

Lent Is the Season to Try Again



This season of Lent brings us another opportunity to try again: Lent is the season of prayer, self-examination, fasting, and meditating on scripture. It's a time to get back to the basics.

This month's Messenger includes words of "Didymus" from a church newsletter so long ago, asking us a hard question: I may be Episcopalian, but am I truly a Christian? Lent is the season when we try to answer that question.

To be a Christian means we seek to follow Jesus. That

means we seek to deepen our relationship with God through Christ, and to pattern our lives after the way of Jesus. We pray, we practice our spiritual disciplines and we take time for forgiveness and works of mercy. And we practice hope and faith in the resurrection – no matter how bleak things look, we do not lose heart. Whether politics or our personal lives go our way or not, we trust in God – and work with God – to bring about redemption.

Do our lives show this pattern? Would others be surprised to hear us claim that we are Christian?

There is always time to ask for God's help. There is always time to begin again.

— Mother Kate

Prayer Warriors of St. Michael's

The arrival of in-person Contemplative Evening Prayer during Lent on Wednesdays at 5:30 in the Chapel of the Angels expands a St. Michael's prayer circle that encompasses morning, noon and night.

The Prayer Chain

You are being prayed for. Your needs are heard. Your joys are celebrated. Your loved ones are remembered. You are part of a faith community, and a devoted group of parishioners prays for those requests in a digital prayer chain that's updated every week.

"Let us pray for those who mourn ... for those who are ill or suffering ... for those seeking employment," come the messages, "for those expecting a child ... for those who might be preparing for marriage ... or seeking a vocation in the church." Wherever two or more are gathered, as Jesus said, and indeed this can be online.

If you have a need, share it with our pastors and they will let the prayer chain know. Better yet, answered prayers are celebrated. Members often respond, spelling out their prayers in the email, sharing the words they share with God.

"Generous Lord, we know that you hold all St. Michael's people in the free and light-filled infinity of your love," is the concluding prayer. (The prayer chain prefers to remain anonymous.) "Make us bold as we follow the teachings of your beloved child, the Prince of Peace, and courageous as we seek the Holy Spirit's wisdom. We witness your love as light as we struggle through the darkness." Amen, Amen, Amen.

— Rick Hamlin



The great Tiffany windows in the apse show the triumph of St. Michael, with his archangels around him. At far right is Selathiel, the patron saint of prayer and worship. See page 2 to learn more about the iconography of Revelation in the sanctuary.

Healing Prayer

In whatever way God guides our words, members of the Healing Prayer ministry offer prayers in the chapel during the 10 a.m. service on Sunday. When you come to the altar rail, there may be tears, there may be a new sense of peace, but always there will be the comforting presence of God.

— Arlene Bullard

Morning Prayer

... qualifies as drivetime worship because one regular participant Zooms in while commuting. Mother Kate and Julie lead on Wednesday. Lay officiants rotate from Monday through Saturday: Arlene Bullard, Juanita Pratt, Tom Phillips, Michael Smith, Sam Sue and myself. The service sets up the day with half an hour of prayers, canticles and readings of Psalms and scriptures, plus a list of intercessions, updated weekly, which, among other things, means that every day we pray for

five different parishioners. And then the officiants mail the Morning Prayer cards to those five as a reminder.

— John Stickney

Noonday Prayer

... is a midday oasis of about 35 minutes, via Zoom, that helps us recoup from our weekday mornings and stay centered the rest of the day. We laugh together — a lot. Sometimes we cry. Always lifting each other up and guiding one another. We start with a check-in, a free-ranging conversation. We take joy in learning about holy people on their commemoration days. Then we open our Books of Common Prayer to An Order of Service for Noon Day, p. 103. We pray for each other, friends, family, the parish, the world. The officiants are all lay people: Carole O'Connor Edwards, Nicole Thomas, Jeff Jeffreys and myself. Join us!

— Ned Boyajian



Check Looking Ahead for how to join Morning Prayer or Noonday Prayer via Zoom.



The Seven Windows Proclaim 'Revelation'

The small-group immersion in the Book of Revelation prompts another look at the seven 25-foot-tall Tiffany windows in the apse, installed in 1895.

AND THERE WAS WAR IN HEAVEN: MICHAEL AND HIS ANGELS FOUGHT AGAINST THE DRAGON

Like the titles of a George Lucas epic, these words from Revelation 12:7 command the arch above the windows. They don't depict the apocalypse that has inspired artists as different as Albrecht Dürer and William Blake. Rather we see the Archangel Michael's victory at the end of time.

Thus no four beasts, no hail and fire mingled with blood, no great red dragon with seven heads and seven horns, no whore of Babylon on a scarlet-colored beast, "full of names of blasphemy" (17:3), no seven gold vials full of the wrath of God — all those hallucinatory entities that inform the iconography of Christian eschatology and have inspired countless fire-and-brimstone sermons.

Instead the glorious rainbow colors of opalescent glass conjure a vision of heaven, with a hierarchy of angels who occupy a cruciform radiance.

At the center is St. Michael, his ruby-colored wings magnificently



The apse windows enact a vision of 'Revelation,' with our namesake St. Michael triumphant.

spread. He stands firmly on a globe, emerging from the clouds, his victory over Satan inaugurating the new realm of eternity: "here should be time no longer" (10:6).

Michael has set aside his shield. His spear has been transformed into the unfurled banner of victory — the same banner Christ holds in countless depictions of the Resurrection.

Everywhere the details reflect how the Tiffany designers — among them the Alabama-born artist Clara Weaver Parrish — worked with the rector, the Rev. John Punnett Peters, a longtime professor of Old Testament languages and literature.

The designers and the rector must have discussed the central cruciform element around which the seraphs flutter. From it radiates the light that illumines the heavenly host, like the Eternal Light that Dante was granted to see at the end of his odyssey in the "Divine Comedy": "that Light sublime, which in Itself is true."

What makes these windows so compelling is how John's mystical vision is realized in material terms — "sea of glass like unto crystal" (4:6); "And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald rainbow" (4:3).

Opalescent glass reveals the colors of Paradise.

— Keith Christiansen

The Old Community's Life and Legacy



Bloomingdale Neighborhood History Group

A Ground Zero desolation prevailed when the blocks west of Amsterdam Avenue were razed in the name of urban renewal during the mid-1950s. Among the casualties was a thriving neighborhood of some 4,000 Black people centered on West 99th Street and served by the St. Jude's Chapel there.

THEN & NOW

After watching "Fantasia" at Radio City Music Hall in 1940 (or thereabouts) with one of the sons of the Rev. Floarda Howard, Gerald "Buddy" Green Jr. got to pay a rare visit to the Howards' apartment atop St. Jude's Chapel on West 99th Street.

"It was unknown territory to most parishioners," Green said. What did he see there? The Rev. Howard's dogs, a German Shepherd and a Great Dane. And the priest himself, "relaxing in his chair and playing the flute," Green recalled. "Evidently that was his hobby, his release. He didn't play very well. He was persistent."

St. Jude's was part of St. Michael's, informally from 1911 and officially from a few years after that. It was also a core institution of the tight-knit enclave that after its demise became known as "The Old Community."

A dispute between two West 99th Street building owners was said to have led one of them to offer apartments to rent to

"respectable colored families," according to a 1905 New York Times article. Before long almost all the White residents of the block between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West had moved out and roughly 2,000 Black New Yorkers had moved in. By the 1940s the community had expanded to include the same block of 98th Street. In the 1950s these and surrounding blocks were razed in the name of urban renewal.

The neighborhood history is the subject of an exhibit on display until the end of the month at the Bloomingdale branch of the New York Public Library and indefinitely on the Bloomingdale Neighborhood History Group website. It was also the topic of a BNHG presentation this month where Gerald "Buddy" Green and his niece Susan Fridle spoke about the life and legacy of the Old Community.

Among Green's other memories: watching Billie Holiday sing from her mother's stoop at a neighborhood block party. Holiday's mother owned a restaurant on 99th Street.

— Justin Fox

The Question Mark, by W. H. Auden

The Swarthmore College Archives



W. H. Auden at Swarthmore during the 1960s; and a detail from Pieter Brueghel's "Landscape With the Fall of Icarus," 1558.



For your Lenten reflection: An essay, unpublished for 80 years, from Edward Mendelson's forthcoming selection of W. H. Auden's prose writings

W. H. Auden (1907-1973) wrote this essay for the parish magazine of Trinity Church, Swarthmore, Pa., The Constant Chronicle, sometime between 1943 and 1945, when he was teaching at Swarthmore College.

No copies of the magazine from those years seem to have survived, but Auden's manuscript, which he sent to the rector, George Christian Anderson, was later acquired by a collector.

In his cover letter to Anderson, Auden asked that the piece be signed "with the pseudonym I have signed it with, as I think such things ought to be anonymous." He used the same pseudonym, "Didymus," for other anonymous essays on theological issues around the same time.

This is the first publication of the essay in 80 years.
— Edward Mendelson

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An official questionnaire lies before me on my desk which asks for my religious affiliation. I can answer easily and quite truthfully; Episcopalian. I go to Holy Communion at Trinity Church; I recite the Nicene Creed; I read the Bible; I say my prayers; and, as I happen to find theology as exciting as some others find horse-racing, I am better informed, perhaps, about the Doctrines of my Church than most laymen.

But suppose the question had been, not my denominational status, but the direct challenge: "Are you a Christian? Yes or No.", what then? How am I to decide whether or no I am in the True Way. "By their fruits ye shall know them."

In the case of others whose inner life is outside my knowledge, their acts of love or selfishness are all I have and all I need to go by, and, in any case, it is not my business to judge. But in the case of myself I know only too well that I might have faith, courage, spiritual gifts and yet, by lacking charity, still be an unprofitable servant, so that my acts and even my thoughts, since I can never escape from self-deception, can tell me very little.

Is there for me, as a subject, an objective test of my relation to the Truth? Yes, says the Gospel, there is: those who are in the Truth suffer for it in this world. "If ye were of the world, the world would love its own; but because ye are not of the world.... therefore the world hateth you.... Blessed are ye when men shall hate you and when they shall separate you from their company for the Son of Man's sake."

And on the other hand; "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.... Woe unto ye that are rich, for ye have received your consolation."

I look at my life, then. Do I suffer or have I suffered? Yes, sometimes for my sins, occasionally in events for which I did not seem responsible; but for the Son of Man's sake? No, never. Does the world hate me? Well, some people dislike me, most of them for just reasons, a few, maybe, unjustly; but does anyone hate me as a witness to the Truth? No, not one.

Am I a rich man, i.e., do I get on well with the world? Yes, very. I enjoy excellent health; I have many friends whom I love and who love me; God has given me gifts which enable me to earn an adequate living by work that I love.

For all these blessings, I must, of course, praise God. To

Adapted from "Auden and God," an article by Edward Mendelson in The New York Review of Books, Dec. 6, 2007:

During the 1930s the moral language of Christianity became more explicit in Auden's work. In 1938, he wrote "Musée des Beaux Arts," a commentary on Brueghel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (1558, now in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels) and the indifference with which everyone in the painting turns away from Icarus's suffering and death.

The poem sketches the outline of the Christian story. It mentions, as if in passing, a "miraculous birth," a "dreadful martyrdom," and the "forsaken cry" of the dying Icarus — an echo of the victim in the Gospels who "cried with a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"

Musée des Beaux Arts, by W. H. Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the
torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns
away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have
seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

desire to suffer would be blasphemous pride, for suffering which is humanly desired ceases to be suffering. But as long as I am not suffering, or suffer for any other cause than the Truth, there is an enormous question mark against my life. An Episcopalian, certainly. A Christian? — *Didymus*

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Edward Mendelson, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia, is W. H. Auden's literary executor. Edward and his wife Cheryl Mendelson, a novelist, are longtime parishioners at St. Michael's.