's mission has a church. But we get no guarantees that we are that church. All we get is an invitation to participate in the ongoing mission of God. And that certainly means that we now must listen, and be willing to change.

My sisters and brothers, I think now is the time for us to take on the task of discerning the mission of our church in Europe for the decade ahead of us. These are difficult days, I know; but there could be no better time for us to begin the work of reimagining who we are called to be, or to listen more intently to what God is calling us to do in the communities we serve, as individuals, as communities, and as a Convocation. The world has changed. And if we are going to be faithful disciples in that changed world, we have to take a moment to set down all of our assumptions and listen with ears to hear to God's call.

If the question is what our part in God's mission will be, I do not know the answer. I believe the way our church works is, we must find it together. But I do know some of the questions I think we will have to consider prayerfully as we listen.

The first is, How shall we be people of faith, and share the faith we have, in a culture that is losing its capacity for faith?

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has written of an important distinction between European Christianity and Christianity in America. He points out that in Europe, even the cultural sense of connection to faith has eroded dramatically since the 1960s.

For most people around us, he says, “it just becomes very hard to understand why anyone would believe in God.” But he goes on to say that “we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee.” What is our call in God’s mission in a Europe still searching, yet so sure of its secularist assumptions?

The second question has to do with our historic connection to America. The Episcopal Church has never been the established church in America—but for many years it was the church of the Establishment. When the generations before us built many of the churches that we now gather in in Europe, America was not yet a global power. But for all of the twentieth century, America’s influence in the affairs of Europe, in the culture of Europe, in the thinking of Europe was significant.

Now, that’s changing. Since 1990, America has experienced a steady decline in its presence, its influence, even its reputation in Europe. We are not an American church; we do not represent the United States; but our connection to our American heritage is clear to anyone who spends even a little time studying us.

So we must now decide what it means for us to be the Episcopal Church in a Europe after the era of American globalism—and how we will continue to extol and live out these values that we have, and at the same time be something distinctive as a church in the Anglican tradition, informed by an American history, but unique in the landscape of European Christianity.

The last question I think we must keep in mind as we seek our part in God's mission is related to the first two. It is to understand, and distinguish between, what is essential to our identity as an Episcopal Church in Europe, and what is not.

Some of the things that make up our identity we know are not really negotiable. We are a part of the Episcopal Church. We share in the governance of that church. We elect delegates to General Convention. We use the American prayer book. We are not simply a different department of the Church of England; we are in communion with Archbishop Justin, but he is not the Presiding Bishop of our church. We are part of an independent, self-governing province in the Anglican Communion.

But there are other things that have long seemed to be part of who we are—and which are changing. We're not a church of American expats anymore. So who are we? I'm glad we're finding out, through the survey our task force on Racism has developed. You'll hear about that later today, and I commend it to each one of you.

We think of ourselves as an English-speaking church. We think of ourselves as a liturgical church. We think of ourselves as a church inside a building, meeting together physically.

What parts of that are essential to who God is calling us to be now—and what parts of who we thought we were do we need to leave in the past?

The four task forces we launched a year ago have done tremendous work in giving us leadership in thinking, and praying, and acting as disciples in four critical areas of the ministry God is calling us to. I am so thankful for the work they have done, and so humbled by the immense gift they have given to all of us. I commend to your careful attention the reports they have provided, and the presentations they will be making.

These four areas of ministry now need a larger framework of mission to guide us into God's future. We are being called think anew, and act anew, so that our church will be renewed and respond to God's call in this changed, deeply divided, desperately searching world. I call on us to set ourselves to the task of listening again to God's call to us in mission, and to responding in faith and joy to that call, wherever it leads us.

This second wave of the virus isn't just threatening to our bodies; the worry and waiting, the distancing and isolation is taking a toll on our spirits as well. Especially for those of us who live alone, these are difficult, even debilitating days. In all that we do, we must remember to treat each other compassionately. Christ calls all of us who are disciples to treat each other with care, to be quick to forgive and slow to suspect, and in all things to be ready to help. That is how we become known as the community of hope and healing that is supposed to be the hallmark of Christian people. It has never been more important for us to show this to each other—and to the world.

The tasks before us are great, and our powers seem so small. We cannot yet even see the outline of what God is already asking us, inviting us, to do. But we know, because we have been baptized, that the invitation is there, if we will turn down the noise of our preferences, our certainties, and our assumptions, and listen for what God's hope for us is. So I end with a prayer you have heard from me before, which seems better suited to our present moment than anything else I know:

Lord, as we endure these days, and anticipate the changed world to come, save us from longing for easy lives. Do not give us tasks equal to our powers; but rather give us powers equal to the tasks you set before us. Then the doing of our work will be no miracle; but we shall be your miracle. Every day we shall wonder at ourselves, and at the richness of life that has come to us, by your abundant Grace. *Amen.*