

A homily by Alexandra Gillespie
2021 High School Graduate
June 6, 2021

I've seen high school seniors stand here and speak on their faith every year on this Sunday for as long as I can remember. I've watched siblings of my classmates come up to the front of the church and say all of these inspiring and pieces on each of their respective faith journeys, confident in themselves and confident in their relationships with God.

As a general rule, I don't possess that same confidence. I operate under a fake-it-til-you-make-it mentality where if you pretend to know what you're talking about you'll buy yourself enough time to figure it out and no one will have to know. But when it comes to religion and God and this church, I didn't really want to fake it. It just didn't feel right.

Truth be told, I've struggled with a lot this last year. I don't particularly care for change and the last 15 months have consisted almost exclusively of things changing. We went months without seeing anyone outside of our families, went to school online, and got so used to wearing masks that we now feel naked without them. I'm graduating high school and leaving home. I'm going to college in middle-of-no-where Maine and before you ask no, I have not yet purchased a coat heavy enough for those weather conditions. So much feels uncertain and like I have no idea what I'm doing, even a little bit.

I made the mistake early on trying to hold on to parts of myself and the world that were changing, whether I like it or not. My relationship with the church and God was one of those things. Obviously, I couldn't actually be in church during a pandemic so that coupled with my inability to see many of the people I loved left me feeling alone. It was strange, we were all collectively feeling the same isolation so there was a vague sense of solidarity but not necessarily community. Things simply weren't the same, and I kept looking for ways to make it feel like everything was normal. I'm sure a lot of you can relate to that.

The greatest error in my pursuit for continuity was forcing myself to feel connected to God exclusively via a computer screen. Without the congregation and music and the building itself, I wasn't unable to fully experience our virtual church services. Call it my nonexistent adolescent attention span, call it burnout from online classes every day of the week, but no matter what you call it I just couldn't do it.

Then, one day in February or March, I decided to go on a walk. I remember putting on my dad's big red jacket so cars could see me and my favorite gray hat so my ears wouldn't freeze. I mention these insignificant details in hopes that you may fully appreciate how insignificant the circumstances were. That is, right up until a breeze blew the hair out of my face and I felt the sun cut through the frigid air. Yes, I sound like a greeting card and no, I don't care, because it's true. I felt closer to God in that moment than I had since the start of the pandemic a year prior. I learned very suddenly that God isn't a place or a person, God is simply an experience when you feel completely connected to a force greater than yourself. And let me tell you, that was the most liberating epiphany of every life lesson the pandemic has taught me.

Don't get me wrong, I still enjoy going to church and still feel close to God when I see all of you or sit on session meetings or package gift bags with the youth group. Those are all experiences where I feel that connection. But seeing as I won't be able to physically be

here in a couple months when I head off to college, I very much take comfort in knowing that I'll be able to get in touch with God even when I can't be with all of you.

Since that walk last winter, I feel God's presence regularly, the most notable and recent moments surrounding the blooming cottonwoods around town whose seeds fill the sky with snow-like fuzz. I'm willing to bet middle-of-no-where Maine will have plenty of trails where I can wander and feel God's presence. I know not all of you are going off to college, but this has been a time of change for all of us. Seeing everything change is a lot less scary when you know that you can feel connected to God at any moment you appreciate all His creation.