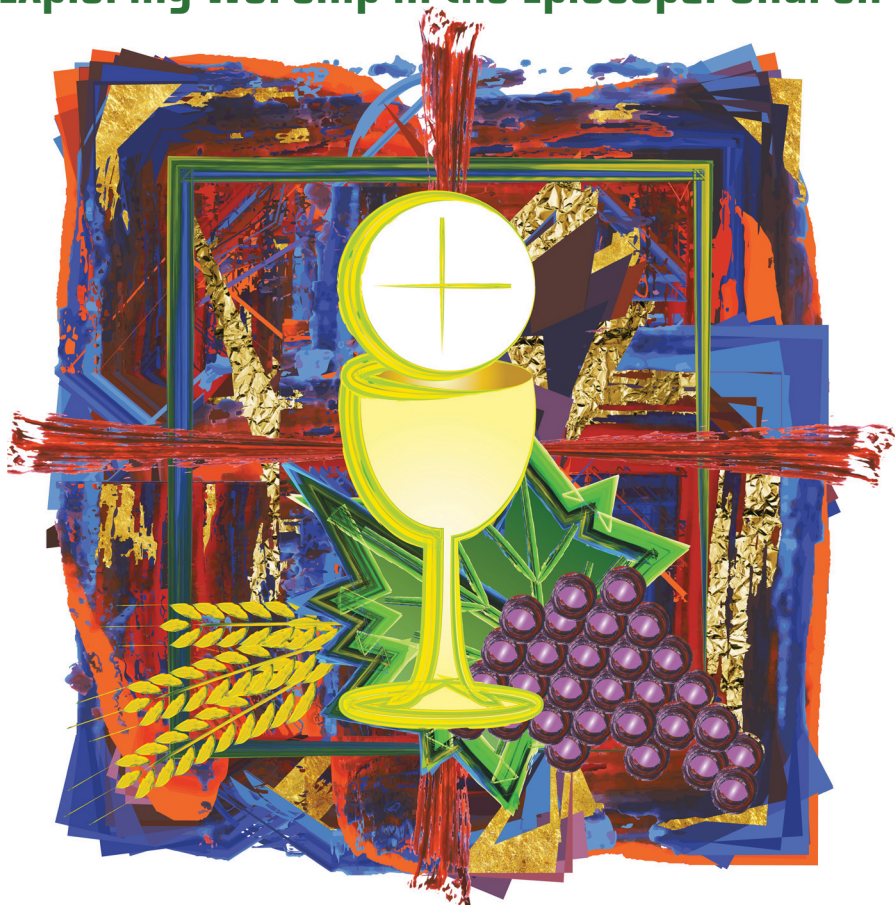


# Gifts of God for the People of God

Exploring Worship in the Episcopal Church



Furman L. Buchanan

**For Kim, Katherine, Finley, and Lamar,  
four very special gifts from God in my life**

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# Celebrating Communion

## A Perfect Picture of God's Love

*He is the image of the invisible God...*

*—Colossians 1:15*

Imagine being invited to appear in a picture destined to become a classic image for the ages.

Imagine setting aside any qualms you may have about how you look. Imagine those concerns melting away with an assurance that the timeless quality of this picture does not depend upon you. You are simply invited to be a part of it.

Where would the picture be taken? What might you wear? Who would be in the picture with you? What makes the perfect picture?

For two-thousand years, the perfect picture of God's love is depicted by a simple meal among friends. The backdrop is a hidden room borrowed from a stranger. Jesus uses water to

wash the feet of the disciples. Then he and his friends share a meal of bread and wine.

This picture is so perfect, so complete, that we re-imagine it every time we gather for the service of Holy Eucharist. When we come together for worship, we recall these first gifts of communion—of togetherness in the light of God’s love, and we experience God’s desire, through Christ, to be in communion with us.

Through the observance of the Holy Eucharist, the church carefully preserves and repeats the words and deeds of Jesus on that night. We also frame this perfect picture of God’s love with other words and actions that prepare us to celebrate communion in Jesus’ name and share his love with others. You do not have to imagine waiting for an invitation to receive these gifts of God, because God has already invited you. You do not have to imagine being invited to become part of the perfect picture of God’s love, because you are already invited.

As an Episcopal priest, I have been privileged to celebrate the holy mysteries of God’s love as revealed through the Holy Eucharist—in the bright light of day and in the darkness of a candlelight vigil. God’s grace has shined through quiet celebrations with one other person and at noisy assemblies of hundreds. I have shared this simple, sacred meal with people for their first time and their last. We have celebrated with laughter and with tears.

The gifts imparted through the sharing of the Holy Eucharist are as innumerable as the masses of people who have been nourished by this sacrament from every tribe, language, people, and nation for two-thousand years. You would surely describe your experiences of these gifts differently. This is as it should

be, because we all follow different journeys to and from this celebration of God's love.

What we have in common (and in communion) is the all-embracing love of God revealed in the story of Jesus Christ. What we hold in particular is our own stories along life's pathways.

Holy Eucharist is where God's common love story and our particular stories intersect. As surely as the Bible is the testament of God's love, Holy Eucharist is the means by which we consume that love so that it becomes an indistinguishable part of our own souls and bodies. Worship is a gift that sustains us as we appear in the next chapter of God's love story.

I want to take you on a journey through the worship service of Holy Eucharist as we celebrate it in the Episcopal Church using *The Book of Common Prayer*. Even if you are from another tradition in the church, you will recognize most, if not all, of these elements.

Beginning with the opening words and following through to the final dismissal, I invite you to discover some of the special gifts of God. I will try to open up these gifts through stories—biblical and personal. They help point to some of the surprising ways God's love is communicated to us when we worship, and then through us when we love our neighbors as ourselves. Ultimately, I hope these stories challenge and inspire you to reflect upon your own particular stories that shape the way you encounter the gifts of communion with God and your neighbor.

As we begin our reflection on Holy Eucharist and the stories that bind us, one to another and all to Christ, I will share with

you a tale that I believe offers a picture of what life with God and one another is supposed to look like.

One of my favorite photographs from my childhood features a passel of boys and girls clinging to eight steps on a ladder that ascends to a brand-new treehouse. Freshly cut pine boards shine like golden halos over the heads of happy children. The only thing missing was some of our teeth. But when you're eight years old, you don't let missing teeth stand in the way of big smiles when you experience a great gift.

If I were making up a parable about the joy and wonder of experiencing the gift of love, it would start like this: "Once upon a time, a father built a tree house for his son. He made it tall enough for the boy to see the world from a new perspective. He erected walls and a roof to make it safe and dry enough for sleeping under the stars. Most importantly, he let his son help build it in order to show that perfection is not necessary for goodness. It was a gift of love, one that lasts a lifetime."

How does your parable about love begin? What is your favorite picture of receiving a gift that was more than you deserved?

Near the end of the New Testament is a letter to the Hebrews. This letter begins with another picture of how God's love story has developed over time. The writer explains that while God used to speak to our ancestors through prophets, there is a new means of revelation for us now—a Son who reflects God's glory, a Son who is the exact imprint of God's very being!

Think about that for a moment. God's people used to have the words of the Law and the prophets but now also have the



picture of Jesus. As the letter to the Colossians also says, “He is the image of the invisible God” (1:15).

It is as if the invisible source of light and life, mysteriously present in all things, used the light of divine countenance to take a picture that captures the truth and beauty of love in a human face. It is as if God shared a favorite picture of a gift that was more than any of us deserved.

Scripture contains numerous theological metaphors related to photography that the ancient writers could not have known. I wouldn’t know the significance of these metaphors without the help of my daughter, who shared with me what she learned from a photography class.

It turns out that a brief exposure to light is all that is necessary to create an image. That’s all a camera does—it simply lets a little light shine in. What a wonderful metaphor for what we do when we celebrate Holy Eucharist! We take the time to be still long enough to experience the perfect image of God’s love and let a little of that light shine in.

And yet, while light is necessary to create an image, the photograph requires darkness to develop. Jesus—the imprint of God’s being—suffered in the darkness of human cruelty as the full portrait of God’s love came into focus. We have been given the courage to persevere in our own valleys of darkness by seeing more clearly that God does not do bad things to us. Rather, our God suffers bad things with us.

After the picture develops in the dark, then we bring it back into the light to view the full image with all of its subtleties. Through the stories of scripture, we are blessed with many pictures of Jesus sharing the love of God, welcoming children

and adults into his arms and blessing them. In our own snapshots too, we see God's love, in big ways and in small, from the knots in golden pine boards to gaps between the teeth of children's smiles. In all these images, we have the gift of joy and wonder in seeing God's love.

During the service of Holy Eucharist, we are invited to take and develop our own pictures of God's love. We open our minds to let God's light shine in. We also gain strength and courage to persevere in the dark, trusting that God is there with us, too. Ultimately, we receive the joy and wonder of God's love, imprinted on our own hearts in living color.

What's even more incredible is that the picture of Jesus—the exact imprint of God—is not for our benefit only. I believe this image is also a blessing for God. This new understanding came to me as I realized that while my father built the tree house for me, he took the picture for himself.

As a father, I can understand why God the Father built an entire kingdom for his children. God did so to delight in those glorious smiles—toothless or not. God does this to give us more inquiring hearts, more courageous spirits, and more joy and wonder in it all.

In the Holy Eucharist, we join a celebration in which our picture counts. Our presence makes a difference in the picture—as a blessing to God the Almighty and a blessing to our sisters and brothers and to our neighbors.

Whether the light is shining or the darkness surrounds us, we are making a family photo album one page at a time. And Jesus is the perfect picture for the cover. These pages of the scrapbook are meant to be filled with images and stories of this love as we have received and shared it with one another.

When we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, we are giving thanks for God's desire to be in communion with us, no matter what. We also are celebrating a perfect picture of God's love and our place in that picture, here and now. Our presence in that picture gladdens the very heart of God, for it is the image of our thanksgiving—our eucharist—and it is holy.

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## **Reflecting on Our Story with God**

- ❖ Look through a photo album or browse pictures on your telephone or computer. How do these pictures illustrate the gift of God's love communicated through and with other people?
- ❖ Reflect on celebrations of Holy Eucharist that have been especially meaningful and memorable.

## **Celebrating Our Story with God**

- ❖ Copy or re-photograph some of your favorite "pictures" of the love of God communicated through the gifts, graces, and mercies of other people.
- ❖ Offer thanks to God for these people, experiences, and memories.
- ❖ If possible, write a note of gratitude (including a copy of the picture) to people who appear in one of these pictures, letting them know how they are part of one of your favorite images of God's love.

# Jesus Is Coming

## The First as well as the Last Supper

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*

*—Psalm 118:26*

The pattern of the liturgy for Holy Eucharist is derived not only from the Last Supper Jesus shares with his disciples before his death but also from the first supper he shares with his disciples after his resurrection. Holy Eucharist unfolds like a two-act drama, patterned after the resurrection story of Jesus' secret walk to Emmaus with two of his disciples and their meal together.

In *The Book of Common Prayer*, the major “acts” in the liturgy for Holy Eucharist help make this clear. The first headline is “The Word of God.” This corresponds with the hearing and remembering part of our worship. The second headline, “The Holy Communion,” corresponds with the

sacred meal part of our worship. If we were to look at the first supper story from Chapter 24, verses 13-35, of Saint Luke's Gospel in light of these two acts, it would look like this:

## **The Word of God**

Now on the same day, two of [Jesus' disciples] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these

things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

## The Holy Communion

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



Every now and then, I see a bumper sticker that always makes me smile. It reads, “Jesus is coming. Look busy!”

This reminds me of a common experience in elementary school: The teacher steps out of the classroom for a moment and utter bedlam unfolds—at the chalkboard, at student’s desks, *on* student’s desks. A fellow student serves as scout, peeking through a crack in the door.

And then the inevitable, “Here she comes!” Fear surges in our stomachs as we scurry to get seated, open books, pick up pencils, all to give the appearance of being busy.

In Luke’s story of Jesus meeting two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we have the teacher—Rabbi—who (to say the least) has been detained by some other work for three days. But these followers haven’t been on the lookout. Instead, they are reeling in sadness. Their hope that maybe, just maybe, Jesus would redeem Israel has been dashed when he died an ignoble death on the cross.

They are not expecting Jesus. They have no reason to look busy. In fact, they are doing their best to try to sort out the confusion of the last few days. They ask in disbelief, *Are you the only stranger in town who doesn’t know what has been going on?*

Using our modern, colloquial expression, Cleopas might just as easily express his astonishment with the question, *Have you been in a cave?* Which, of course, Jesus has.

Like so many times before, Jesus turns the expected on its head. The disciples actually begin to describe who Jesus was as a prophet to Jesus the Prophet. How embarrassing!

The disciples have let fear, hurt, and anxiety cloud their judgment, and they forget the words of the prophets. Jesus sets out to work on their “mental clutter”—Luke tells us that “beginning with Moses and *all the prophets*,” Jesus gives a good, solid lesson as they walk along. Imagine what it would feel like to be on the receiving end of that lecture!

Despite the suffering, death, and resurrection, at least some among the inner circle are ready to chalk Jesus up as another



dead prophet. Yet, their hearts burn as they listen to some of the most inspiring teaching of their lives. So, they invite this stranger to dinner. And—thanks be to God—he accepts their invitation.

So, maybe the bumper sticker *should* read, “Jesus is coming. Invite a stranger to dinner!” Don’t *look* busy; just share your bread with a stranger or a friend. The lesson about Jesus and the disciples at the table in Emmaus shows that those two types of dinner guests are really one and the same—the stranger turns out to be the friend.

This is the cornerstone of Christian hospitality—the expectation that we will meet Christ in the stranger. Remember Jesus’ admonition in the Gospel according to Matthew: “Just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (25:40). Or in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2).

We also find this emphasis on hospitality in the Acts of the Apostles in which the earliest believers were described as devoted “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers”(2:42). This pattern of faithful living, half of which is concerned with fellowship and breaking bread, is so critical that it is one of our baptismal promises. During the sacrament of Holy Baptism, we are asked, “Will *you* continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers?”

When we invite strangers and friends to dinner, we honor our baptismal vows. When we share hospitality with strangers among us, we honor our baptismal vows.

Being faithful is not about looking busy—or even *being* busy. Being faithful is about breaking bread with one another and with our Lord—a Lord who sneaks up on us in places where food is found, like a feeding trough in a run-down, Bethlehem barn or a grand outdoor picnic of bread and fish along the seashore or a Last Supper in a discreet, upper room.

Even now, our Lord sneaks up on us, is present with us, when we share with those who are hungry or serve meals to those in need. Jesus is with us when we show hospitality to strangers and to friends—and when we receive hospitality from strangers and friends.

Most of all, our Lord is known to us when we show up for the Holy Eucharist. Interestingly, our worship reflects the pattern of that day on the way to Emmaus. We begin with the Liturgy of the Word, hearing from the prophets and listening to the gospel so that we might better recognize Christ and better understand his glorious ministry.

Then, whether or not we understand all the prophets and teachings, we invite Jesus to our table as we offer gifts of bread and wine. Just like that evening in Emmaus, Christ says yes to our invitation. We gather around the table—some of us friends and some of us strangers—and we receive Christ, right there in the bread and wine.

And here's the profound and remarkable twist: Christ receives us! It doesn't matter if we are like Cleopas or the other disciple, foolish or failing to recognize Jesus in our midst. It doesn't matter if we are like the disciples, bereft and hopeless. None of that matters.

That's because our Lord is the one who takes, blesses, breaks, and shares what he has—his bread and even his precious

life—for the health and salvation of his disciples. Our Lord is committed to giving us what we need and cannot give ourselves.

Anglican priest and hymn writer George Wallace Briggs articulated the request of the disciples at Emmaus. It is a prayer that invites Jesus—and recognizes the fact that Jesus really invites us to the table. “Come risen Lord, and deign to be our guest; nay, let us be thy guests; the feast is thine; thyself at thine own board make manifest in thine own Sacrament of Bread and Wine” (*The Hymnal 1982*, #305).

In other words, Jesus is coming. Let’s have dinner!

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## **Reflecting on Our Story with God**

- ❖ Try to remember an occasion when you felt surprised by the presence of God, particularly when you could not see (or refused to see) God's grace initially.
- ❖ Reflect on an occasion when you reached out to a stranger and experienced a blessing.
- ❖ Think of a time when the Liturgy of the Word did not make sense but you accepted the invitation to Christ's table anyway.

## **Celebrating Our Story with God**

- ❖ Consider how your worship and service in Jesus' name is based not only on the memory of the Last Supper but also upon the hope and expectation of the First Supper.
- ❖ Explore new ways to give, serve, share, and receive food as part of your life of faith.
- ❖ Jesus is coming. Imagine how to both look and be less busy in order to make time to encounter him more deeply.

# The Word of the Lord





# Blessed Be God & God's Kingdom

## First Things First

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

*—John 1:1*

Blessed—the very first word spoken during the worship service of Holy Eucharist—tells us everything we need to know. The purpose of worship is, after all, to bless God. Of course, we come to church for lots of reasons: to be part of a community, to visit with friends, to hear an excellent sermon and stirring music. But the first word of the service reminds us of this important fact: Our worship is not about us. It is about blessing God.

The term “Holy Eucharist” itself offers additional insight into what we are doing when we gather for worship. “Holy” means

# The Holy Eucharist: Rite Two

## The Word of God

*A hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung.*

*The people standing, the Celebrant says*

*People* Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever.  
Amen.

*In place of the above, from Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost*

*Celebrant* Alleluia. Christ is risen.  
*People* The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

*In Lent and on other penitential occasions*

*Celebrant* Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins.  
*People* His mercy endures for ever.

*The Celebrant may say*

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our  
hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may  
perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name;  
through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

—The service for Holy Communion begins  
on page 355 of *The Book of Common Prayer*.



“set apart” or “special.” And *eucharistia* is the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” Therefore, the service of Holy Eucharist is our act of offering a special thanksgiving to God for all the blessings we have received. So it is logical that the very first word we use to describe the One from whom all blessings flow is “blessed.”

In a fitting symmetry, one of the last words spoken in the liturgy is also “bless.” At the end of the Holy Eucharist, the deacon dismisses the people into the world to serve others in God’s name.

One of the dismissal statements is: “Let us bless the Lord.” This statement recognizes two fundamental ways to bless the Lord—one way is through prayer and worship when we gather; the other way is by loving our neighbors as ourselves when we are dismissed.

In the Episcopal Church, the priest is the one who calls people to gather in the Lord’s name, and the deacon dismisses the people to serve in the Lord’s name. Worship and service are two sides of the same coin—they are both indispensable acts of faith as we have come to understand faith through the example of Jesus Christ.

In the first act of Holy Eucharist—the Word of God—blessing is made incarnate through prayer. We offer prayers of praise and adoration. After listening to the story of God and affirming this story in the words of the Nicene Creed, we offer our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession. Next, we offer prayers of confession. And finally, after being reconciled with God and one another, we offer our prayer of oblation—giving ourselves, the fruit of our souls and bodies, to the glory of God.

Thus, the Word of God portion of the Holy Eucharist involves far more than passive listening to biblical readings and a sermon; it is an engaged, active response by all the people to God's love.

In short, we are praying—by word and deed—to a God who is worthy of blessing, while we are responding—by word and deed—to the blessing of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Throughout this portion of the service, as we move through the prayers and responses, it is important to remember that they all flow from the very first word: blessed.

And not only blessed be God, but blessed be God's kingdom. But what is God's kingdom? What do we mean by this phrase? I believe the kingdom of God is not a place in the way we normally think of an earthly kingdom as having a specific geographic location. When Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, he often compares it with a thing or even describes it as a verb. Examples include *sowing* seeds, *mixing* yeast, *hiding* treasure, and *finding* a great pearl (Matthew 13).

Jesus encourages us to see the kingdom of God as an invitation, a celebration, and a journey. This blessed kingdom can also entail judgment, as found in Jesus' Parable of the Bridesmaids in Saint Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and

trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

—Matthew 25:1-13



Most of us can remember special moments of celebration in our lives when our families and friends—sometimes even people we don't know—have gathered with us to mark a special occasion: baptisms, weddings, birthdays and anniversaries, sports banquets, recitals, graduations, and even funerals. These occasions can offer us glimpses of the blessed kingdom.

One of the kingdom moments in my life took place early in the morning on a cool September day at the Opening Convocation of Wofford College in 1987. This convocation was in the auditorium of the historic "Old Main" building, which stands at the center of the campus. The gravity of this 133-year tradition was perceptible to everyone in the room.

A convocation is a ceremonial assembly when college and university presidents call together their faculty, dressed in full academic regalia, and their students, preferably dressed with some respectability. These events celebrate the beginning of a new school year. It is an opportunity for the president

to recognize and welcome new professors and students. The academic dean encourages everyone to study diligently, explore new ideas, and meet new challenges.

At this convocation there was one other item on the program, immediately following the president's opening welcome. Dr. Joe Lesesne was going to publicly name me as the new presidential scholar, a student selected for the privilege and responsibility of spending the upcoming year traveling independently around the world.

I felt deeply honored to be considered worthy for an invitation to such an invaluable, life-changing opportunity. The kingdom of heaven is like this: an invitation to an invaluable, life-changing opportunity.

I was also overwhelmed and scared by the idea of embarking on a solo journey to foreign places, cut off from familiar faces and voices. The kingdom of heaven is also like this: a journey upon which we embark to an unfamiliar reality we cannot control.

Yet despite my fears, I was proud to be commissioned and sent forth by the president of the college and to receive the blessing and support of my professors and fellow students. There is nothing quite like receiving the blessing of people you admire and love. The kingdom of heaven is also like this: a celebration overflowing with blessings beyond what we deserve.

The grand, antique bell in one of the twin towers of Old Main began to toll the hour, and the faculty in their gowns and academic hoods formed a processional line behind the dean to ascend the twenty-eight steps that framed the historic building like an apron. The students in the auditorium stood respectfully as the procession entered from the back of the

room. The president, the dean, and the college chaplain stepped onto the stage while the faculty gradually filled in the first rows of seats.

I could not see this procession from where I was, but I could *hear* the toll of the bell. Thank God, I could hear the bell! You see, I was sound asleep in my dormitory. Jesus said, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

The numbers on my digital alarm clock reported with precision the shocking judgment of my dilemma. I don't know what happened to the alarm on my clock, but the alarm gripping me from inside was dreadful. The kingdom of heaven is like this too: a celebration that happens—*with* us or *without* us.

Under these circumstances, one quickly distinguishes the essential from the merely important. It is essential that one wear clothes to an opening convocation, but it is merely important for those clothes to match. It is essential to brush one's teeth before leaving for such an auspicious occasion, but it is merely important to brush one's hair. The kingdom of heaven is like this: a reality that compels us to distinguish between what is essential and what is merely important.

I ran as fast as I could down the sidewalk toward Old Main, and I learned on that morning that it is possible to run and tie a half Windsor knot in a necktie at the same time.

I attacked the steps three at a time. I ripped open the door, ran my hands through my hair, and slipped into the back of the auditorium at the precise moment the president called out my name. The kingdom of heaven is like this: We are called by our names whether we are listening or not.

I walked to the stage to receive a framed certificate as an outward and visible sign of this scholarship. The text of the certificate included adjectives like “responsible, diligent, and conscientious.” Conspicuously missing were words *more* descriptive of me on that particular morning, like “careless, foolish, and unprepared.”

Perhaps some of the people interpreted my breathlessness as excitement or nervousness. And, ironically, their interpretation was right. I was excited and nervous for good reasons and for not-so-good reasons. The kingdom of heaven is like this: We are recognized by grace for merits we have not earned, and we are mercifully forgiven for flaws we simply cannot deny.

All throughout the gospels, Jesus repeatedly tells people that the kingdom of God has come near. He urges them to pay attention to what is right under their noses. Why should we expect God’s kingdom to be any different in our day and time?

The kingdom has always been introduced with a call. Indeed, the original word for church—*ekklesia*—is based upon the ancient Greek word for “call.” It literally means “called out”—called out of nowhere, like a bell ringing faintly in the distance, called out of familiar comforts to embark on a new journey, called out of slumber to join a celebration.

The kingdom is much nearer, more diverse, and surprising than we can imagine. Our personal answers to kingdom invitations, journeys, and celebrations may take time and prayer in order to emerge more clearly.

But there is no better place to start searching for glimpses of our own blessed kingdom responses than in the very place where we worship the Lord of this kingdom. It is the place

where we pray as he taught us to pray—for God's kingdom to come here and God's will to be done now.

So we must keep awake, therefore, for we know neither the day nor the hour when our prayers will be answered and we will experience God's here-and-now kingdom. We must keep awake, therefore, to hear God's invitation, join the celebration, and embark on our journey.

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## Reflecting on Our Story with God

- ❖ When you think about why you attend worship, is blessing God the most important reason? How might this perspective change your attitude, preparation, and participation in worship?
- ❖ The kingdom has always been an invitation to a life-changing opportunity, and other faithful people have accepted this invitation and passed it down to us. What life-changing invitations have you received to experience God's blessed kingdom?
- ❖ The kingdom has always been a journey into an unfamiliar reality. Many faithful people have embarked on this bold and new journey with Jesus—and without expertise. What journeys into unfamiliar territory have you taken that led to blessings of new discovery and promise?
- ❖ The kingdom has always been a celebration overflowing with blessings, and other faithful people have shared these sacraments for two millennia and passed them on to us. At which important celebrations have you experienced blessings and mercies?



## **Celebrating Our Story with God**

- ❖ What new, specific words and deeds—in worship and in service to others—might you try out in order to exemplify “blessed be God and God’s kingdom,” which we express at the beginning and the end of the service of Holy Eucharist?
- ❖ What invitations might you extend to others so they will experience the blessed kingdom?
- ❖ What journeys might you help lead with other pilgrims who are seeking and serving Christ in the blessed kingdom?
- ❖ What celebrations might you host or help sponsor that would bestow blessings and mercies upon others?