
Surviving Change

**A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Easter 6 – Year A**

When was the last time you experienced a major change? Was it because you lost someone you loved? Were you facing a major life decision, such as a move or new job? Or, was it when you brought home a bundle of joy from the hospital? What did it feel like when there was change in your life?

Or what about this question: What did it feel like when you were confronted with a challenge or a difficult situation? How did you feel? What were the thoughts going through your mind?

Or this question: What does it feel like when you are in the midst of a stressful situation or enduring suffering?

While we all might respond to these questions differently; if you are like me, three themes begin to emerge as you answer those questions: fear, confusion, and anxiety.

In today's epistle, Peter is writing to a church in its infancy. He is writing a church that is facing some challenges, difficulties, struggles, and suffering. So, it is no surprise that Peter addresses fear, confusion, and anxiety.

So, in my sermon today, I want to look at what Peter says about fear, confusion, and anxiety. I believe that Peter offers us a Christian outlook, a Christian perspective, a Christian vision for confronting the change, challenges, and difficulties in our own lives.

Do Not Fear: "Do not fear what they fear..."

Peter had to know that one of the great lines in Holy Scripture is "Fear not." Yet, we live in a culture of fear. When we get home at the end of the day, we turn on the television, or check the computer and notice the headlines: "Breaking News." Suddenly, you are afraid of something you didn't even know you were supposed to fear!

Fear spreads like wild fire. Fear is toxic. Fear is used by politicians on both sides of the aisle, because it is effective. (I am going to leave politics aside, because our email server can't handle the volume if I open that can of worms.) So, I will use a non-partisan example of fear.

Tell me, what happens when you wake up in the morning and learn that there is a 30% chance of snow in the afternoon? Simple: Fear! Fear begins to take over. We cancel schools. We get into our cars and go to the grocery to purchase all the milk and bread on this side of the Mississippi. Fear gets the best of us.

When I was in seminary in New Haven, I remember the first time 3-5 inches of snow was predicted. I skipped class (probably the one on 1 Peter) and jumped into the car to go to the grocery. As I was checking out the cashier asked if I was having a party. I let him know that I was preparing for the snowstorm. The cashier asked if I was from around here. I said, "No, I am from Tennessee." He said, "You have nothing to fear."

Fear can get the best of us. That is why Peter says, “Do not fear what others fear.”

Do Not Be Confused: “Account for the hope that is within you.”

When faced with change, challenge, difficulty or suffering, we often become confused. We don’t know where to turn for answers. Peter reminds us to take “account for the hope that is within you.”

Peter is one of my favorite people in scripture. He does so many things right, but also many things wrong. Sometimes, he does those things at the very same time. Remember, Peter steps out in faith to walk on water, then doubts and starts sinking (Matthew 12:28). Remember, it is Peter who confesses Jesus as Messiah, then denies the crucifixion, making Jesus say to him “Get behind me Satan!” (Matthew 16:23). Finally, it is Peter who follows Jesus into Jerusalem, yet denies him three times before the crucifixion (Luke 22: 54-62). Peter got it right, but he also got it wrong.

I grew up a cradle Episcopalian, but I had a conversion as a teenager reading John 21, the chapter where the resurrected Jesus encounters Peter. Peter had to have gotten up that morning and realized that he had made many mistakes, and perhaps the disciple thing wasn’t for him. He had to have noticed all of his flaws, shortcomings, and inadequacies. But, that day the resurrected Jesus stood before him and said three times, “Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me? Peter responded, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus says, “Feed my lambs...Take care of my sheep...Feed my sheep” (John 21: 15-19).

It must have been a powerful moment, because Jesus stood before Peter confirming that he believed in him, loved him, and accounted for a hope that was in him. So, Peter drawing upon that experience can turn and write to the church and tell them also to “account for the hope that is within you.” In today’s gospel, Jesus tells the disciples that “you are in me, and I in you” (John 14: 15-21).

Whenever you are in the midst of change, challenge, difficulty, stress, or suffering, do not be confused. Know that you are created, loved, and redeemed by God. Peter says, “Always account for the hope that is in you”!

Do Not Be Anxious: “Keep your conscience clear...and appeal to God for a good conscience.”

We live in an anxious time. When faced with challenges, stress, or suffering our anxiety tends to multiply. Peter writes, “Keep your conscience clear...and appeal to God for a good conscience.” That is why in the midst of our anxiety we enter this space and hear that very first prayer: “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit...” (BCP, 355). We pray to cleanse our hearts and minds by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

For Episcopalians, the mind is an important part of a life of faith. We do not check our minds at the door. Actually, we are called to bring our minds into our life of faith. Remember, Anglicanism has a three-legged stool: scripture, tradition, and reason. Anglicanism has always been closely aligned with the academy (Oxford and Cambridge), and Episcopal churches have a history of founding strong schools, like we have here at the Cathedral.

We do this because the formation of the mind is an important part of our faith. Former Harvard chaplain Peter Gomes used to say, we are in the business of forming parishioners and students to have “thinking hearts and loving minds.” Actually, St. Paul writes that “we are to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Philippians 2).

Peter tells the Christian community “to keep their conscience clear...and appeal to God for a good conscience.” Peter reminds them to keep their mind focused on their Christian life.

Keeping your conscience clear isn’t easy. It involves getting up each day and “appealing to God for a good conscious.” That is why one of my favorite prayers in the Book of Common Prayer is the prayer for the fourth Sunday of Advent.

Think of Advent IV. We are all busy Christmas shopping, rehearsing the Christmas pageant, and welcoming our families to town...it is an anxious time! The prayer for that day addresses having a non-anxious mind and focusing on Christ: “Purify our conscious, Almighty God, by your daily visitation...” What beautiful words. They are a reminder to clear our minds and focus on the presence of God in the here and now, even amidst the changes, challenges, and stresses of life.

So, let me wrap up by saying we have come to the end of the programmatic year. Things have changed as we have

celebrated graduations, confirmation, and Holy Eucharist Instruction Class. We are entering summer, a season of more change, and will begin a new programmatic year in August (with even more change). Episcopalians don't do change well! That is why you choose to sit in the same pew each week and prefer a consistent liturgy! It is who we are.

Be that as it may, when we are faced with change, challenges, difficulties, stress, or suffering, let us remember Peter's words and incorporate them into our lives. *Do Not Fear*: "Do not fear what they fear..." *Do Not Be Confused*: "Account for the hope that is within you." *Do Not Be Anxious*: "Keep your conscience clear...and appeal to God for a good conscience."

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