

30 Years and Counting

by Peter Cornell (12/18/05)

Good morning. Jonathan has graciously agreed to give me the opportunity to deliver my meditations on the Propers this morning. For those who don't know me, I'm Peter Cornell, and I am honored to have the support of Saint Luke's in my journey to the Deaconate. Aside from the formal sponsorship that is required to be enrolled into the program, I have the benefit of the prayers and support of so many of you, in ways large and small, and I have to say Thank You from the bottom of my heart.

Well, it's almost here. We are anxious for this Sunday to pass; the pageant rehearsals are nearly complete, the Advent wreath is lit, the choir is again in fine voice and on Saturday we'll be back to welcome the Christ Child into our midst. We hope that we will find that balance of family, Church and Santa Claus that seems so elusive in this consumer driven society. We are being updated almost daily on how well we are supporting the economy. But where is the reinforcement of the true meaning of Advent and Christmas? Some would say the secular world is bent on removing Christ from the season that bears his name. For me, this Christmas marks the mid-point in the coursework of the School for Deacons.

Do you all have your plans made? Found that perfect gift for someone special, or at least got the gift card for the right store? I know our family's plans seem to get simpler each year, one special gift for each other, getting the Nativity set out and the tree up, is about it for us. But how about God's plan? Are we prepared for what God has in store for us? How about on the scale that God had plans for King David and a young woman named Mary, betrothed to a descendent of David?

In the Old Testament, we learn of King David. He has finally found peace with the defeat of the Philistines. He is planning to build a temple in honor of the God who sustained him. But God has other ideas and describes a heavenly kingdom that he will build for David. God is offering David greatness that will eclipse any temple and last longer than any earthly dynasty. God is changing David's plans, and it's an offer he can't refuse. God is saying 'no' to what David is considering, in deference to the divine plan that will link David to the birth of our lord.

And in the Gospel, we hear the wonderful story of God's plan for Mary, a young woman betrothed to Joseph, but not yet married to him. God sends the angel Gabriel, who presents her with the news that she has been chosen by God to bear a son, named Jesus. And this son will claim the leadership of the kingdom promised to David generations before. Do you think this was disruptive to Mary's plans? She was all set to marry a carpenter and live a quiet, faithful life, raising a family. In effect God told Mary, 'No, I have a different path for you.'. Nearly a thousand years after God changed David's direction, he puts her on a course to bear his son Jesus, to save the world from sin. And this is God's grand plan for humankind.

In this season of miracles, we should remain open to what God has planned for us. Because whether we are mighty kings or a young woman betrothed, it is not our earthly plans that matter. Because God will change them in a heart beat when it serves his purpose.

And now this discourse is about to change direction. In this Season of Renewal, we have the opportunity to share a special time of joy with one among us. Lets go back to 1975. President Gerald Ford is presiding over the end of the Vietnam War, unemployment is 8%, Saturday Night Live is making its scandalous premiere on television, its Sony versus Panasonic in the Betamax/VHS wars, and Cincinnati beats Boston in the World Series.

It is also a time when a young man, called by God to closer service to Him, graduates from General Theological Seminary. On December 21st, Jonathan Percival was presented by a group of priests and lay person to receive the Sacrament of Ordination. He was examined by the Bishop, found to be qualified and deserving of Ordination and God is asked to make him “a faithful pastor, a patient teacher, and a wise counselor”. He accepts the curacy of Saint Michael’s in Bristol, RI. The son of a career diplomat, born in Afghanistan, and raised in France and Germany, he spent his formative years outside the United States. While some might be awed by this lifestyle, Jonathan was more focused on the normal pursuits of youth. One of his fondest memories was as the catcher for the U.S. little league team, when he led them to victory in a game behind the Iron Curtain in Germany. Raised with his brother and two sisters, his parents instilled in him what was to become a life long thirst for learning.

While I have not been to Saint Michaels, I did find it represented on the web; with ministries of community service, as a member of a local food bank, and the site for multiple twelve step and other community outreach programs. I am not surprised that this is a parish reaching beyond its walls to help the world. As a Deacon, I recognize this as one of the prime missions of the church.

From Bristol, he answered a call to Saint Margaret’s in Staatsburg, NY. I see from their website that they are very proud of their diversity and inclusive nature of their congregation. From there, it was on to Holy Trinity in Stamford, CT, another parish that reflects itself as a diverse congregation welcoming to all. Do you sense a theme here?

Jonathan left the church for a brief time after the death of his first wife, to complete his MBA at Yale, and considered following his brother into business, but finally decided that his true vocation was as a pastor and priest to a congregation.

In 1987, he answered the call to Saint Andrew and the Holy Communion in South Orange. He served as rector there through a time that the demographics of the parish changed dramatically. We are honored to have the former Wardens and Vestry members (the Livingood family) as well other friends here to celebrate with us today. Saint Andrews is now the model of multicultural diversity, and Jonathan helped lay the foundation for that shift during his thirteen years of service. In 2000, we called him to join us as our spiritual leader and pastor here in Metuchen.

Throughout his ordained life; Jonathan has continued to be focused on the spiritual needs of his congregations and the people outside his church. He is both a gentle man and a gentleman in all his pursuits, and the comment from Saint Andrews that he is all about God seems an apt credo for his ministry. We are honored to have such a spirit filled and caring person as our Rector. Along with Evaleon and Roy, we, as his parish family, join in Celebrating his Thirty Years of Godly Service in the Model of our Lord Jesus Christ.
