April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain.

That’s what T. S. Eliot wrote in his renowned poem *The Waste Land*. He and his wife caught the Spanish Flu in December of 1918. He wrote much of this poem during his convalescence in London. All of this was on the heels of the Great War, when so much death and destruction had left the West reeling.

There’s nothing cruel about April itself; but in the northern climes, it’s a time of transition from winter to spring, from the barren and dry land to one blossoming with life and hope. Eliot uses it as a metaphor for the tension between memory and desire, between what has been and could be, between death and new life.

We are experiencing Eliot’s April in November. We’re enduring another pandemic. We’re going through what feels like a great cultural and political war. We want to find hope in a spring moment, but we feel caught, stuck, on pause, because winter lingers.

This is true of so many things in life. Launching out in hope, moving forward, making a new start is exciting and frightening at the same time. Our vision calls us forward, but our memory holds us back.

The Israelites felt just like that in our text today from Exodus 14. Moses promised them a new start in freedom from slavery. They had left Egypt and were standing on the banks of the Sea of Reeds. But Pharaoh and his army were in hot pursuit. They were afraid and wondered why they even tried. It felt a cruel April to them. They complained to Moses: *Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?*

This is what it feels like any time we make a new start. Withdrawal pains set as you try to dry up or clean up from alcohol or drug addiction. Hunger pangs hit when you start a diet and you can’t rely on your snack foods to comfort you. The first week you exercise to get in shape, every muscle in your body is sore and you just want to stay in bed. You try to get free of
debt and you cut up the credit cards, but there are those shoes that are so cute, and you know they would make you happy. Maybe you’re trying to start over after a breakup or loss of a job and it’s just so hard to focus on what’s ahead because your mind is swimming in regret or resentment.

How do you make a start to live into the future you want when the past, your familiar habits that were killing you, are always nipping at your heels?

Moses shows us what a true leader says in moments like these: *Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.*

We love that, don’t we? Just stand still. But no sooner are those words out of Moses’ mouth than the Lord speaks to him and says this: *Tell the Israelites to go forward.*

Go forward. Our biblical faith begins with this command from God. Jewish and Christian faith is rooted in a commitment to move forward. Don’t go back. God is always doing a new thing. And God will fight for us. We just have to go forward.

This is what your baptism represents. Like the Israelites going into the waters, they find that God makes a way through the sea for them and then drowns their oppressors behind them. They had to go forward, though. In the same way, we walk into the waters of baptism and God drowns our threatening past there, delivering us with Christ into the newness of life.

Four years ago this week in our church, November felt like April. We were trying to make a new start, but we were afraid of leaving behind what was comfortable for many of us but not lifegiving for Every Body. We decided to go forward, though, to make a new start; and we found God faithful. Many feel afraid about the state of our country today. The temptation to stay where we are or go back has been calling out to us that it’s only safe when you stick with the familiar. But America has always been a project, an ideal beyond our grasp that has beckoned us onward to a more perfect union. Whether you are talking about the church or the country, going forward is the only safe option that leads to life.
Today we begin a three-week stewardship emphasis I am calling Start to Finish. You can’t finish unless you start. And starting is never easy. You have to decide to become a good steward of your resources. We do not come by the spirit of giving naturally. We naturally hold on; we don’t naturally let go. Generosity is an act of forward faith. It takes making a start.

In his second letter to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul tells the Christians there: In this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something to finish what you started. We’ll take time in the next two weeks to talk about continuing and finishing, but I want to focus today on getting started in your giving.

The context of this letter is interesting. There was a famine in Jerusalem. The Christians there were hurting. Paul was collecting an offering to send to the church in Palestine. He tells the Corinthians, who were wealthy by comparison to other churches, that they need to give from their wealth. He even uses the example of the poorer church in Macedonia to shame them into giving. That church gave generously even though they had little. Then he drops the ultimate example of Jesus: though he was rich, he became poor so that we might be rich. And by rich in this case, he means spiritually, don’t you know?!

Friends, we are a rich church. I know we aren’t as rich as some. But compared to others, we are wealthy beyond measure. Yes, there are richer churches than Wilshire in Dallas, and there are poorer. If we only compare ourselves to the rich, we will miss the point.

And that is true also among our members. Some of you are struggling financially right now. Others of you are doing better than you want to admit. We may all be letting this COVID-19 pandemic dictate to us what we do with our money. We are fearful of the future, whether we will have enough if we give generously. It feels like a perpetually cruel April we can’t get out of. We think we should wait to see if things pass and then give when we have more confidence things are going to be okay. But the secret of the Christian life is found in risking it all when it all feels like it’s all on the line.

*Go forward,* God says. *Get started.* Move now, and watch what God
I believe every single of one of us wants to be generous. None of us wants someone to stand up at our funeral and say *He was a magnificent miser. She was a prolific penny-pincher.* We all want to have people say of us that we lived for others. That we opened our hand to the poor. That we trusted God and found God faithful.

If you haven’t been giving until now, I challenge you to make a start. Begin to give. Open your hand and see if God doesn’t do as God promises.

Some of you have been giving something now and then but in your heart of hearts you want to become a committed tither, a person who gives at least ten percent of your income to the Lord through the church. You have been fearful to take that step and get started. But if you don’t start, how will you ever know the God who promises to fight for you and take care of you if you only move forward?

There are so many restrictions we are dealing with right now on how we gather, how we conduct our lives and our church interactions. We hear stop more than go. But we long to have something we can do now. One thing we can do is give. Give generously now.

Some of us have taken this pandemic time of cruel April to start new habits. We are walking and working out. We are eating right and trying to order our health and fitness. Many of us last fall at this time made commitments to give to the Unified Budget and to finish the Pathways Endowment to fund our residency program perpetually. If you haven’t started to give as you pledged to then, get started now. This is the best time, even if it’s April in November.

I challenge you today to start to finish. Fear will flee and freedom will appear when you obey the word of the Lord to ... go forward. Amen.