

The Road is long and the journey is messy. This could easily be the slogan of how to live a Christian life. Jesus warns his disciples about the perils of their new faith.¹

The disciples certainly could have agreed with this sentiment; they traveled with Jesus through storms, facing crowds, and staring down religious adversaries. When they came to this particular point in the gospel, Jesus wanted one thing to remain clear: put your faith in Godly things rather than earthly structures. Commit to God. Be in awe of God.

Much like tourists in NYC the disciples point out the “large stones and large buildings” Jesus responds by saying, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one Stone will be left.” The disciples are called to be inspired by Christ’s ministry rather than a large building made by humans.

Those hearing Mark’s gospel understood the destruction of the temple. Mark made sure to point out that Jesus provided comfort to the disciples. He points out that the destruction is like birth pangs - and everyone in the hearing would have known what he meant. Birth was not such a hidden act then, it was part of everyday life and the Marian community knew the pain and the anticipated joy. Again, it takes commitment to make it through the birthing process.² Jesus warns about the temptation of the false prophet. He knows the hearts of his disciples. He recognizes that they can be deceived in what and who they trust.³ His speech is about commitment and focus.

When Christianity began Baptismal candidates used to undergo a period of six weeks where they reflected and imagined the journey ahead. They would put ashes upon their foreheads. They dressed in all white. They confessed their sins. At the end of this period they came out and joined the other Christians and were born again - born into a new faith. Washed clean. They knew their faith required a difficult journey ahead of them. They gave up their entire previous identity to become Christians. They were committing their life to Christ rather than to earthly matters. At times this cost them their relationships and even their lives. We only have to look at our epistle reading today to know that Jesus’ focus on commitment is valid.

The whole chapter in Hebrews is introduced by a double question about the Temple. Herod’s Temple, still incomplete in Jesus’ day, had the reputation of being the most beautiful building in the whole world, and was certainly the largest and most imposing structure for hundreds of miles in any direction.⁴ Paul’s warning that they would be ‘hated by all people’ was proven true a “when, in Rome itself, the Christians were viciously persecuted by Nero, being regarded (as one Roman historian put it) as ‘notoriously depraved’, and as holding to a ‘deadly superstition’ Jesus told us we would need patience. We should not be surprised if we are called, through whatever circumstances, to practise that virtue – however unfashionable it may be in our hurried and anxious world.”⁵

How far Christianity has come. And sometimes, I think that we have made the new journey too easy. Sometimes, I think we need to be more selective in what we are advertising about this life of faith. Being a Christian truly is the greatest gift that I can imagine. It means

¹ For more on the warnings of Jesus see <https://www.workingpreacher.org/authors/amanda-brobst-renaud>
Amanda Brobst Renaud
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-2/commentary-on-mark-131-8-5>

² For more information on birth pangs in the ancient near east see *mark for Everyone* by N.T. Wright.

³ *Journey with Jesus* (2012)

⁴ *Mark for everyone* p.178

⁵ *mark for everyone*. P. 179

understanding in Our hearts that the one true God, the Holy one, the Almighty, gave up His life, his son's life to be part of us. It means experiencing the greatest love story ever told. Eternal love. Everlasting commitment.

While it can be tempting to choose secular choices, flashy, easier faith. I have seen and heard the commitment at Saint Dunstan's. I recognize that you know the necessity of committing to God's way. Jesus says stay committed while not providing a timeline this is a parallel to church work we have dreams without a timeline.⁶

Yet this road is messy. Sometimes our friends think we are odd because of our faith. On Christmas Eve when they are (quite enviably in some ways) tucked in with their children reading *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, we are facing the elements and singing in a room lit with candles. When they are hunting for Easter Eggs we approach the altar proclaiming that we are going to eat someone's body and drink his blood. Because he brutally died for us and came back to life.

As Christians, as Episcopalians, we profess our love of God with our continual commitment. This yes to God means that we must say no to other activities.

Being a Christian means sharing our talents. These past months, I saw the committee of the Street of Shops spend hours in order for community members to gather with each other while shopping and eating cookies. I noted the talents of people as they talked with the Health Committee and The Fire Marshall. I saw the labor of those preparing a joyous evening of entertainment. The next morning arrived and some of those same people were helping with a lively All Saints Parade and later a moving mass. This experience showcases the commitment of this church to its purpose of loving God.

The time commitment that many of you make at this church is encouraging. In October and September I was attending Bible Studies, and you took time to meet with each other and deepen your understanding of scripture. Talented leaders prepared these gatherings and your deep commitment was an investment into your faith and this community.

We see in our scriptures a lesson on dedication. Jesus continues to remind his disciples of the importance of their commitments. You have heard them reiterated in the epistle reading. Yet the last of these commitments is equally powerful: the treasure.

How a church spends their money reveals their priorities. I continue to be encouraged by the generosity of this church. For example, going above the budget to provide for major maintenance of the church and for hurricane relief. When I heard the stewardship testimonials I witnessed how these gifts came out of humble faith rather than guilt. This only happens with our commitment.

Going back to the street of Shops, I want to lift up the dinner. Your commitment of time and talent were on display. Your generosity and joy were also evident. You all were willing to pay to have dinner with your clergy so we can support outreach ministries of the church. Your generosity is an inspiration.

Today, when we bring our pledges and offerings forward, let us do so with joy. We are committed to the Lord. Let us remember the words of the Psalmist, "We will bless the Lord who gives us counsel; my heart teaches me, night after night. We have set the Lord always before us ;

⁶ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/authors/amanda-brobst-renaud>
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*because he is at our right hand we shall not fall.”⁷ Let us renew our commitment to Christ with our time, talent, and treasure. Together we can inspire radical generosity with our living and our giving.

Our challenge for this day is to give abundantly so that our ministries can be fulfilled without worrying what to cut from the budget. At the beginning of this stewardship season Fr. Roman said to tell our money to go to church. Now, we need to live up to that directive. We need to live into the generosity and commitment I have witnessed these past few months. Amen.

⁷ Psalm 16:7