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The Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Capital Campaign

The Great Sphinx of Egypt is a paradigm of the relation of nature and reason. Rising gracefully out of live rock, the Sphinx takes the shape of a great lion, resting on all four legs, not prostrate but erect, satisfied in strength and beauty, and yet also attentive to its place. Its attention derives from the rational sphere in the human head which looks with wisdom upon what lies before it This is man's mythical attempt at Incarnation. Its sculpture embodies the natural and the rational at once.

But now the Sphinx deteriorates. The reality of nature's pattern, the centuries of the seasons' contrariety, and the destructive spite of men, has worn the natural element and broken the rational vision into pieces. Human craft and proud aspiration are comprehended by nature's divine rhythm. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."

These words from Ecclesiastes remind us of the patterns of life, of nature and of human craft. The one measures the other. Nature, even in its finitude, comprehends nations and heir cultures both in their brilliance and in their presumption, forcing maintenance, development, and new life or the necessity of decay.

The same is true of our own lives with what we have made of the precious gift of our souls. Whenever we think more of ourselves than we ought to think, the seasons continue "relentlessly, and place us right where we need to be within the greater sublime realm of appointed cycles and times. The reality of finitude is a knowledge that comes with age. But this is only part of the pattern.

The rhythm of life comforts us as well. When we cannot seem to rise above the chaos of our inner selves, or when the chaos of human imagination erupts and overflows violently toward our fellow image-bearers, nature herself declares an inexorable law, repeating Fall and Winter and Spring and Summer, contradicting herself with profound destruction - cold or hot or dry or wet - only to resolve the contrariety with another miraculous beauty. "To everything there is a season."

All of this we know full well. Our own lives are instructed by the regularity and beauty of creation. She provides us with comfort and lessons of humility. And the way that we have fashioned our lives more or less reasonably, and often willfully, reflects the attention that we have paid to our place, or the way we rebel against it. The two are

inextricably entwined in how we use the passage of time.

Human craft, what the Greeks called "practical mind", works with and within nature's pattern. First there is co-operation with the facts of things, the limited resources of wood and stone and gem and the power of fire, oil, coal, and water to shape these. Then the practical mind fabricates synthetic energy and materials to complement what is already made. This is the human act of making, a refashioning, a combining and dividing of what exists already by the singular creative mind and will of God.

It turns out there is another greater perspective which comprehends even the truth of Ecclesiastes. There is "a time to every purpose under heaven," and there is the overarching reality of heaven itself and the eternal life of God beyond the laws and regularity of creation, and beyond the use of "practical mind."

God gives meaning to every season and to every purpose. Not a sparrow falls outside of the Father's care. Not a nation on earth flourishes without the mystery of divine permission and the prospect of divine judgment.

As we hear in the great Epistle of the Hebrews appointed for Christmas Day, 'Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: they shall perish; but Thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt Thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but Thou art the same, and Thy years shall not fail.'

Nature and every clever design of man shall pass away. What remains is the Lord Himself, now as we know Him, not a mythical aspiration like the Sphinx, but as He truly is, the Incarnate Word of God.

He is the reason St. John's Church exists. Our *raison d'etre* is to proclaim Jesus as the only begotten Son of God whose fellowship with the Father and the Holy Ghost are bestowed by grace upon us.

Neither the times and seasons of nature, nor the practical mind, are the final determinative forces of our lives. Rather at St. John's we inherit with all Christians the life of the Spirit handed on to us for generations. That inheritance is fellowship with God through Christ Jesus.

For many of us our inheritance began in churches and ministries outside of this beloved Parish which has come to be the spiritual school and preparation for our eternal home. For some of us, this Parish Church has been the place of spiritual birth and growth for generations. But for all of us what we now enjoy as St. John's Church is and shall be a solemn responsibility to pass on to subsequent generations.

We ourselves shall go the way of all material life. We shall die and our bodies decay. By God's grace our souls shall live with Him until our completion at the great day of Resurrection. For now we live within the preparation for God's blessed inheritance. And the means of our preparation is St. John's.

That is why the Vestry and Clergy have undertaken prayerfully a

capital campaign to provide for those who will come after us. This provision comprehends the totality of the stewardship of our Church.

There is to begin with our physical facilities, the Church, the Green-Meldrim house, and the Rectory. These are material things, but they are set aside for one specific purpose, to proclaim the kingdom of God.

What gives them their spiritual form is our life together, instructed by the Book of Common Prayer, conveyed by the Church Year, understood and lived in the knowledge and charity of Christ. Through nature's seasons this material element of our life must be maintained. But the maintenance of these buildings is not merely material. In themselves, by their very structure and adornment, they exhibit and witness the primary importance of being set aside for the sake of God's kingdom. Their beauty and dignity represent the King, and proclaim His truth and mercy. And so we must provide for their preservation.

In addition to these buildings, the Church School must undergo refurbishment. Its architecture expression is sorely dated and worn, and the building itself is inadequate to a comprehensive scheme of Christian Education for all ages in our Parish. We believe it is time to bring this particular building to the stature, dignity, and spiritual significance of the others. There is no greater responsibility or vocation more rewarding than the cultivation of our children in the knowledge of their heavenly Father. Christian Education for every person should be one of our first priorities.

And then comes mission. In order to preserve our tradition, not our mere customs, but the very tradition of passing on the fellowship of the Gospel in the form of the Book of Common Prayer, and within the Episcopal Church, we are putting into place a house of studies, called Elliott House, named for the first Bishop of Georgia and the first Rector of St. John's Church, Stephen Elliott.

The intention of Elliott House is to provide seminary graduates and ordained clergy the opportunity to spend a period of time in residence in our Parish, following our habit of prayer and worship, and studying classical texts of the Christian Church. In this small way we can help in training clergy to pass on the tradition that we love.

Of all the tasks that we can undertake during the seasons that make up our lives, this is foremost. Along with the Clergy and the Vestry, please pray about the spiritual responsibility of your gift to St. John's in Jesus' name.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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