

I would like to begin this morning by expressing gratitude to everyone who has worked to put together this virtual convention, including our host Texas Wesleyan University and their President Fred Slabach, all of the musicians who are contributing both to our worship and the business session (led by Tony Kroll of St Luke's in the Meadow), and my staff – Janet Waggoner, Michele King, Adriana Cline, Steve Grenzow, and Katie Sherrod.

As you know, I serve two dioceses, and this would not be possible without the work ethic, professionalism, and friendship of this staff. It's been a particularly difficult year, given that we have no office. A couple of our congregations know what that is like. Please join me in showing gratitude to my staff for their dedication to this diocese.

By the way, given that this is a virtual convention I'm aware that you can see us, but we can't see you. I understand that many congregations are participating in this event together. So, feel free to applaud when appropriate.

Each year, I recognize those who have served in the leadership of our diocese, and are concluding their service in a particular role, or commission, or committee. In addition to those I name, there are many who agree to continue to serve. I am grateful for the work which keeps us moving forward in ministry together. Those who are concluding their work in various roles, commissions, and committees include:

Jennifer (Tuck) Rodgers, Constitution and Canons;  
Lynne Waltman, Constitution and Canons;  
Bill Stanford, Chair of the Commission on Ministry;  
Amy Haynie, Commission on Ministry;  
Linda LaMarca, Commission on Ministry;  
Sidia Miranda, Commission on Ministry;  
Courtland Moore, Commission on Ministry;  
Judy Graber, Chair of the Finance Committee for six years;  
Fred Morgan, Finance Committee;  
David Shockley, Finance Committee;  
Mary Tracy, Schools Commission;  
Eddie Barnett, Executive Council;  
Laura Fleming, Executive Council;

Melinda Jo Ray, Executive Council;  
Karen Calafat, President of the Standing Committee;  
Jane Dennis, Standing Committee member for six years.  
Please join me in showing gratitude for their faithful service.

I want to recognize some people who have moved – or are in the process of moving – out of our diocese.

Judy Cariker and her husband Leigh are moving to a place in the Hill Country near the border between the Diocese of Texas and the Diocese of West Texas. Judy has served as the volunteer director of the 4Saints Food Pantry; along with Leigh she helped with the Parker County Church Plant; she is currently on the Standing Committee (officially); they have supported the diocese in a number of ways over the years; and they are members of Resurrection in Decatur. Let's show our gratitude to Judy and Leigh.

Bob and Joan Hicks have moved to Florida. Bob was Trustee for the Endowment of the Episcopate, and our first diocesan Treasurer after the re-organization at a time when the diocese was building from scratch. At the time we had no data base, nor access to diocesan records. Bob brought a depth of experience, breadth of knowledge, and theology of abundance at a critical time in our diocese. They are members of St Christopher Fort Worth. Let's show our gratitude to Bob and Joan.

I want to take a moment to recognize a few of our own attorneys. First, I would like to recognize and thank our Assistant Chancellor, Bill Greenhill. During the last year we have had to consider the changes we need to make to our Constitution and Canons in preparation for this convention. It has required a pretty deep dive. Thank you Bill, and Kevin Johnson (chair of the committee), and the committee members for this important work. Let's show our gratitude to Bill.

Frank Hill has served sacrificially on behalf of his beloved parish, All Saints Fort Worth, for over a decade. In the last year, Greg Westfall of All Saints has stepped in to help. This has been difficult and time-consuming work. I wish I was at liberty to say more, but that's the nature of litigation. Let's show our gratitude to Frank and Greg.

Sandy Liser. If I have any pull with St Peter, Sandy will not spend one split second in purgatory. Her sacrificial offering to this diocese goes beyond time, effort, and expertise. She deals with some pretty tough stuff, while being a pastor to the rest of us. Let's show our gratitude to Sandy.

As you know, with the decision of the courts, six congregations have been forced out of their buildings. I would like to take a moment to recognize the rectors, priests-in-charge, and senior wardens of these respective congregations:

All Saints Fort Worth – Chris Jambor and Mollee Westfall;  
Episcopal Church in Wichita Falls – Topher Rodgers and SuzAnne Russell;  
St Elisabeth/Christ the King – Sandi Michels and Harold Parkey;  
St Christopher Fort Worth – Bill Stanford and Marti Fagley;  
St Luke’s in the Meadow Fort Worth – Karen Calafat and William Ledbetter;  
St Mary’s Hillsboro – Paula Jefferson and David Skelton.  
Let’s show our gratitude and support to the leaders of these congregations.

Four of our recently displaced congregations have received amazing generosity from others in the form of shelter: St Matthew’s Lutheran Church, Bishop Erik Gronberg and Pastor Lesley Radius have shown such generosity to St Christopher; Park Place Christian Church and their pastor Alice Hupp have been hosting the Episcopal Church in Wichita Falls; St Luke’s in the Meadow is worshiping at Texas Wesleyan University; and All Saints is worshiping at All Saints Episcopal School. Thanks go to Tad Bird and his staff. Let’s show our gratitude to our friends and partners in ministry.

I want to recognize a priest and professor who is licensed in this diocese, Wil Gafney. On October 28<sup>th</sup> the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney was inaugurated as the holder of the Rt Rev Sam B Hulsey Professor of Hebrew Bible Chair at Brite Divinity School at TCU. She has recently published “A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church.” Let’s show our gratitude for Wil’s presence and ministry.

Finally, I want to recognize and thank my canon, Janet Waggoner. The title, “canon to the ordinary,” is a church jargon phrase that means “assistant to the bishop.” After this convention, Janet begins a long overdue and well deserved three month sabbatical. Her role as the Canon in this diocese is multi-faceted, and it includes work with our attorneys. Her capacity to do that work is rare. Let’s show our gratitude to Janet as she goes on her sabbatical.

This has been quite a year. For most dioceses, dealing with a pandemic and a bitter election year have been on the front burner. And, we had that, too. And, we lost in the courts – lost our name, lost our corporation, lost property and assets, lost our diocesan office, lost a school, lost outreach locations, and six more congregations were displaced. With loss comes corresponding grief, so we are working through

that, too. And we are learning that we can grieve, and continue much needed ministries, and look forward with hope, simultaneously.

Hope. In our tradition when we have a funeral – what our Book of Common Prayer calls the Burial of the Dead – we hear the officiant begin the liturgy with a series of anthems. Often we hear these anthems as the opening procession moves down the aisle toward the Altar; sometimes we hear the anthems after an opening hymn. Sometimes the anthems are said, and sometimes sung.

One of those anthems is taken from the voice and the Book of Job. It reads as follows: “As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth. After my awaking, he will raise me up; and in my body I shall see God. I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him who is my friend and not a stranger.”

The context for this statement of faith and declaration of hope – the context itself – is remarkable. Job’s whole world has fallen apart. He has lost everything. Everything. Even God seems to stand against him. And Job makes this triumphant statement of hope – a deep hope against the evidence, a hope not tied to outcomes, a deeper hope.

This is the kind of hope expressed by the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Julian of Norwich who said: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

I would suggest we can see manifestations of such hope throughout the Episcopal Church in North Texas. For, when one knows deep in their bones that “all shall be well,” one is liberated to be fearless, and generous, and compassionate. When one knows at the cellular level that “all shall be well,” one is free to live with integrity, and gratitude, and joy. And you are fearless, generous, and compassionate. And you live with integrity, and gratitude, and joy. I can testify to that.

Job’s hope is remarkable, especially given the context of his proclamation. If his story was a movie, that alone would be worth the price of admission. I want to stay in this Book of Job for a moment – a book many call a literary masterpiece, and the greatest literary work in the Bible – and turn to its fundamental message.

Forty-two chapters long, forty of which are poetry, the author sets out to address and confront the conventional theology of their time: that success, and social

prominence, and material well-being are rewards from God for good behavior and faithfulness.

That was the underlying theology of their time – the conventional wisdom. And the author of Job, borrowing from a 2000 year old story, and using an inspired imagination, creatively challenges the conventional orthodox theology of his day.

He sets up the story, first, by introducing the character, Job. Job is “blameless and upright, one who fears God, and turns away from evil.” He is blessed with a large and healthy family. He is wealthy, and according to the book, he is “the greatest of all the people in the East.” Even the Lord himself says, “there is none like him on earth.” Job has got it all. Life is great. He is living the dream.

And then our author introduces two more characters to the story: Satan and the Lord. In the story, the Lord is presented as being very proud of Job, as Job is a loyal and faithful servant. And Satan, who is cynical about it all, poses the question which sets up the whole story: “Does Job fear God for naught?” Satan says to the Lord, “Haven’t you put a hedge around him, and his home, and all that he has on every side?”

And Satan challenges the Lord, saying, “take all that away, and Job will curse you to your face.” And in our story, the Lord basically says, “Go for it.” And as the story is told, Satan is authorized by the Lord to inundate Job with unlimited suffering.

The scene is set. Suffering is inflicted. We see four major disasters in the span of one day, and when Job responds to it all by praying to the Lord, Satan piles it on even more.

Three so-called friends come to comfort Job in his grief, and as predicted, Job curses the day of his birth. The friends are no help, for they represent the theology of their day. To them, it’s obvious. Job has committed some sin – unknown to them, but he’s done something wrong – and he should repent, and all will be restored. All three friends plead with Job that the remedy to his problem lies within his own power. He just needs to repent.

And all along, Job claims his innocence, for actually, Job also buys into their theology (the conventional wisdom). To Job, his suffering is undeserved. He’s done nothing wrong. If he can just get an audience with the Lord, he will prove his innocence and regain the Lord’s favor.

As the story goes, Job gets his audience in one of the most dramatic passages in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Lord answers Job out of the whirlwind, saying: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ... Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” This line of questioning goes on for a couple of chapters. I would think it was uncomfortable.

And Job says: “I lay my hand upon my mouth.” And THEN Job repents. Job repents – which means he changes his mind or changes his direction. Job repents from basing his world view and his understanding of God, on the conventional wisdom. Job has come to understand (unlike his friends) that one can only bow before God. We cannot manipulate God with our good behavior to achieve God’s favor. And God is not some scorekeeper in the sky who rewards the good and punishes the bad.

I’m not sure our culture is much different than Job’s. Much of our culture – including the Christian culture – understands the Christian dynamic in terms of “reward and punishment,” or like Job’s friends, in terms of “success and failure” – that success is evidence of God’s favor, and cultivating God’s favor is a path to personal success.

And long before Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the Book of Job puts a corrective on that. The life, teachings, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus (the entire Christ-event) more than confirms that our tradition is not about “reward and punishment” or “success and failure.” It’s about death and resurrection. It’s about dying and rising. It’s about new births. It’s about being born again. It’s about being a new creation.

The theme for this year’s annual convention is taken from Paul’s second letter to the Church in Corinth. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

Throughout Paul’s letters, he calls for a complete reorientation of our outlook on life and the world. Paul saw the Christ-event as the event that triggered a new creation. It’s as if the events from the first chapter of Genesis were re-enacted. He says, a chapter earlier in this letter, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Just as God gave light to the universe through the spoken word at creation, so now God brings light to humankind through the new creation accomplished through the Christ-event. [“Preaching Through the Christian Year”]

Creation is more than a once-upon-a-time event. As we hear in the Revelation to John, God is making all things new – always.

We don’t celebrate the Seasons of the Church Year simply because these events happened once upon a time. Yes, Advent, Christmas, the Epiphany, the Crucifixion, Easter, and Pentecost happened once upon a time. That’s true. But the point is, they happen all the time. Christ comes all the time. Christ is born in hearts all the time. Christ is made manifest all the time. Christ is crucified all the time. Resurrection happens all the time. Pentecost happens all the time.

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

God is making all things new, always – in each one of us, in our congregations and ministries, as well as throughout this diocese, the Episcopal Church in North Texas.

In many ways, you are leading the way. But, you are not alone in that leadership. You are not alone in understanding our context for ministry. In September our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, preached a sermon to the House of Bishops, telling us that he had this sudden epiphany that the Church is in a “narthex moment.”

Narthex. Unless you’ve been an Episcopalian for pretty long time, you may not know what a narthex is in the church context – and besides, many of you no longer have a church narthex. When it was standard practice to build a church in a cruciform design, a church building had a high altar and sanctuary behind an altar rail, then a choir or chancel, then the nave where the assembled congregation sat in pews, and then the narthex. In order to get inside or go outside the church building, one traveled through the narthex.

The narthex was the “in-between room,” the link between the world and the church, a threshold, a crossing, a confusing place, a liminal space, the betwixt and between, the familiar and the unknown.

Bishop Curry quotes Richard Rohr, who says this liminal space is “the realm where God can get at us because our false certitudes are finally out of the way. This is the sacred space where the old world falls apart, and a bigger new world is revealed.”

I find that fascinating, because it’s true whether we are entering the narthex in order to enter the church, or whether we are entering the narthex in order to re-enter the world: a bigger new world is revealed.

To go tangential just for a moment, we will hear that expressed in this morning’s offertory anthem as Chris and Anna Menger of St Alban’s sing the lyrics of Peter Mayer (no relation to me), who after making his communion sings, “everything is a miracle” – “everything is holy now.” It calls to my mind the quote from Albert Einstein: “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

We are living in a narthex moment, a liminal space. Liminal spaces can be physical locations – like waiting rooms, or hallways, or even airport gate areas. They also can be states of being in which we feel different, maybe uncomfortable, maybe anticipatory, maybe slightly unbalanced.

Rohr says, “Liminal space is an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where we can begin to think and act in new ways. ... We usually enter liminal space when our former way of being is challenged or changed – perhaps when we lose a job or a loved one, during illness, at the birth of a child, or a major relocation. It is a graced time, but often does not feel ‘graced’ in any way. In such space, we are not certain or in control.”

Sound familiar? You could write the book. It’s not easy to be in a liminal space, and we’ve been here for months now – if not years – with more time to come as the finalization of litigation outcomes stretches out longer than any of us want. Our legal teams are working hard to bring this to a close, so we can move on to whatever new adventures God is dreaming for us here in this place, in this time.

It’s notable that life goes on in this liminal space – this narthex moment. Congregations are continuing to worship, to plan for Advent and Christmas, to carry out ministries to the people in your neighborhoods and communities. 4Saints Episcopal Food Pantry continues to feed the hungry. Laundry Love continues to help those in need have clean clothes, while also providing community. St Martin’s shoe ministry continues to offer much needed footwear to the homeless. St Luke’s



Stephenville Food Pantry addresses food insecurity on Tarleton's campus. All Saints continues to feed children in Como, make sandwiches for the Presbyterian Night Shelter, feed and nurture refugee and immigrant children, and support schools in Belize and Kenya. Ministry continues.

Meanwhile I have assembled people from around the diocese to do some discernment work about our future. To be clear, this is not group that has any canonical authority to make decisions on behalf of the diocese. It is a group pulled together to reflect on where we are, and where the Spirit may be leading us. It is liminal, threshold, narthex work.

Earlier this year, the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church invited us to make a presentation to one their meetings – by Zoom, of course. Katie Sherrod and Bradley Dyche are the leaders of our General Convention delegation, so Katie, Bradley, and I teamed up to make about a one hour presentation about the Episcopal Church in North Texas.

I want to share with you a portion of my conclusion. I said: “Six years ago in introductory letter to the diocese, I wrote that I did not believe that we are called to re-build the old church, and that I did not think resuscitation was our goal. Yes, Lazarus was happy with resuscitation, and Jesus was as well. And, I'll take resuscitation if I'm honest. But, I said, resurrection is something else. Resurrection is not the restoration of life in the same old body – or as the same old body. In this new day, we are called to participate in resurrection to new life as a new body.”

You have likely heard all that before. But then I said to the Executive Council: “Perhaps I gave them some new theological language. But actually, they knew this already. They were living it before I arrived. And they still are.”

“This diocese knows something about resurrection. We don't know what is next – that seems to be the nature of resurrection. But I can say with confidence – and out of my experience – that through their courage, creativity, and resolve God is raising the Episcopal Church in North Texas to new life as a new body for a purpose beyond ourselves. Because, this diocese matters. This diocese makes a difference. This diocese knows its identity and purpose: to proclaim and embody the undeserved forgiveness, unmerited grace, and unconditional love of God for all people.”

“If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”