

Everybody wants to be strong. In the abstract, human nature makes us aspire to be ready, capable, robust, persistent, and makes us inclined to see ourselves as already possessing these qualities. Everybody wants to be strong until they need to be strong. Then another side of human nature arises and we start looking for a way out. We are ready to run, capable of creative excuses and robust rationalizations for why we can't, or shouldn't, meet the need of the moment. We persistently offer the world what is easy to give, rather than what is urgently needed. So, when St. Paul tells us how strong we are through Jesus Christ, it's still good news, even as it's also natural to greet the news with a less than celebratory attitude.

For Christians, though, we can find the courage to be strong in the knowledge and experience that Jesus has gone ahead of us, into the darkest realms of existence. Sometimes the deepest darkness is the realm where the light of hope is truly stunning. We expect to meet Jesus in moments of joy and places of beauty, and we do. There is nothing wrong with finding Jesus in such times and places. But remember that God's purpose in the incarnation was not to gild the lilies of creation.

Jesus gave up the infinite glory of heaven to be with us, gave up his agency to God, gave up his dignity and his life to a Roman execution squad, and literally went to hell and back to liberate the souls held there. We worship a Lord who goes where he is needed most, but do we follow him there? We call ourselves followers of Jesus, but each of us needs to be honest with ourselves about how much evidence there is in our lives that we do follow him into places that test our souls.

Today's readings are all about the power and strength of following God. The Prophet Isaiah, Saint John, and Saint Paul are eloquent writers, sometimes too eloquent. Their language can be so grand, yet so smooth, that we cruise right by their insights. We can easily miss Isaiah's references. John can be obscure, loading more meaning into a word than we can pull out. And Paul does tend to run on and on in very long sentences. Their brilliant poetic intellectualism can make modern eyes glaze over. Which is a shame because their insights are not only profound but deeply affirming, so we do well to listen carefully.

Isaiah describes an ideal follower of God, who originally would have been understood to be an ideal king of the ancient Jewish state, but whom Christians understand to be Jesus, who is Lord of all. But Isaiah's vision is more useful to us as inspiration for how we *follow* Jesus, not just for how we *worship* him. Yes, Jesus is worthy of gestures of fidelity and obedience from kings and princes, but can we bring ourselves to say, "surely my cause is with the Lord," and, "my God has become my strength"?

Now, John's gospel can be detailed and intricate, so it's fascinating that John never explicitly says that John the Baptist baptized Jesus. It's as if the moment is so sacred, so transcendent, the light of God is so strong there that the best we can do is look at the periphery, like waiting until the sun is completely blocked by the moon in an

eclipse before looking directly at the corona. (John does this again at the Last Supper, never describing the institution of the Eucharist, but rather everything else around it, the setting and the theology, and using Eucharistic imagery extensively throughout his Gospel.) The revelation of Jesus's divinity to John the Baptist is so overwhelming that we can only see it refracted in the Baptist's description. And his testimony does not disappoint. Until he actually sees Jesus walking by like an ordinary man, and all he can say to his disciples is, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

And that was enough. John's disciples heard him, and they became Jesus's disciples. Even though as observant Jews they would have understood that the purpose of a lamb of God is to get slaughtered. By identifying Jesus in this way, John indicated that following Jesus would be a bumpy road at best. In the very first chapter, John foreshadows Jesus' journey to the cross.

Then we have this wonderful moment when Andrew has met Jesus and he tells his brother Simon. The one who would become the leader of the disciples had to be told, invited, by someone close to him. And then when he does meet Jesus, Jesus gives Simon a new name, Peter. The Rock. The strong one. It's a cool nickname, unless you have it, and realize that you're going to need every ounce of that strength.

Saint Paul tells us about that strength. Let's break his long sentences down. Because we are Christians, we have received the grace of God in Jesus. We have been enriched in him in every way. The testimony of Christ has been strengthened among us. We are not lacking in any spiritual gift. Jesus will also strengthen us to the end. God is faithful; so we need not fear the cost of following Jesus. The way will be difficult at times, but it's a way worth travelling — the only way worth travelling — and God will give us all we need along the way, and will receive us joyfully at the end. It's going to be okay.

We at Advent are going to need to remember that. Our strength is going to be tested in a new way. Although our operating budget for last year had forecast a small surplus, we actually ended with a large deficit, and this year's budget will be even worse without serious intervention. Our losses are not due to anyone's misconduct, nor are they due to any single event; expenses were higher than anticipated in many different areas. Advent also has major capital needs, which the Vestry anticipates addressing separately. To be clear, Advent is not on the brink of closure. We have enough money in the bank to cover this year's deficit. But that only means that we have this year to transition to a sustainable budget.

I have already asked our Canon to the Ordinary to send us a CPA with expertise in the relevant areas, and he has agreed to do so. The Vestry plans to present the 2023 budget, or at least an update on it, at a parish meeting after church on January 29, but I can tell you right now that we can't just cut our way to a sustainable budget. For Advent to become sustainable, and still be Advent, our members simply must give more. Our total amount pledged needs to increase by about half again what it is now, and since

some families are already giving at their limit, other families will need to increase their giving by even more than 50%. So even though this is not “stewardship season,” I have to ask you to consider a substantial increase in your pledge, and if you do decide to give more, please tell our parish administrator, Pat Akins, right away.

This might sound like a scary place to be in, and yes, I am concerned. We all should be concerned. But we don’t need to be scared because we remember that Jesus goes ahead of us into far scarier places than a budget deficit, and he does not leave them unchanged. Jesus is both personal and cosmic, intimate and public, one and all. He is all things for all people, God with us, and God for all seasons. So we need never fear. Likewise, our faith is both private and corporate, and like Jesus, our faith transforms us and the world. We strive to follow Jesus, to live up to his example of both humility *and* courage, to be responsive both to the material needs before us *and* to the spiritual needs of the world. These things are worth doing, and we can do them, rejoicing in God’s gifts of faith, hope, compassion, and strength, for God is within us, and therefore, already we are far stronger than we realize.