

**Feast Day of St. Andrew – Romans 10:8b-18**  
**St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church – Sedona, AZ**

*Always Near*

*“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.”*

These words from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans are offered at a time when Jewish and Gentile people were responding to the good news of Christ in very different ways. This was deeply troubling to Paul because he believed that the good news of Christ crucified was for all people.<sup>1</sup> Throughout most of today’s Second Reading we hear Paul quoting from various parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, including from the prophets Isaiah and Joel, and from the Book of Deuteronomy: “The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”<sup>2</sup> These words were originally spoken by Moses to the Israelites reminding them to follow the laws or teachings that YHWH gave to them just prior to entering the promised land.<sup>3</sup> Paul draws on Jewish teachings to engage his Jewish brothers and sisters in recognizing the good news of God in Christ. And he reminds them that “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, and is generous to all who call on him.”<sup>4</sup> All meaning everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2774](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2774)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_of\\_Deuteronomy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Deuteronomy)

<sup>4</sup> Romans 10:12

It is important to note that, although Paul is pointing toward salvation through Jesus Christ, he is not downplaying the significance of the Law of Moses. From Paul's perspective teachings of Moses and the prophets point toward Jesus Christ, the long awaited Messiah. Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension is for all who call upon the Lord. Paul reminds his listeners of God's promise, "The word is near you," and the fulfillment of God's promise through Jesus, the Christ who walked upon the earth, and taught and healed among the followers of Paul's generation. In sharing the good news with subsequent generations, Paul directs Jews and Gentiles to examine their everyday lives and to recognize Christ's presence among them and within them. "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart." Just as Jesus called people to follow him faithfully, we are to call others to follow Christ. We are to use our hearts and hands and voices in the service of God by being attentive to Christ's message of faithfulness. Faithfulness to the intent of the law, which is to draw us closer to God; and faithfulness to the word of God, Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us that our faithfulness is made possible by God's faithfulness; God's promise to be with us always.

A few weeks ago we began a new confirmation class for newcomers and seekers. When we gather, we begin by lighting a candle to remind us that God is always with us. The light of the candle reminds us of the light of Christ living within us and all around us. In our own worship gatherings in the church, we

light candles to help us focus our hearts toward God through prayer and reflection on scripture, and as we share in Christ's meal. Our faithfulness in prayer and worship shapes our beliefs, and how we live as Christians in the world.<sup>5</sup> Through faithful prayer and worship we respond to God's faithfulness in abiding with us in our daily lives. We believe that prayer has the power to transform our hearts, and that the words spoken from hearts shaped by God's love will in turn shape how we use our hands and feet and voices in the world for the manifestation of God's beloved community.

We also believe that because God is always with us, that Jesus shows up in the world beyond the walls of our worship spaces. We know through experience that Jesus shows up in unexpected ways at unexpected times. In our confirmation class we began reading the Gospel of Luke, not from the beginning but from a passage toward the end – from chapter 24 in which the resurrected Jesus shows up to two travelers on the road to Emmaus. While the two followers of Jesus were talking, he “came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”<sup>6</sup> After the travelers recounted what had happened over the past few days about Jesus being crucified and the women finding an empty tomb, the resurrected Christ interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures beginning with the teachings

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<sup>5</sup> *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* – Scott Gunn and Melody Wilson Shobe. *Walk in Love: Episcopal Beliefs & Practices*. Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement (2018), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 24:15-16

revealed through Moses and the prophets. Although their hearts were burning within them while Jesus was talking, their eyes were not open to recognize Jesus in their midst until just before he vanished from their sight.

In sharing this post-resurrection account, we are reminded that Jesus did not abandon the teachings revealed to the Israelites. And we are comforted to know that Jesus continues to appear in our lives – even though we may not recognize him immediately. The Spirit of Jesus enters our hearts and inspires us to see him at work in the world, sometimes through people who we least expect, and through circumstances that are difficult to accept and to understand. This is both the challenge and the promise of living into our baptismal covenant every day. Not only are we called to continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers; but we are also called to persevere in resisting evil, strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes we pray that God will grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change.<sup>8</sup> But perhaps there are other times when we might transform those words to pray, “God grant me the serenity to change the things I cannot accept.” In doing so, we recognize that Christ’s Spirit is always working in and through us to transform our hearts to see something new, and

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<sup>7</sup> [https://episcopalchurch.org/files/book\\_of\\_common\\_prayer.pdf](https://episcopalchurch.org/files/book_of_common_prayer.pdf), 304-305.

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Prayer for All Seasons*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, Inc.(2014), 139.

to proclaim God's light and love in the world in new ways. The nearness of God is not always comforting. Sometimes God is nudging even pushing us to be God's light and love in the most difficult and unconscionable situations.

Some of you know that I attended the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Border Ministries Summit in Tucson this past weekend.<sup>9</sup> There were bishops from dioceses on both sides of the border recounting the challenges they experience within their particular geographic area. The bishops south of the border spoke of rampant violence perpetrated by gangs and cartels resulting in deaths of over a hundred people a day in some areas of Central America. Bishops north of the border spoke of being resilient and adapting to changing conditions where they minister with our neighbors. There were also representatives from the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol. The chief of the Tucson sector spoke about many of the challenges and changing circumstances that they face on a daily basis. He noted how conversations about immigration have devolved to such an extent that it is hard to sit down and engage in civil discourse. He reminded us that we can all learn from one another, and not just follow the rule of law, because our immigration system is broken. He encourages his team to look beyond a black and white interpretation of the law, and look at each individual in from of them; to see them as human beings encountering circumstances

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2019/11/26/border-ministries-summit-calls-christians-serving-migrants-to-common-mission/>

specific to their context. He acknowledges that there are some people whose misconduct tarnishes the reputation of every organization, but his team is directed to recognize that they all have a common purpose, which is to help people. The border patrol is tasked with providing law enforcement, but their role is also humanitarian, to be care givers.

Although I do not know the chief's religious tradition, I sense that he is trying every day to honor the law, and to recognize the face of God in every person he and his team encounter. I imagine that because this border patrol chief and Deacon Rodger Babnew have developed a respectful working relationship, the work of our shared border ministry, Cruzando Fronteras, can support the border patrol's efforts to be more kind, caring, and compassionate in these most challenging situations. But while these organizations seek to collaborate where they are, we are also called to respond as the hearts and hands of Jesus in our own contexts. We are called to recognize the nearness of God in our places of worship and in the world. We are called to respond to the Spirit moving in and through our hearts. We are called to be agents of transformation by proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ with every person we encounter. But more often than not, the Spirit is repeatedly urging us to step out of our comfort zones to recognize the face of God in those who do not live near us or share in our particular lifestyles; and to reach across self-imposed borders – those that are fabricated with steel and razor wire, and

those we fabricate in our hearts – that we may courageously and faithfully  
celebrate the nearness of God with all of our neighbors.

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