

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
November 20, 2011

“Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult”
A Sermon on the Occasion of Our Centennial Anniversary

On November 19, 1911, an eager group of Episcopalians gathered for the first time in their new chapel in the fledgling suburb of West Ghent. It was just five months after the initial meeting in the chambers of Judge William Bruce Martin, and already this determined group had acquired property, overseen the construction of a wooden chapel, and hired a rector. They moved fast because they believed deeply that God was calling them to form a church in this place.

Their faith was rewarded. By the end of 1912, the very next year, the congregation had grown to more than 100 families, with 92 students in Sunday School. Needless to say, the small, wooden chapel would not hold them for long, so plans were made to build a larger church – this church. It took some fits and starts, but finally on June 30, 1921, the congregation gathered to lay the cornerstone. Before they did, they sang a hymn to mark the occasion. It was the same hymn we sang this morning to open our service: “Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea. Day by day his clear voice soundeth, saying ‘Christian, follow me.’”

It was a prescient choice, because the history of this parish coincides with the considerable tumult of the past century. Think of all the momentous events of the last hundred years. St. Andrew's was formed just before World War I. The church was not even a decade into its new building when the Great Depression hit. World War II followed soon after. I found a bulletin from 1945 that lists 88 members of St. Andrew's serving overseas.

Later still came the turbulence and change of the Sixties and Seventies, followed by the events of recent decades leading right up to today. In every era, there were moments of great triumph and togetherness, and there were moments of great tragedy and turmoil; what remained constant, though, in every age, was that people gathered under

this roof and at this altar to seek the presence of God and to strive evermore to follow Jesus over the tumult of life's wild, restless sea.

I'm told that in Charles Joy's parting sermon he reminded you that the nave of this church is designed like an upside down boat. And not a pleasure boat, Charles said, but a working vessel – like a tugboat, maybe, or a Coast Guard cutter – a boat designed to serve others and lead them safely home. That's the way our forebears at St. Andrew's made the voyage of the past century: not in luxury and not even in safety but in a small, sturdy vessel that weathered the storms and followed Jesus over the restless sea.

It occurs to me that what helped them survive – what sustained them on that journey – is the fact that they kept their eyes focused outward. The saints of this church are saints not because they ensured their own safety or salvation but because they cared for the world around them. They listened to Jesus' call in the midst of the storm, and they understood it as a call to mission. In the words of our gospel today, they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, cared for the sick and welcomed the stranger.

You probably think I chose the gospel today to reflect the theme of our stained glass windows, but not so. It was the assigned reading of the day, but that's no coincidence. This gospel speaks deeply of the spirit of this place, and it's perfect for this occasion because it lays out what it means to follow Jesus over the tumult. It means – come what may – remaining faithful to the mission and ministry of the gospel, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

This is the legacy we inherit: Red Cross workers in the midst of war, food drives and shelters during the Depression, friendship and support for people infected by HIV, hospitality for those who are homeless. This is our inheritance and our inspiration as we prepare for another century. There will always be storms facing our world; there will always be rough seas in our own lives; but if we keep our eyes and hearts fixed outward, if we listen for that clear voice and follow Jesus over the tumult, then in time he will lead us – all of us – safely home to that distant shore. Amen.