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Recommended Citation

"Newspaper; n.d.; Pulpit." Bethel A.M.E. Church. Monroe Fordham Regional History Center, Archives & Special Collections Department, E. H. Butler Library, SUNY Buffalo State.

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Pulpit: An alternative plan

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your work?" they asked. "Yes, I do!" Jesus said.

"Surely," they said, "You have some alternative plan." "No," said Jesus, "I have no alternative plan."

"But you must have another group in reserve somewhere in the event this group fails," the angels said. To which Jesus replied: "I have no other group. This group is the one that I am depending upon, because this group is my church."

As unstable, and as unreliable as we are, as easily as we become discouraged or distracted, as quickly as we become tired and ready to give up, as often as we are inclined to complain and engage in self-pity, as stubborn as we are and as insistent in walking in our own willful ways, as weak and as unworthy as we are, the fact remains that Christ has committed and entrusted the ongoing work of the kingdom into our hands.

Any casual reading of the New Testament will reveal that our Lord left his work in some very shaky hands. It was left in the hands of disciples who demonstrated time and time again that they were unworthy of doing God's work and should not be trusted with it. To the very end, Peter continued to leap before he looked and to speak before he thought. To the end, Judas maintained a secret agenda while Thomas openly voiced his skepticism. To the end, Philip continued to ask inane questions, while James and John tried to plot and politic their way to the two top spots in the kingdom. Yet these were the ones who had been entrusted with the task of proclaiming salvation to a lost and wayward world.

The church that Christ left was a disappointed church. Those whom the Master called had a different conception and different expectations of his messiahship than he did. They expected him to inaugurate an earthly kingdom and they saw themselves on earthly thrones. They had hoped that he would redeem Israel, but his teachings, coupled with Calvary, had shattered their hopes.

The church that Christ left was a confused church. How could Jesus allow himself to be crucified? They had seen him rebuke raging storms, cast out demons, heal the sick and raise the dead. They knew that he could have withstood Caiaphas' vindictiveness, Herod's arrogance, and Pilate's vacillation. They knew he could have called legions of angels to fight his battles.

ry? Their confusion was the confusion of all of the faithful when they see goodness abused and crucified at the hands of evil, or when life seems to contradict all that they believe about a just and powerful and good God.

The church that Christ left was a weakened church. Divisions, betrayals, desertions and denials had decimated their fellowship. Satan had shown that all of them were disciples with clay feet and that none of them could be counted on when the chips were down. All of them had been shamed by their behavior on the night that Jesus was betrayed and none of them could feel quite the same about themselves when they looked in the mirror. Their self-confidence, their perception of who and what they were had been shaken.

The church that Christ left was a frightened church. It was a church that hid itself behind drawn shutters and closed doors. Now that Jesus had been crucified, what would happen to them? Jesus had already told them that the servant was not greater than his or her master, nor the messenger greater than the sender. Jesus had already told them that if the world hated and rejected him it would also hate and reject them. Having seen what happened to Jesus, they feared for their own lives.

The church that Jesus left was a lifeless church. It was a church in mourning. They had lost the physical presence of the One who was their integrating center. They had lost the One who had called them from where they were and brought them together. They had lost the One who had given them life.

The church that Christ left was all of this, to be sure, but it was also more than this. The church that Christ left was also a believing church, a hopeful church, a trusting church, an expecting church. With all that had happened to their little group, with all of their disappointment, confusion, weakness, fear and personal loss, they still dared to believe Christ's promises and follow his commands. There were some things that Satan couldn't destroy and the world couldn't touch. There were some things they could still trust, and Christ's promises ranked among them. How do the faithful keep hope alive, stand on the promises and witness to the goodness of Jesus in the face of unrelenting evil and the frailty of humanity?

It is said that once the great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, was in concert when one of the strings on his

laughed. He continued to play, however, and shortly afterward another string broke. The crowd laughed again. Later, when the third string broke and Paganini continued to bring forth good glorious music from the one string left, the audience looked on in hushed wonder. They realized they were indeed in the presence of a master who could bring forth sublime music from a violin with three broken strings.

The church that Christ left had broken strings, but they continued to play on the one string that was left — the string of faith. Sometimes all we have to go on is our experience in trusting God's Word. Sometimes life, circumstances and reality will contradict all that we believe; sometimes we won't know what the future holds; at times the only string we have left is our knowledge of what Jesus has done — how he has stood with us, fought battles for us, and opened doors for us. But if we can just play on that one string, if we can remember that the Lord has always kept his promises and that he has promised to be with us, gives us reason to keep hoping, trusting, praying and believing. We must play the string.

However life often provides notes of pain, sorrow, disappointment and shame. How do we play appropriate music on our string that praises and glorifies God when life is providing the blues? The answer is in Acts 2. Jesus promised a comforter, and the comforter will provide the anointing that allows God's children, Jesus' siblings, to turn life's blues into Godly praise. Yes, we have the string of faith, but every once in awhile we need the anointing to play the string. The anointing will allow you to take life's notes of hurt, pain, rejection, disappointment, failure, illness, betrayal and death and turn them into a symphony of praise, melodies of joy and orchestrations of thanks. Life may break many of your strings, but you have one string that only you can break — the string of faith.

With the anointing of the Holy Spirit, play the string. Make heavenly music for your soul, melodies to encourage your heart and rhythms to praise your God. Play the string and God's work will be heard and seen.

If you wish to suggest a local clergyman or woman of any faith whose sermon could be included on this page, contact Paula Voell at The Buffalo News, P.O. Box 100, Buffalo, NY 14202.