

*A sermon given at
the Wyman Memorial Church of St. Andrew, Marblehead, Massachusetts,
on Sunday, September 10, 2023,
by the Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates, Bishop of Massachusetts*

Here is an exercise which you will doubtless be enjoying over the next year: recollection of what was happening in the world in 1924! In 1924:

- The first winter Olympics were held in Chamonix, France.
- The first crossword puzzle book was published by Simon & Schuster.
- Boston officially opened its airport on the tidal flats of East Boston.
- George H.W. Bush was born; Jimmy Carter was born; Marlon Brando was born; Edward Gates (my dad!) was born.
- Woodrow Wilson died; Vladimir Lenin died; Charles-Villiers Stanford died.
- Hitler and Mussolini were gaining power in Germany and Italy.
- In the U.S., the Immigration Act of 1924 was passed and signed into law by President Calvin Coolidge, sharply cutting the number of immigrants allowed, and transforming Ellis Island from an entry point to a detention and deportation center.
- Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" was premiered.
- The Boston Bruins became the first U.S. team of the N.H.L.
- In Cleveland, the first ice cream cone rolling machine was patented.
- In Marblehead, Massachusetts, construction of the original chapel was completed for the Wyman Memorial Church of St. Andrew.

Well, so: Happy Birthday, St. Andrew's! It is such a joy for me to be here with you this morning, and an honor to help kick off your yearlong Centennial Celebration! What fun you will have! And what gratitude we offer to God for the blessings of these past 100 years.

Our First Reading this morning from Genesis 28 recollected the tale of Jacob and his vision. In that story the weary Jacob rests his head on a stone pillow, and dreams of a portal opening between heaven and earth.

[Then Jacob] dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. [Genesis 28:12]

For most of us of a certain generation, that reading will inevitably make us think of the African-American spiritual which was widely popular when we were growing up: "We are climbing Jacob's ladder, ... soldiers of the Cross." It's is not a bad image for the Christian: climbing a ladder towards God's kingdom; getting closer to the way God wants things to be; moving up, moving on to the next chapter of one's life, as an individual or as a parish.

But maybe it's because I so loved playing board games as a child, that this reading always makes me think not only of Jacob's Ladder, but also of that wonderful, terrible game ... Chutes and Ladders. You know the one, right? Where you roll a single die and move your little marker along,

trying to make your way up the winding path to the finish line at the top. And oh, how great when you land at the bottom of one of those ladders, and scoot ahead towards the top. And oh, what frustration when you land instead at the top of a chute, and slide right back down to a place you'd already left behind.

So what do you think? Does life sometimes feel like a game of Chutes and Ladders? Sure it does. We have good days and bad ones. At one moment we climb to a new and unanticipated height. At other moments, we have setbacks and disappointments, and feelings of futility. This is true for us in our personal and family lives. This is true of congregations as well. No doubt St. Andrew's Church through history has had its own ups and downs, its own periods of joyful flourishing, and its periods of struggle.

As but one example just in the past three years, St. Andrew's has experienced (together with the world around us) the unimagined challenge of a global pandemic. You have hit setbacks that might very well have felt like those heart-breaking slides in the game of Chutes and Ladders. Yet you have been rising to your challenges and demonstrated a commitment to your parish, and an inspiring determination to be the church you feel certain God is still calling you to be.

Thinking about your centennial, I read through St. Andrew's entry in the bicentennial history of our diocese, published in 1984. I was struck by how consistent the history of this parish has been – how principles that I know to be your deeply held priorities and hopes now actually trace themselves back to your early years, and wend their way through your century of ups and downs. Here are a few moments that struck me from your parish history, some sepia-toned snapshots in your parish scrapbook.

Isaac Chauncey Wyman, the guiding light and benefactor of the church's founding, was concerned in the early 20th century that the remote nature of this part of town was changing; some build-up was occurring, but a church for the people and a Sunday School for the children would not be accessible. So swift was the response to Wyman's vision that no sooner was the chapel built than community space was also needed. A parish hall was constructed in 1929, a full year before the church would be formally consecrated. This sequence is most unusual. In the history of our parishes, most often the worship space is followed only many years or even decades later by space for community events. But you have been community-oriented from the start.

It's in your DNA and you've been doing it ever since – from sponsorship of the Marblehead Community Counseling Center; to supporting My Brother's Table in Lynn; to your Giving Tree Project; to upstream efforts to wrestle with the legacies of racism through your Beloved Community Team with St. Stephen's. In these and so many ways you've displayed your first notable charism and defining feature: *engagement with the community around you*.

The next snapshot: In the earliest years of the congregation's worship life, the choir members were directed to "move out from the chancel into the nave, so that the preacher had someone to preach to." We call that *liturgical adaptation and openness to change*! In far deeper ways, you have made adaptations and been open to change in your life together, and in your service to the world around you. Especially in the realm of ministry with refugees – whether 50

years ago with Vietnamese families, or currently with the New American Center and Welcome the Stranger projects, you have adapted and rearranged yourselves to respond to current realities and needs.

One more snapshot: the history reports that “lay influence in the spiritual and community life of the parish has continued to grow.” In many ways, St. Andrew’s anticipated the theological shift of our current prayer book in *upholding the ministry of all baptized persons*. Within this church, parishioners take up ministries of every description. Furthermore, the community engagement we’ve spoken of earlier, while often led by your clergy, has at other times been led by church members with a passion, who’ve drawn others in.

So here are three charisms of St. Andrew’s Church: engagement with the world around you; adaptation to change; and leadership by clergy and lay people together.

The Gospel reading today suggests that Jesus’ rare display of anger is tied to one thing: worship that is for its own sake or for the benefit of its organizers only. Such worship is hollow and hypocritical and not pleasing to God. St. Andrew’s has beautiful worship traditions, but from the start they have been connected to real people, with real gifts to offer, in response to the real needs of the world around you. Good for you, and keep it up!

The challenges are real, and they are not all resolved at year 100. But friends, here’s the thing: In God’s economy, even our setbacks are part of our path towards greater faithfulness and service. Remember our reflection on Jacob’s Ladder, and Chutes & Ladders? In the final analysis, your life in the church is much more akin to Jacob’s Ladder than it is to Chutes & Ladders. And I will tell you why: Because Chutes & Ladders is a game of pure chance. There is nothing whatsoever in that game to determine your progress except the roll of a die. Neither strategy nor faith plays a role. It’s sheer, dumb luck. But your life, people of St. Andrew’s, is not a function of dumb luck. Your life is guided and led (1) by the grace of God, and (2) by skilled leaders, who are guided and equipped by the Holy Spirit; and (3) by your own faith and commitment and sacrifice.

In his rector’s report at the last annual meeting, here is what Clyde said about your Centennial Celebration which now gets underway.

We have set the stage for our celebrations in the next year and a half. We have invested in our church and campus. And we have set ourselves in a place to receive new members and create new programming that will build our collective ability to work toward the Kingdom of God in our midst. Let us be about that work, embrace one another, value and support each other, and witness to a way of living that gives life and value to all of our endeavors.

This church stands solid and secure in the lives of its members; this church stands prominent and proud in its community; this church stands visible and beloved in its diocese.

I laud you. I congratulate you. And I challenge you to find ever new ways to be the people of God in this place.

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.