

If there is one observation of the human condition that holds true across all times, all places, all cultures, it is this: life is difficult. We can be brought low by the cruel realities of nature, happenstance, and fortune. We can fall prey to the selfishness, madness, and malice of other human beings. We can set the most noble goals, with all the optimism the human heart can muster, and the bitter irony of unintended consequences can ensure we still are brought to utter, indisputable failure. And Scripture makes it clear that even if we can avoid all the pitfalls of this world, the spiritual world includes forces that are no match for us.

Just before today's passage from the Gospel of Mark, the disciples tried to heal a girl who was suffering from an unclean spirit. They failed, leading Jesus to intervene and do the job himself. To their credit, the disciples did not give up and leave Jesus, but rather, they asked him why they failed, listened to the answer, and kept following him. Now, they have a new challenge from their master: a mysterious and disturbing prophecy. They'd heard Jesus talk about the death of the Son of Man before, but now there's a bitter new taste in the mix: this Son of Man, before he dies, will be betrayed. Since the disciples did not have our benefit of hindsight, we can only imagine the depth of their unease.

So again, the disciples find themselves in a difficult spiritual situation. Again they try to do the right thing, they try to follow Jesus the best way they know how. They still have zeal for following Jesus. They want to follow him as well as they can. They want to be the best followers of Jesus that they can be. They want to be such great followers that they can at least have complete faith in the depth of their devotion. Each of them wants to be the greatest. And with these commendable intentions, they have failed their master again.

Failure is a strange animal. We avoid it at almost any cost. But only after we have failed at something, when all seems lost, can we let go of old burdens and enjoy the grace of a new beginning, the joy of a future unbounded by the fears of the past. We can be reborn and take on the world with a fresh mind, new eyes, and a pure heart.

Most Episcopal priests, if they're honest with you, will tell you they only started to consider the possibility that they could be called to holy orders after they failed at something else. For me, it was computer science. After passing my first year's sequence of programming classes only because the instructors got behind in grading the assignments and decided to give perfect grades to anyone who had submitted any work at all, I accepted that one, I didn't like comp sci; two, I wasn't good at it; and three, there was no way I would get that lucky again. If I had stayed, I might have flunked out, or I might have been last in my class. I certainly would not have been happy or satisfied. But only after I let go of my own poorly-examined plans, could I be open to what God's plans for me might be.

By the same token, both I and the leadership of this parish had a very different idea of how my tenure here was going to go. But then we discovered problems we had not anticipated, and did our level best to address them. And there was no guarantee that we would get from there to here; some churches in such difficulties would rather destroy themselves than chart a new way forward and commit to sustainability. So we should be proud, and relieved, that your leaders have brought Advent a long way in a short time. While we could not conjure money out of thin air to close our budget deficit — if we could conjure money out of thin air, none of us would have been working for a living — we have ensured that every dollar that comes in will be treated in accordance with best practices, and that the congregation enjoys the transparency of the same monthly balance sheet and treasurer's report documents that the Vestry reviews. The departure of a rector can sometimes engender a lack of confidence in the congregation they leave behind, but given our circumstances, members of Advent should feel more confident than ever. In part because you have all this information, in part because transitioning to sustainable budgets will ensure the parish exists in perpetuity, but most of all because, as the disciples discovered, when things don't go the way we hope, we give God the opportunity to do something better than we would have imagined or attempted, and God capitalizes on these opportunities.

Failure was not the end for the disciples, it was not the end for me, and I don't even think it's accurate to call our situation at Advent a failure — but whatever you call it, don't call it the end. That isn't how God works. Call it, call them all, transformations.

Transformations like these are a sign of God's presence in our lives, caring and active. Only a God of grace would take dark and confusing times of our lives and let them become opportunities for transformation, growth, and blessing. Only an all-loving God would use an experience of potential alienation to instead draw closer to us, and bring us closer to each other. Only an all-powerful God could restore us to new life, time and again. Transformations, if we recognize them, should be times of profound, exciting, hope. So we have every reason to affirm our faith and move forward in confidence.

This is the part when I'm supposed to tell you to have faith like a child, to look within yourselves and find the child-like purity, innocence, humility, and trust. It says so in the Big Book of Mediocre Homilies; I looked it up. But I'm not going to do that. Because, most importantly, Jesus doesn't say so. Jesus talks about welcoming one such child, not becoming one. And also, let's face it, we're adults. While we're never too old to be immature, we are better off when adults put away childish things; being born again does not involve literally re-emerging from the womb. But more subtly, the reason the disciples failed time and again is not because they haven't been trying to find noble qualities in themselves, but because they have been trying. They have been looking to themselves for virtue and spiritual power. Looking at

themselves, when they are literally following Jesus! They seek greatness, and the greatest One that ever could be is literally staring them in the face, but where do they look? At themselves! Egomania can't be diminished through self-examination.

Fortunately, Jesus recognizes this, and responds not with condemnation, but with grace, love, and wisdom. Jesus became fully human not just to fulfill God's plan of resurrection, but also to fulfill God's plan of revelation. Jesus shows us who God is through his words, his deeds, and every aspect of his being. He shows us through the love and the teaching, the acceptance, the inclusivity, the miracles. He shows us what true greatness is. Through being the poor man who needs a meal and a place to stay, through being the one who is rejected, betrayed, and killed, Jesus draws us out of our obsession with our own success or failure and into a relationship of humble self-giving. He shows us that surrendering ourselves fully to God is an act of freedom and the deepest joy. He gives us freedom from the constraints of the world, which tells us one can only be greater if another is less. He gives us joy in defining ourselves with gracious, loving relationships, not with numbers and comparisons. Only in these higher realms of grace and love does the concept of "greatness" even have meaning. Only God can save us from anything, especially ourselves.

So how do we get to those realms, if not by looking inward? Look to Jesus, he tells us how. Jesus's words are full of calls to action. "Be last of all and servant of all." If we change our actions and our aspirations, and our hearts and minds and souls will naturally follow: from the child we welcome into our life to the God we welcome into our heart.