

Dear Friends,

The Pre-Dawn Briefing One of the staples of fictional or historical accounts of the American bombing campaign in Europe in WWII is a presentation of the pre-dawn briefing. In those final hours before daylight key crew members would be gathered together for a series of presentations about the mission they were about to fly. Elements would include an overview of weather patterns, where enemy fighters were most likely to hit, how long they would have friendly fighter cover, key navigational information about the legs of their flight and when to change direction, what altitudes to maintain, how to recognize the target as they approached, and notes on return courses and, if necessary, escape options if they were downed. Fighter pilots for the same mission would have their own briefings with the details they needed to carry out their own assignments.

Pilots, co-pilots, navigators, and bombardiers would take copious notes. And what prompted first their attendance and then their attention was not so much the inherent appeal of the content, or the dazzling rhetoric of the presenters, but their belief, from experience and observation, that their lives depended on what they were being told. Miss a navigational turn or fly at the wrong altitude and their plane or group could be easy targets for fighters. Miss the target, and they would have to come back some other day and run the gauntlet again for a second try. Get the wrong map coordinates for heavy flak defenses and they could fly right into the most deadly zones in northern Europe. The missions were always dangerous and often very costly, but without the information offered in the briefings the chances of survival dropped dramatically. So people showed up as active listeners, not so much because they were ordered to, but because they knew that they needed what was presented to survive.

The briefing was not an introduction to flying, to engine maintenance, to tactics, or to gunnery. The briefing did not tell crews everything they needed to know. Each crew member was responsible for their jobs and their skills—for cultivating and exercising what St. Paul would have called their gifts. The people giving the briefings did not fly the mission for the crews—often they stayed back at the base preparing for the mission after this one. When a crew hit trouble in the middle of a mission, their ability to get through it depended on their training, their skills, and their ability to work together and with the other planes in their group. The briefing leaders were not there, nor were they, in WWII, even available by radio for consultation. Crew members had to internalize their skills and depended on their colleagues to have done the same.

Your Mission You do not need a briefing to see where I am going with this. God created the church so everyone could have briefings before going out on their mission. And the “mission” isn’t volunteer work in a economically poor setting; it isn’t “missionary” work in some exotic setting: the mission, for most of us, is getting up every morning, going to work or looking for work, dealing with our families, going to school, navigating the various emotional, psychological, spiritual, and sometimes even physical dangers of the day, and hoping to get safely back to base in one piece with the day’s mission accomplished. Ordinary life is the mission, and it is sufficiently complicated and hazardous that we need regular briefings to make it through intact.

My hope is that we will come to church with the same sense of serious purpose that those air crews brought to their briefings, believing that without the input we will receive on Sunday morning we

would be setting off on a dangerous journey without the preparation we need—and which is available—to have our best chance of success and safe return.

Crews at their briefings no doubt chatted, and maybe even joked, coming in and out of the meetings—fellowship was important for morale, but the purpose of the gatherings was not to see friends but to hear what they needed for the day. Pilots attended not just to be sure that their bombardiers heard what they needed to know, but because the pilots knew they had to learn from the briefing, too. There was no audience in the briefing, only members of the unit for whom the briefing was a key element of what was to follow—everyone was an active participant.

Four Points and a Bumper Sticker Like those air crews in the early 1940's, we will hit rough times on our mission. If our plan when that happens is to check back with the briefing staff to walk us through the immediate crisis in real time, we may find ourselves without all the resources we might have had. One purpose of coming to church is not simply to know someone who knows God, but to know God well ourselves, so as we go about our mission, we are fully equipped to deal with whatever it throws at us. Keeping our relationship with God like a fire extinguisher behind glass to be broken in an emergency may not be our strongest position. A bumper sticker offers a related insight: “If God is your co-pilot, consider changing seats.”

For this mindset to make sense we need to acknowledge four things.

- First, we do not know on our own how best to handle whatever life throws at us.
- Second, looking at what everyone else is doing might make us feel more comfortable but may not make us more skilled.
- Third, if God did indeed create all that is, then perhaps God has some useful insights to how we might interact successfully with God's creation, which includes not just the “natural” world but also all of humanity—individuals, families, communities, nations, and the global population.
- Fourth, God wants us to know how we fit into God's creation and guides us in that understanding, primarily in scripture (in stories and poetry as much as in admonitions and prescriptions) but also in the life of the Church which God called into being and continues to guide through God's presence as the Holy Spirit.

Full Disclosure Being clear about what the church exists to do will help us make more sense of what happens each Sunday morning. In the opening of the Eucharist [“Blessed be God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever.”] and in the Opening Sentences of Morning Prayer we announce at the very beginning what we are gathered to do: to focus on God, God's will, God's relation to us, and God's hope for this world and the world to come. The Episcopal Church is a full-disclosure religion—our liturgical intent is to say what we mean and mean what we say. So, in the Rite I Eucharist, when we quote Jesus' saying that the first and great commandment is to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, we are not being poetic, we are offering something like the navigational element of the mission briefing. We may choose to fly by other coordinates, but we cannot, with integrity, expect God to bless that course.

If we come to the briefing primarily to chat with other crews, we may have a good time here but may find ourselves underprepared once we are in the air on our own. If we come because we think the junior members of our crew really need this, we may be forgetting that for them to land safely, we have to know what we are doing ourselves. If we messed up on our last mission, coming back and figuring out what we missed and focusing on how to be better next time probably makes more sense than skipping briefings out of a sense of embarrassment. The fact is, we get sent out on missions whether we attend the briefings or not, so the only thing we can skip is what might make us better next time out. And maybe we were brilliant on our last mission, but today's mission has a different route, different dangers, and a different target and we need this day our daily briefing.

Seat backs and tray tables in their original upright position So I am a fanatic about briefings not so much because they are great fun but because we are preparing for takeoff, and I want every crew in our unit to have every possible resources to meet the dangers that will come their way. I want us all to have every possible help in getting to our objectives, and as I am watching each plane come back, I want the number that land to be no less than the number that took off.

I hope you will each come to St. Elizabeth's with the active goal of coming away each week better prepared for daily life because of your encounter with God here—through hearing and reflecting on God's word in scripture and through opening yourself in music, prayer, and symbols to the workings of the Spirit which transcend the verbal and the intellectual but are no less real or authoritative because of that.

I look forward to seeing you all this fall. We have a full year ahead of us which, I expect, will have a rich combination of blessings, opportunities, challenges, sorrows, and joys. May we seek, find, and be comforted and guided by God as we navigate our way through these months ahead.

The Rev. Cn. John G. Hartnett, Rector