In my current role I find myself at a different church every Sunday morning. After 3 years I am finally getting close to having visited every one of the 175 congregations in the Diocese of Massachusetts. This has its joys and delights. But it is not the same as travelling the journey and marking the milestones and going deep with one parish community. So I miss you still, and I always will, and it is good to be here today.

Another thing about my current role is that it has me reflecting with some regularity about what church is for. Not that I hadn’t asked such a question before. But there’s something about traveling around, holding gatherings and conducting confirmations and ordinations, and trying to get the big picture, that gets one wondering – what are we doing here?

I received one sort of answer “from on high” – which is to say, it was on a billboard as I drove north out of Boston on I-93. Looming above the traffic, in large, bold letters it said:

(A) Go ask your mother.
(B) Because I said so.
(C) We’ll see.

Later, I learned that it’s an ad campaign encouraging adoptions and foster parenting in Massachusetts. The billboard is meant to represent real but imperfect answers that parents give to questions asked by their kids. At the bottom, it says: “There are no perfect answers in parenting.” But when I first saw it, it put me in mind of an earlier billboard campaign with purported messages from God. Remember those? Big black billboards with white letters, giving short messages, like:

We really need to talk. – God
If you must curse, use your own name. - God
As my apprentice, you are never fired. – God
Don’t make me come down there! - God

So when I read that billboard on I-93, I figured these too were messages from God: Go ask your mother. Because I said so. We’ll see.

And I thought, if these are God’s answers to some of my questions – well, then, what is God saying to me, as I drive through Medford, Mass?

A. **GO ASK YOUR MOTHER**
In parenting this is normally seen as an avoidance tactic. “Dad, can you take me for my driving test next week?” Go ask your mother. “Dad, can you explain to me the Pythagorean Theorem?” Go ask your mother.

But in Christianity, your mother is the Church itself. “Holy Mother Church” is by tradition mother to us all, across time and place. So, “Go ask your Mother” means – bring your questions to the Church. When you and I have questions – about faith, about ethics, about the big mysteries of life – there is no virtue in trying to puzzle things out on our own. Bring your questions to others who have also been trying to use their God-given gifts of intellect and intuition to find answers.

Read some theological works, ancient and contemporary. Read St. Augustine and read Dorothy Sayers. Read the mystical writings of Julian of Norwich, the poetry of T.S. Eliot, or the essays of Annie Dillard, or Nadia Bolz Weber. Gosh, you might even read the Scriptures! “Long ago,” said today’s reading from Joshua [24:1-3, 14-25], “... the Lord our God brought us and our ancestors up out of the land of Egypt ... he protected us along all the way that we went...” Stories like this morning’s are part of your birthright. Learn the stories, ancient and modern. And bring your questions to the church. And if you haven’t yet found the right individuals or groups there to help you explore, keep looking until you do.

My own mom got tired of my questions. I guess she felt pestered or cross-examined, because she would often sigh and say, “You are such a Philadelphia lawyer.” But I don’t think she really minded. Because if you are asking questions, you are in relationship with the one you are questioning. You’re engaged in the quest, seeking to learn and grow.

If you think the world is not the way it ought to be these days, and there are things the people of God ought to be trying to address with our faith as a guiding principle – you’re right!

In your life of faith, I hope you come to the church to figure these things out. As God might say: “Go ask your Mother!”

B. BECAUSE I SAID SO.

In parenting, this is the ultimate cop-out. “Why do I have to go to bed now?” Because I said so. “Why can’t I get a Yankees tattoo?” Because I said so.

Frankly, the church has probably used this one a little too often, when really we just didn’t want to admit that the question was a hard one. “Why should I call God the Holy Trinity, if I only believe in one God?” Because I said so! Sometimes we need to find better answers, even when exploring sacred mysteries.

But then, there are times when “Because I said so!” is just the right answer. Last year in the mill city of Haverhill, Massachusetts, we blessed the opening of Dinah’s House. It’s a safe center for women and children, especially women who are trying to break loose from entrapment in sex trafficking, or cycles of domestic violence and other forms of abuse. The founding director, an Episcopal Deacon named Gay Cox, says that most of the women
who come there suffer from feelings of guilt, shame, and worthlessness. Even as victims, they are conditioned to imagine that they deserve what they get. Deacon Cox says, “We just have to keep telling them, ‘You are not bad. You are not junk. You are worthy of God’s love.’” And I expect that if such a person were to say to God, “Why do you love me? How do I know you love me?” - God’s answer would simply be, “Because I said so.”

At any moment in your life, if you are feeling sad, or ashamed, or uncertain, or afraid, I hope you come to the church and are reminded here that God has truly said to you, “You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And if you find yourself saying to God, “But why should I believe that? How do I know it’s true?” - for once let this answer be good enough: “Because I said so. I love you, and you are good enough. Because I said so.”

C. WE’LL SEE. This is another parental non-answer, isn’t it? When my sons used to ask, “Dad, can we go to Disney World some time?”, I invariably responded, “We’ll see.” Which of course was my polite way of saying, “Oh, do we really have to?”

Still, sometimes, it is the only honest answer. Life is full of unknowns and unpredictables. “Will the Cavs go all the way this year?” We’ll see. “Will Karel Paukert jump up on his bench to direct the anthem today?” We’ll see. “Will I get the job I am hoping for?” We’ll see.

The life of faith in particular deals often in big questions, eternal questions, which do not always lend themselves to a definitive answer. “Will my loved one recover from her stroke?” We’ll see. “What does it truly look like when we die?” We’ll see. Sometimes it’s a slippery answer. But sometimes, it is the most honest answer there is, full of humble integrity, and full of hope.

The Gospel reading this morning points us towards the upcoming season of Advent, when we focus on watching and waiting. To be sure, we are invited, like those bridesmaids, to be active in our hopefulness. We’re not supposed to just wait around for God to do all the work, to fix our every problem and supply our every need without our ever giving a thought or lifting a finger, like those foolish ones. No, we do all we can in this aching, beleaguered, murderous, divided, sin-riven world, to be people of a different way – to love and serve and heal and act in every possible moment as agents of God’s grace.

And then, we try to be ready – even if we are not quite sure what it is we are to be ready for! But in the end, we wait, we remain attentive, alert to signs, alert to the arrival – noisy or hushed – of the coming of God anew into our lives. How? When? What will it look like? We’ll see, we’ll see … with humility and with hope, we wait and we whisper, We’ll see.

I am so glad you are part of the life of St. Paul’s, and what our Presiding Bishop calls the Jesus Movement. I am glad that in coming here you commit yourself to a life of spiritual inquiry and practice.

And I hope, as you continue to wonder and to question, that you will remember to Ask Your Mother.
I hope that you will hear God’s voice, asserting without equivocation: “My beloved child, know that I love you – Because I Said So.”

And I hope that you will live your life, looking with eager patience towards the future, wondering what joys and sorrows lie ahead, waiting and working with God, saying hopefully, We’ll See, We’ll See.

The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates
Bishop of Massachusetts