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Dear Friends,

I hope you have all had a good summer.

And I hope you are ready for a year of blessings and challenges, of receiving and giving, of teaching and learning, and of growing in our love of God and of one another—not only within our immediate community, but in the larger world as well.

Good Advice One of the books I read this summer [*Simply the Good News* by the Rt. Rev. N. T. Wright] suggested that we are prone to the error of treating the Good News as if it were Good Advice. We look to God to help us out from time to time; in times of stress we might consult, or at least think we ought to consult, God; and we tend to think about engaging with God in prayer when all of the other more practical options have been exhausted. In this perspective we look upon God as a wise sage whom we respect in the abstract and who is one source, among many, of how we might live.

Bishop Wright makes the point that this view of a wise, avuncular but not very practical God has basically nothing in common with the God we find in scripture or worship in liturgy, The Almighty, The Creator of everything, The one who transcends everything we can think or imagine.

The new pillars Somewhere in the last two centuries Western European and North American culture began the experiment of seeking to make a good life—private and public—without God. The emerging pillars of this new way of life were government, education, economic growth, and, especially recently, technological development.

So, for example, to address the deeply dysfunctional dynamic of race in America, we looked to pass new laws to outlaw discrimination, we set about a long series of educational reforms to promote racial equality, we talked about jobs and ensuring access to all levels of employment regardless of race, and we developed more and more sophisticated means to measure and monitor our progress.

And certainly much real, important, vital progress has been made.

Laws, schools, jobs, and technology are powerful tools, and if they were enough, American racial dysfunction would, in fact, be history.

Human nature, and our history....My sense is that determined people will always find a way to subvert laws in which they do not believe; twentieth century history clearly shows that education is no guarantee of basic humanity, let alone virtue; many fully employed and highly paid people have perpetrated great evil on scales small and large; and technology tends to magnify rather than purify human attitudes and behaviors.

We live in a world of highly developed minds, damaged hearts, and starving souls. And our dilemma is that the institutions in which we have put our faith are unable to address our deepest needs. The Church is not the place to come to learn calculus. I see little evidence that schools are able to heal hearts or feed souls. Government, education, the economy, and technological innovation are, appropriately, vital elements of our culture. The progress we have made in each area is remarkable and something for which we should all give thanks.

Old news Two thousand years ago St. Paul hammered home as a core teaching of the Christian faith that we cannot find our way to health through the law. Rules by themselves will never shape our hearts and identity. Paul and Jesus both repeatedly made the point that learning and wisdom will not bring us peace and well-being. The wisdom of God seems to the world foolish—we might say “impractical.”

Jesus and Paul both commended, and modeled, hard work, but said it was nowhere nearly dependable enough to be something on which to base your life. At any moment our life (or, perhaps more scary, the life of someone we love) might be required, and, in that moment, how much will titles, possessions, and status matter? The Romans were the technological wizards of their age, but for all their brilliant architecture, engines of war, roads, and public works, and massive libraries, first their government, then their culture, collapsed before barbarian hordes.

If this is how you welcome people.....So why so much gloom at the beginning of a year? We still have a chance, as individuals, as families, as a community, and as a culture to find our way to health. But none of the mounting evidence suggests that we will achieve that goal successfully without God. We’ve tried it; it’s not working.

I am enough of a free-market economist, and still have enough intellectual humility, not to try to compel anyone to see God just the way I do. I will make my case as vigorously as I can, but I want to make a sale, not take a prisoner. I readily acknowledge my debt—spiritual, ethical, and intellectual—to those of other traditions both within and beyond the Christian tradition. I see those holy women and men as messengers of God sent to remind me that though my Christian, Episcopal faith is a true and valid way to God, God is bigger, grander, more complex, more beautiful, more loving, and perhaps more terrifying than anything I can imagine, let alone articulate. Being serious about bringing God into our lives does not make them more narrow; it expands them beyond anything secular [the Latin root has connotations of “of this age”] resources can do. Whatever the resources of this age, those of all of the ages are greater.

Even free market economists are suspicious of unrestrained personal freedom. Most, for example, seem reasonably comfortable with requiring vaccinations against virulent childhood diseases. If an issue is important enough, we let consensus take precedence over freedom. I do not propose imposing any particular faith on everyone, but I remember, maybe even with something like nostalgia, when in America there was a cultural consensus that faith in God—observed in a wide variety of ways—mattered to personal well-being and public security. As that consensus has eroded and neared collapse, we as a culture have not grown stronger or more healthy. We are certainly more materially prosperous. We can do more to our environment and, interestingly, to ourselves. But I

am not convinced that being richer and more powerful has made us better to one another or happier with ourselves.

Just about all of us have become secularists, and, as it turns out, secularism has its own fundamentalism, its own rigid beliefs to be held against all evidence, its own rigid dogmas, and its own ability to ridicule, persecute, and exclude those who do not accept its orthodoxy. Secularism has become our established religion and it has done its job so well that we can barely see and hardly dare name the consequences of its creeds and practices. We do not think of secularism as an artificially constructed system of beliefs; we think of it as just as the way things are.

When we think church is an interesting, or even salutary, option, but not really necessary, when we think missing school is always a serious problem but missing church is rarely a matter of consequence, or when we skip church for reasons that no employer would accept as a valid reason for absence, then we see our secularism in play.

I certainly do not suggest we go back to the Middle Ages, nor am I sure and certain of what it means to go forward. I am reminded of an observation attributed to an American soldier pinned down by Nazi machine gun fire on Omaha Beach on D-Day. He is said to have called out that there were two kinds of men on the beach at that point—those who were dead and those who were going to be. Anyone who wanted to survive the next hour, let alone the war, had better get moving. Going back into the sea was not an option and staying on the beach meant people were dying and nothing was going to change.

St. Elizabeth's exists so that you may find God or let yourself realize how God has always known and sought after you. We exist so that we may hear again how God came to us in Jesus so that, when it comes to God, we need not speculate, we need only remember. St. Elizabeth's exists so that our youngest members may grow up never having known a time when God was not part of their lives, and so that our older members may come back and be welcomed into a community seeking God with roots that extend thousands of years back into human history and experience.

Against such grand images teaching Sunday School, hosting Coffee Hour, singing in the choir, showing up on any (OK, preferably every...) given Sunday, and such ordinary things may seem small by comparison. But such acts of faithfulness shape our hearts and provide occasions for God, through any of a number of expected or unexpected voices, to speak to us. And our hearts will shape our character, and our character our identity, and our identity our actions, and our actions our lives, and our lives our families, communities, culture, nation, and world.

Like those soldiers on Omaha beach, we have much to do today and in the weeks ahead. They did not come to Normandy to save themselves, they came to save a world, but to do that, they had to make every effort they could not to die that day on that beach. Let us make the effort which will lead not only to our own lives being enriched and blessed, but will lead to an oppressed and occupied world being restored to freedom and peace.

I hope you had a good summer. Now let's have an even better autumn, winter, and spring.

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