

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on October 16, 2016	On the occasion of the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24C

The 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Christ Church  
Faith in Spotsylvania

Thank and welcome folks

When I first entered seminary to study for the priesthood I was really looking forward to studying theology. To be perfectly honest, I wasn't interested at all in studying the Bible. Not that I had anything against the Bible, you understand. I just wasn't all that interested in it. And the thing I had the least amount of interest in was Church History. I was never good at history and the thought of trying to memorize the names of popes, or Archbishops of Canterbury, or anything like that truly turned me off. Now if there is anyone here who has ever been to seminary, you know that I have just described the first year's course of study—Bible, Church History, and Systematic Theology. Well, in a short amount of time I had learned two things: first, that I really wasn't very good at Systematic Theology, and second, that I had absolutely fallen in love with the Bible. As it turns out, Systematic Theology is all about systematically explicating the doctrines of the Church, and the Bible is full of wonderful stories. I really like stories.

As I became more and more familiar with the stories in the Bible I began to realize that this collection of stories was in fact the story of how God has loved God's people for a very long time. It was like an old family album in which had been collected the stories of multiple-great grandparents. They were stories that told us something about who we are because they told us something about where we'd come from, the same way the stories of an old grandparent's experiences back in their old country, a place and time we will never know, can help us to understand the present moment with tremendous clarity. I came to know the stories in the Bible

as my own story, not that I have ever spent the night in a lion's den or been swallowed by a great fish, but these stories are the deep background to my own; they are essential to me for discerning any meaning from the story of my own life. Realizing that, I suppose, is how I fell in love with the Bible.

Then something truly remarkable happened. As I was studying Church History one day, my least favorite subject, I realized something. I realized that God didn't stop loving and interacting with his people after the Book of the Acts of the Apostles was written. In fact, in a very real way, the stories that I was reading that were known as Church History were actually the same story that started way back "In the beginning..." in the Bible. The line between what I thought of as Holy Scripture and what I thought of as boring details about the mundane goings on of the Church, simply disappeared. The two were one and the same. The story was just one ongoing, epic saga about the way in which God has chosen to interact with his creation and his creatures. There is no difference between what happened thousands of years ago in a middle eastern desert, and what happened in England in the middle of the sixteenth century, and for that matter what happened just last week. The truly remarkable thing about this was not that I had a sudden new-found appreciation for Church History, but that I suddenly saw myself as part of this complex drama, and not just part of it, but responsible for my part in it.

That's an important thing for all of us to keep in mind as we gather to celebrate the story of Christ Church over the past 175 years. The story of this little parish in rural Virginia is part of that broader story of God. It is part of the beautiful unfolding of God's will and God's longing for communion with his people. As we look back and remember the stories of the people of this parish we remember our own story. Let's remember now, just a few random bits and pieces from the story of Christ Church.

We sit within walls made of bricks that were manufactured by slaves, probably in a brick work about where Robert E. Lee Elementary School is located now. Those bricks themselves tell the story of the battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse in May of 1864, when this building was only 23 years old. Imagine the wounded of that battle lying on these pews. The people of Spotsylvania struggled to rebuild after the war. The Harrison family, buried just outside these walls, had their farm completely destroyed. For most of the history of this parish they did not have their own priest. The priest from St. George's in Fredericksburg would ride out here a couple of times a month to preach and to lead worship. There was a time in the middle of the twentieth century when Christ Church was in danger of closing its doors, and I believe it did briefly close up, but a handful of women refused to let the church stay closed. In the 1970s, Christ Church had its first full-time priest. I am only the fourth rector of this 175 year old parish. The 1980s brought growth to Spotsylvania and change as they added onto the original church building, doubling its seating capacity. These things are all part of the story of Christ Church. There are many present who have their own memories and can tell their own stories.

Whether you have been part of the life of this parish for twenty or thirty years, or if you've been here less than a year, you are still part of the story of God working out God's purposes in this place. It's part of the mystery of the Church that as we are all joined to Christ, we are joined one to another. Our stories are woven together. We share a common history. There may be parts of the story of the last 175 years of this parish that we would want to change. There are certainly lots of stories that we don't know, and will never know. Yet all of the flawed, faithful people who were involved in those stories make up the Body of Christ. They live forever in God's memory. And all of their imperfections have been redeemed.

The most important thing for us to remember on this occasion is not the names and the deeds that make up the history of this parish, but the fact that we now bear the weight of that history. We now bear the responsibility to continue the story. No matter what it has been, the story of Christ Church is now us. What it will be is now up to us.

At the end of this service, we will place a time capsule to be opened in twenty-five years at the celebration of the bicentennial of this parish, a package sent to the future. We put a lot of consideration into what we would put into that time capsule, what part of our story do we want to be remembered. In a very real sense, what we do and say every day is a time capsule that will be unpacked in the future. What stories will they tell about us in the future? What lessons will they learn from our actions and our words? Will they look back and say that we were faithful? Will they say that we were good disciples of our Lord Jesus? Will they thank us for our contributions, as we do today thank those who came before us here?

I don't know what the future will bring. But I have confidence that Christ Church will endure, and that the Good News of God in Christ will continue to be proclaimed here, in word and deed in the power of the Holy Spirit. In our Gospel reading today Jesus talked about the need to pray always and not to give up. I am confident that the people of Christ Church will continue to pray in this holy place. They will continue to incarnate the love of God. They will continue to be the Body of Christ, in communion with those who came before, and keeping in mind those who will come after. Jesus said, "When the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" I say, "Yes, he will. In Spotsylvania, at least."

Amen.