Sermon, *Good News in a Brittle and Anxious Society*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 10.11.26

Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

I realized early on this week that God was going to have me talk about Moses and what happens when the Moses in your life goes up to a mountain and is delayed and then we are full with anxiety. What happens when the Moses in your life – the one who connects you to God and spirituality – doesn't show up when you expected them to show up? But, let's start with the city of Phillipi in Greece.

A long time ago in the New Testament time, Phillipi was established along the Romans road. Goods would pass by as well as Rome's armies. It was an amazing community and Paul planted a church there. He would come and go because again it was on the Romans road so he would travel in and then travel away. But something happened – Paul got arrested and then was taken away to Rome. The trip that he had planned to go to Philippi passed and the people of that community started to get very nervous about where Paul is.

In the Philippian church there were two church leaders who he called out by name in his letter – Euodia and Syntyche (*sin-tee-chee*). In the anxiety and fear of Paul not returning, they started to tear apart the fabric of the church. Paul wrote to them to "be of the same mind in Christ." I've read this letter in Paul's original Greek and, more than our English translation his love for them really comes through. He misses them, longs to be with them and reminds them of his love. Paul is heartbroken that he can't go to where they are. He can't travel because he's arrested. Because of that, he wrote to them about what they should do. (Incidentally, if Paul had not been under house arrest in Rome for two years, we may not have had his letters like this one.)

In summary, expectations about Paul started the church down the path of anxiety and fear. As a result, they started acting badly to each other. That behavioral pattern is not just for the Church. It happens a lot because it's a human thing to do. For example, the story we hear this morning from Exodus 32 where Moses went up the mountain (they saw him go up) but he didn't bring a whole bunch of supplies. And now he's been gone a long time – longer (much longer) than humans can survive without water. The people started to get very anxious. And what they did was they created a golden calf. Prior to that, the people leaned on Aaron – the second in command. They said, "Give us a different God. This Moses, we don't know what has happened to him." In reaction, Aaron called the people to take all their gold, melt it down, and then created a golden calf. And then they worshiped it. Whether it's the church in Phillipi or the ancient Israelites waiting at the mountain of God, humans tend to freak out when expectations are not met and there's no clear direction in which we are headed.

I've been thinking this week about golden calves and creating idols and anxiety. As a result, the discussion groups this week will be talking about an article from Forbes magazine titled, "America Got Rich and God Sad" by Nick Lichtenberg (published 5.3.26). He wrote this:

"A random-sample poll that has asked Americans the same simple question since 1972: *Are you happy?* What he found about the years since the pandemic stopped him cold. Americans are now at their least happy point in the survey's 50-year history."

At the same time the stock market was having incredible highs, the same time when we're having an amazing gross domestic product growth – all the things that some say should make America happy but it hasn't; in fact, we've become sadder. To dive deeper into this topic, Lichtenberg quotes author Derek Thompson, who wrote this:

"Derek Thompson has a name for all of this: the *Permademic*. The argument that 2020 didn't just cause a recession or a public health crisis — it caused a cultural rupture that released forces that have not been contained. Consumer prices surged 25% between 2020 and 2025, the same increase that had taken 13 years before. Confidence in every major institution — government, media, medicine, education — collapsed simultaneously. And counterintuitively, it was the richest third of households whose sentiment fell furthest."

Let's take a look at that again; the richest one-third households in America over a very short of time had their confidence in every major institution – government, in medicine, in education, in the media – collapse simultaneously. When *I hear one-third of top one-third of American households*, I of course think of Longboat. I think they're talking about us. We have all experienced a rupture that we've never had before in confidence of societies' institutions.

There's more: the article addresses the "aspiration gap" which is the expectations we have of how things will be if we receive a certain level of financial success or business success (aspiration). The gap is that when it is achieved, we don't feel the way we expected. And, the generation of 20s to 35 year olds have a unique aspiration gap – they were told get a college degree and you will 1) like your job, 2) feel secure and happy, and 3) do better than your parents. Now, in 2026, they do not believe their financial success will be as good as their parents. The aspiration gap shows that our college graduates are at an increasingly lower and lower economic rung. And that the expectation is not proving true in this decade.

The aspiration gap, the author writes, "Is not just a story about young adults falling behind their parents. It is a story about society that raised everyone's expectations and then all at once made them feel permanently out of reach."

The author quoted researcher Richard Edelman with this, "A lot of people's presumptions have now been shattered. The presumption that I'm going to do better than my parents. The presumption that all facts from the CDC and the government are true. The presumption that my doctor is infallible. These illusions have turned out to be illusions."

And folks, that is the environment in which All Angels exists today.

Now, I have some good news. Don't worry. I have good news. It's coming. But, there's a little more bad news first. This weekend I was at our annual Diocesan Convention. Bishop Sharf, who was just at the House of Bishops, reported to us that what I listed in this article for you all this morning is exactly what the bishops were discussion last week. Here is how they framed it: society is brittle. American society is anxious. American society today, right now, is dealing with what they call incomprehensibleness.

Things that are incomprehensible are happening. A part of the incomprehensibleness is that what we used to do to make results are no longer making results today. Incomprehensible! The changes that are happening within our medical community, within science, are also incomprehensible. 2020 showed us that a research scientist in Wuhan China can sneeze and the world can catch a cold. Incomprehensible. Technology called artificial intelligence – incomprehensible.

What the bishop raised with us is that American society is brittle, anxious and that we're dealing with incomprehensibleness. When he said that, I started to get really excited. Why did I get excited? Because the church in Philippi was dealing with a brittle society and a time of great anxiousness. As the Roman armies marching back and forth, losing battles left and right – incomprehensible – as the economy was changing, as the value of their currency kept dropping, as taxes from Rome continued to climb, they started to see that their children couldn't have the same house that they had. Phillipi in the 1st century and America in the 21st are experiencing the same thing.

Here's why I am excited: in the time of a brittle and anxious society, the message of peace from our Lord Jesus Christ grows rapidly. When Phillipi was feeling brittle and anxious, the traveling Jewish preacher Paul brought the message of Jesus Christ. The movement of this faith that brought peace and order and joy to people's lives in the very environment of anxiety and incomprehensibleness. And so this movement of Jesus Christ, some call it a church, started and is rolling along and works really well in brittle societies; it works really well when people are anxious and when things seem incomprehensible.

In contrast, when society is strong, non-anxious, and things seem to roll along as normal, the Message starts to get smaller and to shrink. But in times of brittleness and anxiety and incomprehensibleness, that is when the flame of the Holy Spirit starts to shine!

So, as you can imagine, I was super excited as the bishop started talking about this. The stuff that's happening on Longboat in society, with a collapse of trust in institutions, is okay because the flame of the Holy Spirt shines in that darkness. But then, the bishop said, "What happens if the Church itself looks like society; what if the Church is brittle, what if the church itself is anxious, what if the Church itself is caught up with things incomprehensible."

So church, I'm going to start with King Solomon and the writing of the book of Ecclesiastes. The very first chapter, Solomon wrote, "There is nothing new under the sun. Nothing new. The rain forms, it goes in the rivers, the rivers flows into lakes, lakes go into the sea, and then the rain forms again, and it starts all over again. There's nothing new under the sun. The sun rises in the

east and will set in the west and tomorrow it'll rise in the east. It'll set in the west. There is nothing new under the sun! Everything we are experiencing today has happened before."

This is the response to society that is dealing with incomprehensibleness – there is nothing new under the sun. Is AI a revolution or are we worried like we were with Y2K. Anybody do Y2K preparations? Yeah, the insurance industry freakout a bit; we were a little anxious; but with some hard work and dedication, it all went fine. We no reason to be scared. We worked hard so nothing bad happened. Likewise, the Church has been through everything – there's nothing new under the sun. At one point, the revolution of the radio – that one voice could go across the nation, across the Atlantic, to millions of people; that seemed incomprehensible. How about television? How about the printing press? What used to be all handwritten out now can be published and sent out and distributed. Incomprehensible! And yet the church has survived and done very well with every single incomprehensible thing that has happened. We are on the internet. We are on the radio. We are on TV. With the printing press, what was the number one thing published – that's right, the Bible. What's incomprehensible turned out to be really good news. And so, church, whatever it is that we're facing today, even if it's civil unrest, it has happened before. We have been here before and with the faith that we have we will get through it.

What about anxiety and brittleness. Let's take a look at what Paul wrote to the church in Philippi with their anxiousness and with their brittleness. Paul wrote this, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice." This is directly from the Hebrew scriptures. This is directly from the light of God that was given to all the Jewish people to spread throughout all the nations. And we are a part of that light and we are still spreading. It has been spread. It is being spread and it will be spread. We are a part of this light that is going out to all the nations. And the repeating message is rejoice in all times and in all places rejoice. And Paul says in case we forgot, "Again I say rejoice!" We are to rejoice in all times and in all places – in all anxieties, in all times of brittleness, at all times of incomprehensibleness – rejoice. It is not a suggestion. It is a command. We are people who rejoice.

A few of you have been there when I've heard that one of the people we love from this congregation has passed away. When I found out that Jan Webb (altar guild director) passed away, the first thing that comes out of my mouth is, "Thanks be to God." I rejoiced; even though inside I'm heartbroken and I'm sad and I don't know what to do and I wonder what the altar guild is going to do, I am commanded to rejoice. Thanks be to God. She has been released. She's in joy. She's in heaven. And the One who watches over her will watch over us. We still have an altar guild. Amen. So, Paul says, "Rejoice." And this is one of the hardest things to do, which is why it's a command. God is commands us to love God with all of our heart and to love our neighbor as of ourselves because we do not do this naturally. We have to be told/reminded to do it. And so likewise, we must rejoice.

The next thing that Paul writes, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." I'll repeat it. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Rejoice and let your gentleness be known. In a society that is brittle, be gentle. In a society that is full of anxiety – be gentle. Be gentle with everyone, especially those who you just cut off on Gulf of Mexico Drive. Just be gentle with the person tailgating you. Be gentle with the person that's in front of you that's going 18 mph and then 38 and then 12. And be gentle and rejoice. Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everybody.

The next on his laundry list of what to do when you are feeling brittle and anxious is to remember “The Lord is near.” We like to put upon humans our responsibility for worshiping and knowing the Lord. We like the Moses’ and Paul’s in our life that bear the responsibility of God in our midst. But that was not God’s plan – that’s humans acting the way we do. Instead, God has set up a decentralized system so that the Lord is in here (in us). So starting with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, God gave the law. God proclaimed how we are to live. And that's how we live in each household. It is decentralized out to the household, to the children. It is decentralized to the oxen and the fields and to everybody – we are to rejoice and to be gentle and to remember that the Lord is near.

But what do we do? We continue to raise up leaders and put expectations on them and then when they don't do it, we freak out. And, again, in response, God gives us a decentralized system. Today's parable was confusing. Jesus gave the answer to it only to the disciples and then told them to go out and you tell the people. At the feeding of the 5000, Jesus blessed the bread. He broke it and then what? He gave it to the disciples to bring to the people because he has a decentralized system. Jesus could not have handed food to 5000 people – He decentralized the distribution center to the people of the Church: Go out, go out and give that food.

If the system was not decentralized, and then he's crucified, the movement ends. A decentralized system moves it out to all of us. Remember, the Lord is near. The Lord is with you. There’s nothing new under the sun with the Lord. Rejoice, always, be gentle, the Lord with with you.

If you are in a time in your spiritual life where you are wondering *where is my Moses*, where did he go? Where is my Apostle Paul? Where did he go? Let me remind you: The Lord is near. The Lord is with you. The Lord is in you. And for you, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and I adore, we are living in a brittle, anxious society who needs our gentleness now more than ever. With the aspiration gap of what we expect for happiness, and what it really is, the Lord is near. Remember to rejoice. Again I say rejoice.

Paul concludes this section with prayer. Remember to pray. Thanksgivings, supplications – which is a fancy word for requests – Lord, please help. And remember pray with thanksgiving. And then Paul writes, "And when you do this, the God of peace will surpass all understanding. That peace will guard your heart. That peace will guard your mind in the love of God."

So my brothers and sisters in the faith, rejoice. Be gentle. The Lord is near. Raise everything in prayer because the God of peace will surpass all understanding.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.