

Fighting the Good Fight, *In Medias Res*

by Penn L. Hagood, Senior Warden



Several weeks ago, I was asked to write an article for the inSPIRE about being on the Vestry and a warden at this time in the life of the church. Reluctantly, I agreed, and have spent each day since wondering what on earth I might say that anyone would want to read. I, perhaps most of all, am surprised to find myself serving on the Vestry and in the position of Senior Warden at this time in the history of St. Philip's. It is not something I sought. I serve only because someone called, and, after prayerful consideration, each time I accepted the call.

I am a teacher. It is all I ever wanted to be. For thirty years, I taught history and English. I was blessed with a wonderful career and the opportunity, over the years, to teach the chronological span of human history, from the dawn of man around seven million years ago through the great civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome until the events of our current day. In literature, I taught many of the great books of the Western canon, including the Greek myths and Homer's epic poems, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, among the world's earliest tales of war. In the last few years, I focused on military history and taught adult classes on "The War on Terror" and "Lessons of History."

One of the first lessons of history is that, again and again, we do not learn the lessons of history. History teaches that human nature does not change, and, because of that, human history is predominantly a story of conflict. As Plato recognized, "Wars are the center of history; peace is only the periphery."

If we study history and human nature, we will not be surprised that generation after generation knows no peace. Only our Savior, Jesus Christ, can change the human heart. Nothing man has ever done or will ever do will convince all men to live together in peace. General George C. Marshall astutely observed, "If man does find the solution for world peace, it will be the most revolutionary reversal of his record we have ever

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known.” The study of history illuminates the mistakes and the successes of the past. It informs better decisions in the present, and it shines a light forward to help us predict, and thereby prepare for, our own future.

In literature, there is a phrase known as *in medias res*, “in the midst of things.” This phrase is particularly associated with Homer, who begins each of his epics by picking up the narrative line in the middle of the events of the larger story. We drop in on Achilles in the ninth year of the Trojan War. We come upon Odysseus whiling away the years on Calypso’s island, gone from Troy but still far from home on Ithaca.

In some ways, this is how I see my service at this time in the life of St. Philip’s. I have dropped in, *in medias res*, in the middle of the story. St. Philip’s has a long and distinguished Godly history, and, by His grace, she will continue to be a light for the Gospel in the city of Charleston and beyond for generations to come.

Today, our church and the churches of our diocese are involved in an ugly conflict. In the midst of it, it is helpful to think in historical terms. This legal battle is but a small part of a much larger struggle between the Christian and the secular worlds. Some historians trace the roots of this present fight back to the Enlightenment in the 1700s. Others cite theological differences that began in the mid-20th century and rose to a crescendo in the early 21st century. Whatever its beginnings, there is a long history to this fight. No matter how it ends for us, it will not end with us.

While the fight can seem lonely at times, we draw comfort from the recognition that we do not stand alone. This is not just a struggle within the Episcopal Church. All denominations are wrestling with these issues. Our Diocesan disassociation with the national Episcopal Church formally occurred in 2012, but we were not the first, nor likely to be the last. We are a small part of a global battle that has fractured the worldwide Anglican Communion.

While this is an unwelcome fight, it is a necessary fight. We stand in defense of nothing less than religious freedom, the right to proclaim the Gospel Truth from these sacred spaces. We can do no less.

How should we respond in this place and in this time? We must reread history, learn from those who have gone before, and remember that we “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” (*Jude 3*) We must remind ourselves that we stand in defense of the divinity of Christ and the authority of Holy Scripture. Ours is merely the latest front in a 2,000-year world war waged to silence the witness of the Gospel.

But we must not let our battle, nor this larger war, consume us. We are called to be spiritual warriors, but we are not a war-like people. We must not let this fight harden our hearts. Rather, may we recall again and again our Godly heritage. May the defense of our faith remind us of its value and inspire us to share it widely, courageously, lovingly, and enthusiastically while we seek to truly and generously love one another.

For inspiration, let us look to the architecture of St. Philip’s. As the sanctuary of our magnificent building invades the secular territory of the city street, as it interrupts the foot and vehicular traffic of Church St., as our double doors open to all directions and our steeple cross shines east and west, may our Christ-like witness be an arresting beacon throughout the city of Charleston, this land, and over the seas, causing people to stop and turn toward the light of Jesus.

Of this battle of the ages that challenges us, consider what J. R. R. Tolkien wrote, “Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales never end? No, they never end as tales, but the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended.”

We are each called to play a part in the greatest story ever told.

Why am I where I am today, a warden of the Vestry of St. Philip’s? I truly do not know, unless it is because God, in His infinite wisdom, whispered that He might have need of an old history teacher, at this time, in this place, in our history.