

The Episcopal Diocese of Maine
193rd Annual Convention 27 October 2012 Northport, Maine
Convention Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Ninth Bishop of Maine

Revelation 21:1-7; John 12:23-33

We are a people who believe in new life. We believe that human beings are born in the likeness and image of God and live with God for all eternity. We believe that transformation is a constant possibility for human life; that transformation, for each of us, lies just around the corner, just beyond the horizon. We believe that God has the capacity to make all things new; that God, even in this moment, is creating a new heaven and a new earth. Our hope rests in the promise of God that, in God's good time, God's intentions for our world, and for us personally, will be fulfilled.

The sign of our belief, the sign of our hope, is a cross - an instrument of execution of the Roman Empire. The crucifix was a public instrument of torture and execution which the Empire used to intimidate and control the peoples they conquered, to remind the idealists and the revolutionaries that Rome held the power of life and death.

Rome was wrong of course. Rome did not hold the power of life and death. God does. Even death cannot prevent God from achieving God's purposes.

But there **is** an essential connection between new life and death. God makes new life out of the death of the old. And both are real: both the new life and the death. For something new to be born, the old must go. We who trust in God to be faithful must let go of our old lives and turn toward God's new future.

At this Convention we have talked a lot about being new. We've talked about some ways that we might be more creative, more flexible, more mission-minded. We've considered how we might move our parishes beyond their default future, out the doors and into God's world. There was a great deal of energy in our conversations, excitement even. We aren't entirely sure where we're going - but we are sure God will be waiting for us when we get there.

The thing we haven't really talked about, the thing we need to consider, is what we will let go? What we will we let die? How will we turn from our past to God's future?

For many of us, this seems mostly like a conversation about money. There just isn't enough any more. But money, as you know, is only the means of exchange. Lack of money actually points to something else: lack of people, lack of commitment. Our church lacks money

because the culture around us hasn't heard or discounts our message. Our church lacks money because our members are strapped, are overwhelmed by other demands, other expenses. Our church lacks money because we have been talking mostly with ourselves and not with all those folks who don't belong, but for whom Christ died.

None of this means that God has forgotten us. What it means is that the institutions we have created must change. What it means is that we will need to be the Body of Christ in new and unfamiliar ways. What it means is that we will need to let go of things we love in order to be made new.

The Episcopal Church of God's future will have fewer clergy and many of them will have more than one congregation or more than one job. The Episcopal Church of God's future will have fewer members and more missionaries - baptized persons who respond to Christ's call to serve. The Episcopal Church of God's future will have fewer campuses and fewer buildings, but more prayer groups and house churches. The Episcopal Church of God's future will devote more of its resources to the pressing needs of our communities and less to the maintenance of facilities. The Episcopal Church of God's future will spend more time meeting people face-to-face and sharing God's good news directly with all sorts and conditions of people rather than simply those who come to our services. The Episcopal Church of God's future will be more a movement than a franchise operation.

For many of you and for me, some of the time, that vision feels like death. And it is. It represents the loss of a way of being church that we've practiced for hundreds of years. It's a new heaven and new earth we aren't sure we really want. And yet it's a future deeply rooted in our tradition; directly related to the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." It is our willingness to fall to the ground that matters. It's our willingness to trust that God can bear fruit that matters. We will not bear fruit if all our effort goes into shoring up the church we've always known. We will not bear fruit if we see change as the enemy. We will not bear fruit if our model for the future is the same as the model for today.

What might our dying be like? What might it mean to be willing to fall to the ground? Dying may mean the actual loss of a beloved community, as the members of St. Matthias' have experienced; a dispersal of the faithful to other congregations. Dying may mean the loss of an old way of being church in order to be reborn as a mission station, as Christ Church, Biddeford, is trying to do. Dying may mean the loss of free standing congregations and joining with neighbors to share clergy, worship, pastoral care and mission as Brewer and Old Town and Bar Harbor and Southwest Harbor have done. Dying may mean recognizing that

while the beauty of our traditional worship is a touchstone for us, it is dated and out of touch for many who first experience it, an issue the Cathedral is trying to address with a new service for young adults. Sisters and Brothers, here's the hard truth: Unless transforming lives, our own included, is our reason for being The Episcopal Church in Maine, then we must admit that we are more concerned with the status quo than in the future God holds out to us.

The spiritual task of dying is to fall to the earth knowing that God is already doing a new thing. It is to cast ourselves into that new thing and to take the risk that God will bless it. The cost will be immense, in terms of our comfort zones and our much loved habits, but the cost is already immense in the constant decline of our communities. The way forward is to embrace God's world as Jesus did, to bury ourselves in it, to fall in love with it, so that new life can be discovered and nurtured.

Each of us is a seed of the Gospel called by God to be planted for Christ's sake. Each of us is a Word of hope to the struggling people among whom we live and work. As we return to our homes and our congregations, may we invite the people around us to join us in a search for the fertile ground in our communities. May we do so, not desperately, not frantically, but in the firm conviction that in that yet unknown place lie the roots of a new heaven and a new earth.

May it be so. *Amen.*