

A Celebration of New Ministry

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Milwaukee, WI

Preached by The Rev. Kevin M. Goodman | April 26, 2016

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Numbers 11:16–17, 24-25a; PS 134; Ephesians 4:7, 11–16; John 15:11–15

My name is Kevin Goodman. I serve as the Associate Rector for Children's Ministries and Day School Chaplain at St. Chrysostom's Church and Day School in Chicago. It was there that I had the very good fortune of working alongside Ian as we moved through an interim period, preparing our congregation to welcome a new rector. When the new rector was called, he kept us, and we had an exciting two years of ministry together.

I got to know Ian and admired Ian's strong pastoral skills. He has years of relational experience and this serves the Church well. A skill of Ian's I wished I had is his ability to think quickly and make a decision. For me, often times the boat has left the dock and I am standing on the shore saying, "Wait! What just happened?" Ian's gift of leadership comes from a strong and stable vision of God's hope for ALL of God's people.

As Ian showed off St. Mark's to me yesterday, as I heard his vision, as he shared yours, I couldn't help but feel the spirit of God overwhelming me. I felt convicted, reminded, converted, called again!

That is what the Celebration of New Ministry is.

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away," there were these things called maps. They helped us get around. Navigate a trip. Go on a journey. The map was contained within 38 unique folds. We would slowly open it up, revealing roads and rivers, and highways and byways. The map was crisp and neatly folded. It would never be folded this way again.

Times were different then.

Twelve of us would pile into an old station wagon. We didn't have to wear seat belts. We would sleep on the floor or crawl up on the dashboard behind the back seat, and play on top of the speakers for the 8-track, feeling the sun on our face.

The car had everything we needed for the journey—food, water, blankets, pillows, and more food.

We would stop at a gas station. The attendant would come out, "fill it up," check the oil, wash the windows, give a friendly greeting. And if you had just crossed over into a new state, would give you a brand new map.

This Celebration of New Ministry is St. Mark's checking out the map. We pause a moment. We welcome Ian. We see what is already packed in the car, what we need and what needs to be recycled. We look around, holding up everybody's gifts, asking God to make them holy. Then we decide, as a community of Christ, where we go next.

It is delightfully appropriate, celebrating during Eastertide - a season where the Church rediscovers the Book of Acts, - a wonderful road map of pilgrims on the journey of faith. We meet people, just like you and me, standing at the crossroads, looking for Jesus.

So here we are, at the corner of Downer and Hackett—arguably one of the most beautiful intersections in all of Milwaukee—asked by God to accompany one another on a way of life called Gospel living.

God created this world and said that it is good. Do I believe it?

I was baptized in water, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I am beloved. Do I know I am worthy of love?

I go to Church to be fed, to remember, to hear the story, to find my place in the story. How do I find my place? Where do I fit in? How do I invite others along?

The map of faith is complicated. Sometimes I am on the right path. Other times, I take the wrong exit! Sometimes, I just need to pull into the Rest Area and take a break. I am moving so fast. I miss Jesus on the road. But Jesus is always with us when it is dark and we have lost our way.

In our uncertainty, we invite the stranger in for a meal. “Join us.” “Stay with us.” “Come and break bread with us.” Then suddenly, we recognize Jesus. We remember him through the breaking of the bread and in the prayers.

People of St. Mark’s, who needs to be welcomed in? Who has lost their way? Who doesn’t know, or has forgotten, that Jesus is on the road with us when we feel lost at the crossroads.

In the book of Acts, Philip relies on the Spirit to be his map. He is suddenly traveling on a wilderness road. Just beyond Phillip’s vision, something is traveling fast, kicking up the dust. It is a carriage. An unknown voice from within it reads, “In his humiliation, justice was denied him.” Phillip runs to jump aboard. Who is quoting Isaiah? It is an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the queen. Phillip is taken aback. Like all of us celebrating tonight, the Ethiopian eunuch wants to know and understand God.

What am I to do with this body God created?

How is my God-given dignity stolen from me by discriminatory laws?

Who walks the road with me?

People of St. Mark’s, you have the gifts, you know the answer to the eunuch’s question.

There is a whole world telling the people of God that they are worthless, scary, abominations, and unclean.

“What is preventing me from being baptized?” the eunuch asks. Philip and the eunuch move down to the water, and Phillip baptizes him, welcoming him into the community of Christ.

St Mark’s, I pray you go to the edges of town. Find the oppressed. Love them. Bring them in. The Episcopal Church has a lot of answers to the questions and complexities of the journey of faith. Go beyond this intersection and call them to this table.

Down the road, in the town of Joppa, lived a generous seamstress named Tabitha. She made beautiful clothes and believed that all of God’s people should be warm and comfortable. She sewed for the poor, often walking down the street handing out her designs to the people on her path. When she died all of Joppa went into mourning. Moved by the Spirit, Peter found her house, made his way up the stairs, encountering people packed in tight, weeping and crying over Tabitha’s body. Peter got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, “Tabitha, get up.” She opened her eyes and saw God’s world in a new way.

Who is dead around you, stuck in a valley of dry bones?

God is calling you, St. Mark’s, to find the dead and open their eyes.

Saul was on the road to Damascus. His holy mission was to find and gather up those Jesus-followers, and return them to Jerusalem for a religious inquisition. The Law serves and protects and keeps everything in order. The Good News proclaimed by the people of Jesus just does not cut it.

All along the highways and byways, just beyond the sudden twists and turns, the people of God cry out, “Why do you persecute me?”

Barely visible under the street lamps, we see the hungry and the homeless, needing food, shelter, and access to medical care. Leaders we elect easily forget they are called to serve all people. No schools. No hospitals. No food. Poisoned water.

The scales on Saul’s eyes thicken and harden. He marches on to Damascus, “breathing threats and murder against” the people of God. But suddenly, Jesus calls out, “Saul, why do you persecute me?”

With the flash of light, there is a burning, blinding, sickening sensation.

Saul drops to the ground grasping, seeking, searching, touching, hoping to find anything that feels familiar.

When he is the most blind, most disoriented, most unsure, most insecure, most anxious, and most vulnerable, God sends someone to anoint him, to ordain him, to commission him, to convert him.

He is no longer Saul. Because everything that was him, his identity, his orientation, his tightly-held beliefs, his understanding of the law—all of this, and many more things are turned upside down—converted! None of it remains. Nothing that was Saul is there and God removes the

scales from his eyes.

A new name is given him—Paul. Beloved by God. Preacher and friend to Jew and Gentile, servant and free, I was blind but now I see.

Good people of St. Mark's, what in you begs to be converted? Where are there still scales on your eyes?

Tonight's Celebration of New Ministry is an invitation to the Spirit to do its work and change me!

I've been converted before. Personally. Professionally. Vocationally. Where suddenly, I was totally blind. Nothing around me was familiar. Others took me by the hand and led me to where I didn't want to go. They told me things I didn't want to hear. I wasn't in control of anything. I knew nothing.

But the good news is, God is in it. God is in it always - Creating us. Sustaining us. Giving us new life.

So people of St. Mark's, our sisters and brothers in the book of Acts still powerfully speak to us on how to be the Church of God. We have a good map. It doesn't mean the path is always clear, or that we know where we are going all the time. But we know the story. And we know how the story ends. With life. With love. With God.

Jesus walks with us. We are converted, over, and over and over again.

This Celebration of New Ministry is an invitation for all of us to be converted—again!

Are you ready?