

# Abandoned to the Word of God

## Meta

Date: January 18, 2026; Confession of St. Peter

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

## Readings

Acts 4:8–13

Psalm 23

I Peter 5:1–11

Matthew 16:13–19

## Prologue

Well this is a different kind of January and a different kind of Sunday. Most Januarys we move to Ordinary Time and green adorns the church. This January we will observe feast days throughout the month. Today the Confession of St. Peter, next Sunday the Conversion of St. Paul. Most years these events don't happen on a Sunday. Peter's confession has significance for us at Apostles, especially as we celebrate our 20th anniversary as a parish later this year. In the mid 2000s, our founding members established this church on the cornerstone that Jesus Christ is not one path to God among many others, but that he is the *only* way to God. Twenty years ago our church established this church on the cornerstone of Christ Jesus; on the truth Peter preached in Acts 4: 'There is salvation no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.'<sup>1</sup> From 2006 when our church was founded, to the drafting of the Jerusalem Declaration in 2008, to the formation of the ACNA in 2009, into the present day—our faith has been established on the truths of Scripture—and the ultimate truth that Jesus alone is Savior and Messiah.

Even as we celebrate Peter's confession today, I want to take the opportunity of this combined service to share my heart for Apostles and a spiritual theme for the year ahead. I've been praying and meditating on this for some time, and believe that the Holy Spirit calls our parish to a specific spiritual direction in this our 20th year as a parish. I believe we are called to *renew our love for the Word of God*. That will be the focus of today's sermon and it will be the spiritual theme for the year ahead. We are called this year not only to give thanks, remember, and commemorate 20 years as a parish, this is a year of renewal—to renew our love for the Word of God. So let us pray that God would grant us this desire. The Lord be with you...

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 4.12

## Opening

*Gracious God and most merciful Father, you have granted us the rich and precious jewel of your holy Word: Assist us with your Spirit, that the same Word may be written in our hearts to our everlasting comfort, to reform us, to renew us according to your own image, to build us up and edify us into the perfect dwelling place of your Christ, sanctifying and increasing in us all heavenly virtues; grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.*

When I first learned about Apostles in 2006, I was deeply inspired by the profound conviction in the truth of the Scriptures. Before I came here, I was coming from a church context, too, where ancient, essential teachings of the faith were being contested. I needed a place that would hold fast to the confession of Jesus Christ, to the belief that the holy Scriptures are trustworthy and contain all things necessary for salvation.

Over time, I learned how much we Anglicans value these statements of faith, to articulate our theological and moral positions. From the 39 Articles in the 1500s to the Jerusalem Declaration in 2008 and many other statements in between, we confess the truth of the Scriptures.

Whether it be our belief in the uniqueness of Jesus; the virgin birth; the physical resurrection of our Lord; our moral convictions in the sanctify of human life; that the unchangeable standard for Christian marriage is between one man and one woman—we stand on the Scriptures and defend our beliefs by the Scriptures.

I have also learned that confessing a truth is different than *hungering and feeding* on the truth. It is a one thing to say, “You are the Christ.” It is quite another for people to say of us, as they said of the first apostles, “these men and women have been with Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Over these nearly 20 years I’ve been an Anglican, I’ve observed something of a paradox among American Anglicans. We have right belief about the Scriptures; we have a storied tradition of reading Scripture in the Daily Office and our Lectionary, yet Anglicans are not known for having a deep hunger for the Word of God.

Several of us became Anglicans from evangelical churches. Now I’m a bit of a mutt regarding church background. I grew up in a mainline church, then spent many years in evangelical churches, worshipped among charismatic congregations, as well.

It was in my years in the evangelical church that I awakened to and experienced a deep hunger for the Word of God. On the whole, broadly speaking, our evangelical brothers and sisters have a much greater fervor and hunger for the Word of God than we do as Anglicans.

Now, two things. First, there is *no* competition in the pursuit holiness. But seeing strengths in fellow Christian brothers and sisters can awaken us to a commitment we need to renew. Secondly, I am an Anglican and I wouldn’t change for one second our deep embrace of liturgy, weekly communion, all the sacraments, the saints, the Book of Common Prayer, and more. And yet with our deep love and affection for all these distinctives of Anglican life; with our call to mission, whether in planting churches, sustaining churches, beautifying the church building; with our life in the diocese, the ACNA,

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 4.13

the global Anglican communion and all the denominational ministries thereof, *we can lose our first love for the Word of God amid numerous other church interests.*

This is not a new Anglican One of our finest Anglican poets, T.S. Eliot, composed a long poem in 1934 entitled *Choruses from the Rock*, which is all about renewing the church. The poet begins asking “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” pointed questions of his church in the 1930s. Then the Christ figure of Eliot’s poem steps forward and asks pointed questions of his church in the 1930s, admonishing the saints of that era about distractions of media and entertainment in their time, saying:

*Many are engaged in writing books and printing them,*

*Many desire to see their names in print,*

*Many read nothing but the race reports.*

*Much is your reading, but not the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>*

One hundred years on and we contend with a torrent of media, entertainment, and distractions that none could have imagined. In an age of much media consumption, where binge watching is the norm, how much are we consuming the Word of God? ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’

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<sup>3</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, 153.

I am grateful for our Anglican theology of Scripture. We are *not* fundamentalists. We do *not* worship the Bible. We believe that the greatest revelation of the Word of God is the Word made flesh—Jesus, the Son of God.

Look at the ancient icon on the cover of your bulletin, an icon from the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, Christ Pantocrator (meaning Ruler of all). Here is a visual theology of the Word of God. Jesus Christ, the God-man, is the Word of God. In his left hand he holds the Scriptures, but *he is greater than the Scriptures*, He is the Gospel. The Scriptures contain all things necessary for salvation, yet Jesus Christ, dwelling with the Father and Holy Spirit, transcends the Bible itself.

Christ is *more than Word of God written*, yet look at the book he holds—it's studded with jewels. It is precious, much like our collect expressed moments ago, "Gracious God, you have granted us the rich and precious jewel of your holy Word..." We read the Word of God with reverence and repentance, yet we treasure these words, hence the gesture of blessing in Jesus' right hand.

## *Reading by Faith*

To receive the blessing of Christ from his Word will require embracing faith beyond our feelings. Reading Scripture is like eating and drinking the Eucharist every Sunday. Most Sundays you probably won't have a great swell of emotion at God's altar. When the celebrant presents the Body and Blood of Christ from this altar, he says "The gifts of God for the people of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving." The priest never says, "Feed on him in your hearts **by feeling** with thanksgiving." We consume the Eucharist in our hearts by *faith*. God is here, feeding me, nourishing me with his grace and love, whether I feel it or not. In a similar way, we consume Scripture more by faith than feeling. But when you bring faith to Scripture—even when it's mustard seed faith—Christ will nourish you with his hope, his love, his beauty.

Today we celebrate the confession of St. Peter, but let's recall some other famous words of Peter. Recall the moment when many disciples decided they no longer wanted to walk with Jesus. Noticing the numbers of his followers dwindling, the Lord turned to the first disciples—the twelve—and said, "Do you want to go away as well?" St. Peter stood up and said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of life."

We need not only Peter's bold confession today, we need Peter's abandonment to Christ—his faith in God alone. 'You alone have the words of life.'

We Anglicans speak about the vital importance of reading the Bible as a daily discipline. At Apostles we teach and preach about praying the Daily Office, praying the Psalms. It is indispensable for our spiritual growth.

But we also need to seek Christ in his Word for our needs, not just as a daily spiritual discipline. When you are in pain, where do you turn? When you are faced with decisions, where do you go? We need to turn to the Word of God for comfort, for counsel, for the needs we face in our lives. When you are distressed, your greatest need will not be found on a podcast or a book on the bestseller list. Christ alone has the words of life and his Holy Spirit breathes anew through the pages of Scripture. 'To whom shall we go? You alone have the words of life.'

## A Confession

Let me pause for a moment and share with you my experience reading Scripture as an Anglican Christian. (Notice I said Anglican Christian, not Anglican priest.) I have learned so, so much from reading Scripture with the Daily Office. But it hasn't been easy. So much of what I have learned have come through tremendous struggles and failures praying and reading Scripture in this way.

For a number of years in the mid 2010s I prayed Morning Prayer and didn't want to. This hit me the hardest during my first sabbatical in 2015. The desire wasn't there. Scripture was dry; the Daily Office was dry. It was a time of testing, for sure. Furthermore, and it took me a long time to recognize this—I was coming to Scripture and the Daily Office as a checklist item; to feel good that I was keeping up my spiritual discipline. I was coming to Scripture to feel good about my habits, to feel spiritually productive.

In the midst of that Scripture drought—a drought that lasted for quite some time—

I held on to Peter's simple words. To whom shall I go? You alone have the words of life. Scripture helping me with my struggle with scripture. I didn't give up. I showed up to pray and read Scripture, not perfectly, but consistently. Walking by faith, not by feeling. Believing that there are words of life here—for me—even on days when I feel nothing inside.

In those years, the Daily Office Lectionary would lead me to Psalm 119 and, my goodness, it sounded like a foreign language to my heart. I would read a verse like Psalm 119.103, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" I read the Psalms aloud and I felt dishonest reading a verse like that. It's a mystery—reading Scripture revealed that I don't love Scripture as I ought. Psalm 119—this great psalm about the Word of God—became an index for my heart.

Oh, but the Holy Spirit was present in his Scriptures even when I was reading scripture, empty of desire. I saw how far I was from having a pure heart, and yet *it was purifying my heart*. It was shaping my desire. I could read Psalm 119 and say "I want a heart like that, even though I don't have it today." I believe that reading the Word of God in the presence of the Holy Spirit is the place where my heart is changed, not by casting it aside. That's why Psalm 119 means so much to me.

Psalm 119 was written by a young man—maybe it was David, Ezra, or Daniel, we're not sure—who *learned* to love the Word of the Lord through many struggles and failures. My goodness, for all his affection about the Word of God, he says at the end, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments." A postmodern novelist couldn't have written a better ending.

If we desire to renew our love for the Word of God, we will read the Word of God with faith—with belief beyond feelings. We will walk through times of spiritual drought and not give up. We'll throw ourselves at God with the reckless abandon of Peter, pouring out our hearts and praying that we will hear his words of life.

St Isaac of Nineveh said, "Never approach the words of the mysteries that are in the Scriptures without praying and asking for God's help. Say 'Lord, grant me to feel the power that is in them.' Reckon prayer to be the key that opens the true meaning of the Scriptures."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> St. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetic Treatises*, 73; quote in Clement *The Root of Christian Mysticism*, 101.

## On Reading and Attention

Having faith and belief is essential for reviving our love for the Word of God. Another quality that revives our love for the Word of God is the quality of **attention**. Simone Weil said that the quality of our attention in prayer matters much more than the warmth of heart we feel. Make it your goal to give God your undivided attention. What is one of the most precious gifts you can give someone you love? Your undivided attention.

You and I will always struggle with distractions in prayer and Scripture reading. It's been a struggle among the saints for 2000 years and it will be for us. Don't let distractions stop you or discourage you. The desire and the effort to devote our attention entirely upon Christ is one of the deepest acts of love you can offer him.

For this reason I strongly recommend that you use a physical Bible for daily Scripture reading. A physical Bible will not send you calendar alerts, email alerts, notifications that someone liked your post from 20 minutes ago. Give the Holy Spirit your *undivided attention*. If you want to show someone that you're intent on listening well to them, your body language, your posture reflects that desire. Show God you want to listen to him only. Read your Bible, read the Daily Office with a physical Bible.

The Word of God is living and active. The Holy Spirit inspired human authors to write Scripture and he inspires human readers in the reading of Scripture. In other words, he breathes constantly through the Scriptures to energize your heart.

(This past Wednesday I led the Vestry in a brief exercise that I've practiced through the years. I selected a short reading from Psalm 119 and asked them to listen for one verse that spoke to their heart. I then had them copy that verse verbatim on pen and paper, recording the date and time. No reflection or commentary necessary. No emotion needed. Just the words of Scripture on that day and time.

There's something mysterious that happens when you write the words of Scripture that have importance for you. Even if you don't know the full meaning of why a verse matters, you are giving your attention to words that God is speaking to your heart. If you read Scripture on a daily basis, record the most important verse for that day in a journal, in a week and a month, you will have a record of your conversation with God the Holy Spirit. It will like signposts along a trail, places where your life has intersected with the Word of God, a personal map of the Scriptures for that season of life. When I've been consistent with this journaling habit, it has always been a treasury for me. )

## A Call to Young Anglicans

I'd like to close by saying a few words to the young Anglicans in the room—our older kids, teenagers, students and our young adults in 20s and 30s. I want you to know that you are ever in my thoughts. I pray for you regularly. I am grateful for your place in this parish. It's vital for our present time and especially for our future.

When you're a young Christian, you often hear discussions about 'the future of the church.' Here's the truth about the church, proven again and again for more than two thousand years: God always renews his Church through a faithful *remnant*. What is a remnant? A remnant is a *minority*, a small percentage of the masses, abandoned to the Lord, no matter what. God has always renewed his Church through a remnant faithful, many of whom are young people. Samuel, David, Jeremiah, and Daniel in Israel; Mary, the Mother of God, Peter, James, and John, the twelve, Mary Magdalene, and

Timothy in the New Testament church. God calls young people and entrusts the future of his church to a minority—a remnant—who *nourish their souls on the Word of God*.

Peter and the apostles were turning the world upside down in the book of Acts. These were young men, standing before rulers and governors, bearing witness about Jesus. They were performing signs and wonders, filled with the Holy Spirit. And what was *obvious* about them? Everyone recognized “they had been with Jesus.”

This is my prayer for you. That it would be said of you—“they have been with Jesus.” Here is a young man who walks closely with Jesus. Here is a young woman who listens to the voice of the Lord. Here are young people who love the Word of God.

And so I challenge you in these younger years: throw yourself into the Word of God. Every single day. Befriend the psalms and the psalmists. Read through the Psalms and find the two or three psalms that matter most to you and the experiences of your life thus far. Read and re-read those psalms especially so.

Read the Gospels and discover which Gospel you love most. In my teenage years I learned that the Gospel of John was my favorite. While I read Matthew, Mark, and Luke, my personality and my story was especially tuned to the frequency of John’s Gospel. Your favorite Gospel might be Mark, maybe Matthew or Luke. Find which Gospel resonates most with your story and your personality. Go there often, seeking Jesus, throw yourself and your problems into that Gospel, listening closely to the words of the Lord and the voice of the Holy Spirit.

We have a prayer for mission in Morning Prayer that prays for our clergy and congregations, a prayer that ends with the phrase, “and ignite in them a zealous love of your holy Gospel.” I’ve been holding that prayer, that specific phrase, near my heart over Apostles for about 4 years now.

What is zeal? Fire in the heart. Fire for the Gospel in your heart. Look, I’m praying that for everyone, but I’m praying it especially over you, our young Anglicans. You need zeal for the Word of God to endure your teenage years, your 20s, your 30s.

One of the reasons we need a copy of the Bible with the Apocrypha is we need Scriptures that include writings like Sirach and the Song of the Three Young Men. We have the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Obednego in the Book of Daniel, three Hebrew youths who wouldn’t bend the knee to idols, thrown into a fiery furnace for their allegiance to the Lord. But in a Bible that includes the Apocrypha you hear *what* Shadrach, Meshach, and Obednego were singing when they were thrown in the fiery furnace.

In the first half of this song, we hear Shadrach, Meshach, and Obednego cry for help to the Lord. In the midst of the furnace they pray, “with all our heart we will follow you, we fear you and seek your face. Deliver us in accordance with your marvelous works.” The second half of the song, they aren’t crying in desperation. They are praising God. What happened between the first and second half of the song? *They met the Son of God in the furnace*. They had been with Jesus. (Thank God for Anglican Morning Prayer that includes verses from this song in between scripture readings. It prepares us to bless the Lord and praise him when we find ourselves in the furnace of trials.)

Ignite in us a zealous love of your Gospel, Lord. Because we need it now and we will need it in days to come, especially when trials come. We need the full 66 books of the Bible, especially the Psalms and

the Gospels. We need the Old Testament and the New Testament letters. We need the Apocrypha for our instruction in wisdom and our encouragement.

## Closing

I know that I've preached much longer than usual. I'm grateful for your patience. There's a fire in my heart that I cannot ignore. This is not an ordinary sermon, but a map for the year ahead, a precious year when we celebrate 20 years as a parish. *Let us renew our love for the Word of God.* The Word of God is a precious jewel. I don't want that to be a nicely worded collect, I want it to be engraved on my heart. Come Holy Spirit and ignite the pilot light in our souls for your Word. And all for the glory of God whose name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.