

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Americans, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

Well... sort of.

In America of late,

religion and politics have become intertwined
in ways that Jesus would have had difficulty understanding,
let alone condoning.

Though religiosity grows in America,
simple faith dwindles,
and Jesus' message of love gets twisted
into screams of hate and condemnation.

It is no wonder to me

that young intelligent people are giving up on this type of religiosity
as a source of faith and hope.

I actually think that is a good sign.

How are we to get the real message of salvation out into the world
in the face of this avalanche of exclusionary muck?

To begin, we must recognize the difference between faith and politics.

Even at their best,

nationalism and patriotism have nothing to do with the gospel.

Let me say that again.

Nationalism and patriotism have nothing to do with the gospel.

And Jesus' Gospel message of salvation
has nothing to do with nation building.

So is it even possible

to be a good Christian and a good American at the same time?

Much of the time you can in America,

because many of our laws are based on a Judeo-Christian commandments.
But sometimes you can't.

Sometimes you have to choose;

Is your allegiance to the kingdom of God,
or the United States of America?

We have wandered into the field of Christian ethics,
the balancing of conflicting good outcomes.

In the Episcopal Church

we are reminded that God gave us the gift of an amazing brain
and we are encouraged,
may required,
to make full use of it in our lives of faith.

I believe this is one of the big reasons why so many scientists
have been able to find a home in the Episcopal Church.

It's also the reason why I think the Episcopal Church
has so much hope *and* faith to offer
in this post modern pluralist society in which we live.

And because of all this,

I think we should be behaving more like Paul does
in the reading we heard today from the Acts of the Apostles.

Paul waded into the market place to talk with philosophers about his faith.

When they pressed him,
he went to the *Areopagus*,
the great place of philosophical debate in Athens,
to defend that faith.

I think we should all be prepared to do the same.

All the time.

As the first letter of Peter says,

“Always be ready to make your defense

to anyone who demands from you
an accounting for the hope that is in you;
yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

I thought perhaps I might make an effort,
like Paul did at the *Areopagus*,
to defend my faith, the hope that is in me.

“Come and listen, all you who fear God,
and I will tell you what he has done for me.”

I cannot remember a time when I wasn't an Episcopalian,
let alone a Christian.

The church has buried my father and my grandparents
and baptized my children.

It has taught me much, though not all, of what I know about God,
but I must remind you of what you know already.

Knowing about God, and knowing God
are two very different things.

As much as I love our church,
there are two things that I know to be true
that would supercede that love.

One is that my love for God is even greater,
and the other is that God's love for me and for you
is even greater still.

In Sunday school long ago, I learned that God is love.
To a child that is simple and easy to remember.

As an adult I am constantly amazed
at the simple mystery of that statement.

God is love.

In our Gospel this morning
Jesus tells his disciples,

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

If one is not careful

one might take this statement as some kind of extortion.

“If you really loved me you would buy me a diamond!”

In my experience, this is not the way that Jesus works.

This is not what Jesus means.

Jesus means, If you love me that will be enough.

You will be keeping my commandments.

Do you remember earlier in the Gospel story

when Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment,

Jesus said,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart,

with all your soul and with all your mind.

And love your neighbor as yourself.”

In all my study and all my life experience

I have come to know that love is supremely important to God.

It is the first best gift that God gives to us,

and the only thing that God asks in return.

As a child, love is easy.

It's as we grow up that love gets more complicated.

Well, love doesn't really get any more complicated.

The truth is that *we* get more complicated.

As I grew up I had to learn some complicated truths.

I learned that people often let you down, even the ones who love you.

I learned that even when I try my best,

I am not always as good as I want to be.

And I learned that there are times

when it feels like even God has deserted me.

But most of all, I learned that God loves me through it all,

even when it feels like God isn't there at the time.
As I continued to grow I also learned about science,
the field of study that seeks to precisely describe
how and what happens in the universe,
and about the scientific method, a process of discernment used
to describe how things happen
and to help predict what may happen in the future.
I found a pure joy and wonder
in discovering the intricate workings of the universe.
For some, science is seen as a substitute for God,
or an attempt to limit God's action
or even to refute the existence of God.
They are more to be pitied than censured.
For me,
science has always been a tool to more accurately describe
the miracle of God's creation.
For example, when God created the hydrogen bond,
the special way that hydrogen and oxygen are linked together,
did God know that this bond would give water the peculiar property
of becoming less dense when it freezes
and thereby giving rise the winter treats
of ice skating and snowballs?
Of course God did!
For thousands of millions of years
those treats lay hidden,
like presents wrapped under a Christmas tree,
waiting for human beings to evolve
and the wonder of a child's mind to reveal them!
Does knowing about how the hydrogen bond works

take away any of the joy or wonder
of making that first snowman with your child?

Not for me.

I have lived with both science and faith in my life for quite some time now,
and I find them to be quite complementary.

I really don't know what all the fuss is about.

Faith and science are two different tools I use to make my way through life.

I would go so far as to say that both are essential,
at least to me, and I whole heartedly commend them both to you.

As Albert Einstein said in one of my favorite quotes of his,

“Religion without Science is blind;
Science without Religion is lame.”

Science gets me through the physical side of life
and faith gets me through the spiritual side.

They are both connected,
indeed woven together,
but still they are separate.

When we confuse the two,
or misappropriate their use is when the trouble starts.

Sadly, humanity has a rich and deep history of just such misappropriation.

When faith attempts to masquerade as science
we get things like the gobbaldy gook that is intelligent design.

And when science takes on the attributes of faith
we get things like the dangerous “pseudo-science” of Eugenics,
the idea that humanity could be perfected
by a policy of selective breeding.

We humans have an amazing propensity for making messes of all kinds.

I thank God daily
that God loves us so much and

has the power and desire to redeem our messes,
like those sculptors that take all our garbage
and with creativity and hot glue and solder,
turn them into wonderful works of art.

It may not be what the artist intended,
but I see them as signs of God's redeeming grace,
of the power of God to take whatever we offer
and work good with it.

(Sorry, when you're a preacher, the whole world look's like a sermon illustration!)

Well, that is the hope that's in me.

It is the faith I struggle to live into every day of my life.

It is the incarnation of Jesus that lives in me and loves through me.

Last week I asked you to reflect on your baptismal covenant;
the words you say you believe.

This week I ask if the words are alive and growing,
or just words you say on Sunday morning.

If you had to defend the faith that is in you,
today,

what would *you* say?

And, what would you do?

A little something to think about on this wonderful day.

Amen.