

Homily – Bishop’s Convention Address

The Rt. Rev. Lucinda Ashby (spoken by Rob Keim)

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Convention Address, 2022 The Rt. Rev. Lucinda Ashby
Welcome to the 42nd Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real! This year, our theme is “Courage in the Wilderness,” which is the third part of our series on pilgrimage.

At our convention in 2019, I introduced pilgrimage as an overarching theme for this episcopate, not knowing that it would be so important to these first years. The lessons of pilgrimage were based on my own practical experiences as a pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago; and there were three that made good sense for us:

In 2020, we talked about “Traveling Light.” COVID provided us with an opportunity to pare down and find ways to do what was essential.

Last year, our theme was “Faithful Ways, Fresh Vistas.” The task we were called to was to look at our traditions and our customs, and hold those in juxtaposition with the innovation and creativity that we are called to in our ministries.

This year, the theme “Courage in the Wilderness” will carry us forward.

So, Courage in the Wilderness.

The gospel reading that you heard during Morning Prayer was chosen specifically for this convention theme. It is the story of Jesus walking on the water. This may seem odd, as we seldom equate water with wilderness. We often envision wilderness as dry and wild, and a lake doesn’t usually remind us of that, especially here in California.

Yet, the passage is about the spiritual aspects of wilderness: the perceived danger, the fear the disciples felt, the need for proof that God is present. Jesus tells them to have courage, for he is there. Jesus commands Peter to walk on the water, and Peter steps forward and does just that—he walks on water-- until he realizes what he is doing.

Peter is able to do what he believes to be impossible and walk in that scary place, as long as he focuses on the fact that Jesus is there too, calling to him.

As pilgrims we are on a journey on the Way of Love, walking literally and figuratively into places that are new and unsettling—whether it be water or dry land. Being in the Wilderness is something that we as Christians understand theologically, scripturally, and spiritually. Jesus goes out into the wilderness for 40 days and lives in that unsettled space himself.

The Hebrews leaving Egypt spend 40 years in the wilderness learning to leave old habits and identities behind as they become God's people moving toward the Promised Land.

Prophets live in and emerge from the wilderness—think of John, who meets people on the River Jordan, crying out for repentance and offering baptism.

What happens in the wilderness is often surprising, transforming and renewing. Yet we must be willing to be in that place walking a faithful pilgrimage with the God who calls us.

It takes courage to do this. The poet e.e. cummings once said, "it takes courage to show up and become who you actually are." Showing up in the wilderness, and being willing to follow Jesus in it, is the way in which we grow in faith and become who we are. We don't need much in the way of resources to be faithful followers of Jesus, but we do need courage.

In the Episcopal church, people often ask for a plan, an end-goal, a product. We have an overall structure of governance that likes order and tradition. As others view our denomination in general, I do not believe that many would put "episcopal" and "wilderness" in the same sentence.

We do though. In the diocese of El Camino Real, we are the Episcopal Church walking in the wilderness.

Our particular wilderness is not a bad place to be

Let's look at our resources:

We have buildings to host ministry---and we are coming up with new and creative ways to use our buildings. Some examples are: Trinity, San Jose, Episcopal Church of Almaden, and St. Paul's, Cambria.

We have a tradition of beautiful liturgy, and our worship is expanding. Most of us now use hybrid models for worship, and parishes have grown lay leadership for daily offices and a variety of prayer services.

For those with their eyes on the bottom line: in the overall picture, our diocesan finances are solid and our operating income remains steady.

Our School for Ministry is thriving under the leadership of Dean Katherine Doar. Both on-line and in-person, in English and in Spanish, the learning taking place is just what we hoped for. If you have contact with anyone taking the Lay Preaching Course, you have probably heard about the excitement and success of the program.

Despite ourselves, we are evangelists, and the good news is out there--partly because of on-line gatherings, and possibly because we're talking more about what matters. Surprisingly, many parishes are growing in membership because people are connecting with good sermons, the beauty of worship and the warmth of fellowship that characterize our Episcopal Church even on-line.

Our Community Trailblazer, Deacon Jen Crompton, is working with St. Benedict's, Los Osos and the San Luis Obispo Canterbury at Cal Poly. Rather than bringing a newly minted seminarian to a parish and training them to be a traditional parish priest, the Trailblazer takes parishioners outside and trains them to become New Church. It's a wilderness experience, challenging and faithful.

We desire connection. Our Communications Director, Carole Bartolini, while attending to known modes of communication in our diocese, has formed a committee to assess the varieties of ways in which we receive and transmit information, especially as this relates to language, age and context.

And we have ourselves, our souls and bodies. Gifted with capabilities and insights, we are well-equipped to walk where God wants us to go.

You are going to see today that we have full slates for our elections to Standing Committee, Board of Trustees, and Commission on Ministry—as well as Delegates to General Convention. These bodies are stewards of our resources ensuring that we have what we need to move faithfully where God calls us.

I believe we have people standing for election in part because these governing bodies choose to gather on-line, and in part because of the energy and drive to become New Church. A beneficial by-product of this is a reduction in our carbon footprint in our diocese.

Being in the wilderness is exciting for some, and scary for others. Every risk takes courage, even when the value is high.

While at Lambeth Conference at Canterbury this summer, with the 650 bishops from all over the Anglican Communion, I learned of people of great courage. I learned of a bishop in Africa who faces violence toward his family and himself on a regular basis. I learned of a bishop who travels 30 hours down the Amazon River in constant danger from pirates. She is committed to this trip in order to baptize and confirm faithful people. I made friends and traded jokes with a young bishop from South Sudan who tends to 44 congregations located in refugee camps and settlements, working in dangerous and very needy situations.

This work is risky and it is essential. It takes courage to be with Jesus in these wilderness experiences.

These examples that I have cited from around the globe are by way of saying that anything we set out to do in our own wilderness here in El Camino Real can be done.

Our hearts need to be brave and our steps, faithful.

Unlike Peter, we aren't being asked to walk on water. Unlike our global friends, we are not being asked to travel among pirates, lead without resources, or live in impossible circumstances. We're just being called to be faithful. To walk with Jesus, and to not know all the answers.

At our Spring Renewal this coming April, we will be inspired to find the place of bravery in our own hearts and the strength in our pilgrim feet to be faithful as we Walk the Way.

As the Diocese of El Camino Real, we will continue to put "episcopal" and "wilderness" in the same sentence, reaching to find the courage that enables us to do so.

And we will do so, with God's help.