

The Rev. Canon Jessie Gutsell Dodson
The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
October 20, 2024

It's so wonderful to be back in this holy space with you all. For those who don't yet know me, I'm the Rev. Jessie Gutsell Dodson and I serve as Canon to the Ordinary here in the Diocese of Ohio. But before that, I was one of your Associate Rectors, And it was in this church that I grew into the priest I am today, And where my husband and I welcomed and baptized our two sons. It's so good to be back.

As I come, I bring you greetings from our Bishop Anne as she worships with the congregation of Grace Church in Sandusky this morning. In this role I have the privilege of traveling all around our diocese, to all 80 congregations spanning from just north of Columbus, all the way to the borders of Indiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. As I go around, people often ask me what my title "Canon to the Ordinary" means – what exactly my role is on the bishop's staff.

For those who need a refresher – A canon is anyone who works directly with a bishop. And "the ordinary" in my title refers to our Bishop Anne – the one we elected to keep the order – she is "the ordinary." In my role, I help Bishop Anne to keep the order. As you know from living a messy human life, "keeping the order" looks different every day.

But my main responsibilities are to serve as our diocesan chief of staff and to take Bishop Anne's vision for the church and our diocese and create strategies to bring it to life.

As part of my role, I also oversee transitions in congregations -- That's one of the things that brings me back to you today: To be with you in this transition between rectors. To support your vestry as they continue to lead, To assure you of the care and support of the Bishop and your diocesan companions, And, perhaps most importantly, to share in the celebration of the Eucharist and worship of Jesus together.

As luck would have it, today is the kick-off to St. Paul's stewardship campaign. Beginning today, you'll be asked to engage with the stewardship theme: Imagine the Possibilities. As I learned about this theme from your clergy and staff, I saw the many connections it has with your current reality as a parish in transition. This is a time of imagination, of possibilities opened and visions renewed.

It called to mind for me what I've spent much of the past year preaching and teaching to other congregations in our diocese in a similar chapter as you.

All of these congregations in transition are doing that same holy work –Imagining what's possible, what could be next.

As I preach and teach congregations in transition, I've been drawn deeper into the concept of liminal time. Revs. Gabriel and Patricia and I were just recently talking about this very subject in a clergy

gathering a couple of weeks ago. I don't have to tell you this, you know it already, but you're in a space "in-between." You wait, in between who you were – with Jeanne as your rector - and who you will be. The liminal space offers unique challenges and opportunities.

A church consultant, Susan Beaumont, writes about this in her book "How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going." She describes a liminal season as "challenging, disorienting, and unsettling. We strive to move forward with purpose and certainty. Instead, we feel as though we are trudging through mud, moving away from something comfortable and known, toward something that can't yet be known."

And yet, by the same token, Beaumont writes: "liminal seasons are exciting and innovative. The promise of a new beginning unleashes creative energy, potential and passion. All truly great innovations are incubated in liminality. God's greatest work occurs in liminal space"

That's where you are: Entering the trudging-through-mud space of liminality, Where God meets you and does God's greatest work.

And my goodness, I cannot imagine a better framing, a better moment to do the work of reimagination.

This moment – this liminal space – is alive with potential. God is active and moving and change is possible in a way it isn't typically. And can you imagine the possibilities that could come from this moment?

What a renewed vision and mission for St. Paul's might be? What your dreams are for who God called you to be? And how God calls you into relationship with one another and with your neighbors? How you can imagine new ways to be seek, serve, and love together?

I pray that God would unleash creative energy and imagination within you all in this season. And that you will be moved to support the work that God's doing through your own gifts –through ministry and leadership in this time and through your financial gifts, So, this work of imagination and innovation can be sustained and supported.

I want to weave our gospel text into this conversation this morning, which, in its own ways, takes up questions of imagining possibilities from an entirely different angle. This interaction takes place between two disciples and brothers – James and John- and Jesus.

The brothers come up to Jesus and say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." What struck me was how Jesus responded to this interaction. He said: "What is it you want me to do for you?"

This one poignant question that rings through scriptures and repeats itself in other places in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus opens himself to the people with whom he serves – What do you want me to do for you?

James and John take a moment to consider the options, to imagine the possibilities, and then they settle on their answer: What do they want? A seat of power. Privilege. A place of honor beside Jesus.

In response, Jesus challenges them – you don't know what you're asking when you ask to sit beside me and lead. Are you really able to do all that I'm asking? To drink the cup I drink and be baptized as Jesus was baptized?

“We are able,” they say, with a crumbling sense of confidence, I can imagine. Jesus took them at their word and said it would be so. The other disciples overheard this interaction, and conflict and envy ensued until Jesus offered a corrective.

My friends, Jesus's question is the same for us here today: What do you want him to do for you? What do you want Jesus to do for St. Paul's?

Much like James and John, this question stops me in my tracks. And I realize, I don't really know. As a church, we don't often ask this question. We don't know how to answer it. And yet this is the question of the moment – of transition.

It's not just about what kind of rector candidate your search committee and vestry will find, It's not about what new initiatives may spring up from this moment in the history of the parish.

We go all the way back to the beginning –Imagine the possibilities, What do we want Jesus to do for us? How do we want to join Jesus on that journey? Are we ready for the road ahead? Can we imagine the possibilities beyond our own successes and failures?

As I sat in prayer for you this week I recalled a famous prayer from the 16th century. It resonated with me, and I hope it gives you some inspiration as you seek to answer Jesus's question in this liminal time, As you imagine together what's possible.

Let us pray.

“Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess

We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love”.
Amen.