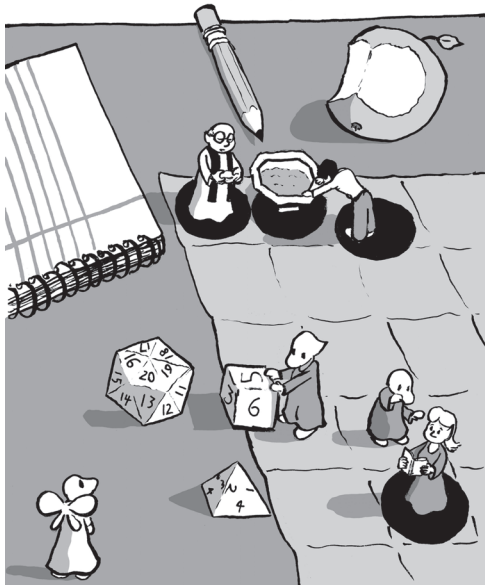# Introduction

In which an adventure begins

[This chapter introduces geeks to the world of church. For church folk seeking an introduction to the realm of geekdom, "Introduction 2.0" on page 7 will offer some party tips.]

So you want to go to church. Good for you. If you're between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, you're already ahead of 65 percent of the population. Further: Church is awesome. Not only do you get to meet lots of really cool—and nerdy—and countercultural—and comfortable in their own skin kinds of people, but you also get to experience the life-changing, well, there's hardly another word

but *magic* to describe the transformational experience of piercing through the veil that separates heaven and earth, joining the heavenly chorus, and partaking of the very body and blood of God in the Holy Eucharist.

Geeks and the Church belong together. Christians thirst for adventure, have a sense of destiny, and desire to participate in something bigger than oneself as much as any questing gamer. The geek's obsessive need to understand how something works, to read the manual, to build a complex vocabulary that explains precisely what's going on, these are traits that particularly the Episcopal tribe of Christians have in spades. We both form intense community bonds, we affect nerdy insular jargons, and we view change with suspicion.

The problem is, like most of geek culture, church (especially the Episcopal Church) can be pretty impenetrable when you first encounter it. This isn't necessarily bad—there are rewards to be found in the effort it takes to understand the centuries of history and theology that underlie the symbolism embodied in the liturgy found in your local Episcopal Church. We geeks like having *some* barriers to entry. We're the rules lawyers, the ones who've studied the Player's Handbook for years, the ones who figure out the exact schematics and comparative sizes of the ships in *Battlestar Galactica*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *Firefly*. The ones who argue continuity issues, who write fanfiction, who have the best Star Wars puns in the Dagobah system. So we are definitely capable of learning the ins and outs of Episcopal liturgy.

The first question is: Why do we want to? Well, assuming that you want to go to church, and assuming that you are a geek (and you did pick up this book), understanding how and why we worship the way we do is part of your identity. Episcopalians have always been a people who value common prayer over common belief. During the Reformation (mostly sixteenth century), instead of writing dense theological tomes like his contemporaries Martin Luther and John Calvin, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote a Book of Common Prayer. So if you want to understand Episcopalians, you have to understand how we worship. And why wouldn't you want to

understand how we worship? Nobody likes feeling out of the loop and confused when somebody suddenly drops to their knees in front of you as you're trying to walk down the aisle.

But now that we've decided it's a good idea to learn all these signs and symbols, how do we do it? There's not exactly a Player's Handbook for the Episcopal Church. There *are* online forums where people can argue the rubrics (that's *rules*; we're starting the vocabulary lesson *right now*), but they can be pretty intense. You need an introduction—a hitchhiker's guide to help you figure out how to get the basics under your belt so that you can join in the conversation. That's where this book comes in.

This book will introduce you to the greatest Adventure Path ever written: following Jesus Christ. Now, before you write me off as unbelievably sappy, hear me out. What is the Christian life if not some Lawful, Neutral, and Chaotic Good folks trying to follow a quest? We're the scrappy outlaws with hearts of gold, the tortured moral leaders trying to make decisions for the tiny remnant of humanity left after the Cylon attack, the last airbenders trying to restore balance to the world. The thing is: we know the odds are long, C-3PO. They're so long, in fact, that we will certainly fail. But Jesus deliberately failed for us, by allowing himself to be killed on a cross. Reinhold Niebuhr (a very fancy theology person who happens to be President Obama's favorite moral thinker) talks about how Jesus's ultimate failure "transvalues the world's values"[1] and makes this failure the ultimate victory. Remember that line on James and Lily Potter's grave? "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."[2] It's actually a line from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he declares that Jesus's death *has* already destroyed death, and we are guaranteed eternal life through his saving grace. Not if we're good. Not if we believe in him, in the right way, as expressed by some preacher who *totally doesn't have his own biases or anything*—no. Jesus has destroyed the last enemy, death, and we no longer have anything to fear.

But still we're on this quest, and enemies do surround us: but on the inside, not the outside. We have met the enemy and the

enemy is us. Greed, anger, pride, lust, selfishness, laziness, pettiness, vengeance—all these prowl around us hapless adventurers, offering us the opportunity to give up following the Jesus Way. How do these enemies still exist, when the last enemy, death, has already been destroyed? Welcome to the *already but not yet*. We'll talk more about that in the "Magic: The God Part" chapter [check out page 119].

Now: There are more ways to follow this Adventure Path than the Episcopal way. Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Quakers— they all have their ways of following Jesus that are ancient, respectable, relevant, and theologically sound paths to God. This book will make some points that they (and others) will agree with. But the Episcopal way of following Jesus is a particular way—most often, a particularly geeky way. We have archaic rules that we love to argue about. We have what one friend from another Christian denomination has called the "best words." We have rectors and thuribles and monstrances and chasubles and all the rest and the other thing. We dress up every Sunday, and our worship, more than any other I've encountered, feels the most alien—the most other-worldly. Church in an Episcopal way is the ultimate role-playing game: a chance to get out of your skin and touch a world that's not your own.

This book will help you get a foothold in that world. It will define some of those scary terms. It will help you understand what, exactly, you're getting into. Think of this as the instruction manual you read before booting up your PlayStation; the inside of the box of *Settlers of Catan*. It will help this brave new world open before your eyes and enable you to participate fully in these strange, otherworldly rituals. There's a "Choose Your Own Adventure" element to it—each chapter will let you know where to turn next to follow your interests.

Who am I, to make such a claim for this book? Well, I'm a geek. Like, legit. I read all the Star Wars Expanded Universe before I was fourteen. I took fencing in college. I play D&D—*Pathfinder*, actually. Be it a 14th level ranger, a 16th level sorcerer, a 6th level rogue, or a 2nd level warpriest, I can roll dice with the best of them. *Firefly* got me through my Peace Corps service, and *Battlestar Galactica* through seminary. I know this stuff.

I know the church stuff, too. I'm a priest. I've got a whole degree in this. I've argued cassock versus cassock-alb with the best of them and rules lawyered my way through General Convention (the Episcopal one, not Gen Con) in 2012. I know the difference between a *cappa nigra*, a cope, and a collarette. I know why clergy shirts are (usually) black. I know how many times the Lord's Prayer appears in the Book of Common Prayer (fifteen or twenty-five, depending how you count).

So come with me on this quest. Familiarize yourself with this world, and I promise you'll make the next Knowledge (religion) check. To paraphrase Captain Hook, "To die might be an awfully big adventure, but to die to self and live again as Christ's new creation is the biggest adventure of all."[3]

Introduction 2.0

In which the adventure is further explained

[This chapter introduces church geeks to regular geek stuff. If you've got a passing familiarity with the differences between *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, you own a PlayStation or Xbox, and/or have played a tabletop RPG, you can probably skip to "The Hero" on page 11.]

Let's be honest: The Church is not cool. I'm sorry if that bursts your bubble, but it's true. Following the way of Jesus is life changing, transformative, adventurous, fulfilling . . . but still not cool.

Fortunately, there is a community out there who is used to being uncool. And it's a community that seeks a transformative life of adventure. A life built around the power of story. A life that fulfills you more as you devote yourself more fully to it. This community is usually known as geeks.

Now, you may not consider yourself a geek, dear church (wo)man. You may think of yourself as cool, calm, and collected. Maybe you were a jock in high school. Maybe you're a leader in a trendy industry six days out of the week. Maybe you were a beauty queen prior to discerning a call to Holy Orders. But I have to tell you: The Episcopal Church is full of geeks. Certainly the pews are full of geeks in the traditional sense—those queuing up to see the latest Marvel film or rolling dice at a weekly *Dungeons & Dragons* night—but worshipping God as an Episcopalian is, in some ways, inherently geeky.

Like much of geek culture, church (especially the Episcopal Church) can be pretty impenetrable when you first encounter it. This isn't necessarily bad—our symbols are richly laden with

heritage and meaning that is worth preserving. Plus, doing the hard work of digging into this quest can be rewarding. And geeks like having *some* barriers to entry. As major fans of intricate worlds, they're used to studying rulebooks, figuring out the exact schematics and comparative sizes of various and sundry starships, noticing continuity errors, writing fanfiction, and making spectacular puns. In short, geeks are an ideal audience for diving into the complex liturgical theology that they will encounter at an Episcopal Church.

> A quick vocabulary lesson: nerds typically = smart; dorks typically = socially awkward; and geeks typically = obsessive fans of genre fiction in literature, television, video games, and comic books. Now, there's obviously some overlap here. A lot of geeks are smart, a lot of nerds are socially awkward, and a lot of dorks like sci-fi/fantasy stories. Don't get too hung up on the differences. But this book is written for, and plans to talk to, geeks.

Geeks and the Church belong together. We both seek the adventure that comes from pursuing a mission bigger than our own personal destiny. Geeks have an obsessive need to understand how something works, to read the manual, to build a complex vocabulary that explains precisely what's going on, just like Episcopalians. Our communities are tightly knit, we speak a strange, unearthly tongue, and we view change with suspicion.

This book is written for geeks, and for Episcopalians who want to relate to geeks. And why wouldn't we? With Comic-Con attendance numbers and comic book movie ticket sales soaring, the success of *The Big Bang Theory* and the fame of Lin-Manuel Miranda, geeks comprise an enormous group of people who need to hear the Gospel. They follow and inhabit fictional worlds, they connect emotionally with fictional characters, they are drawn to the power of fantastical stories—and we can offer them the Great Story. There's a "Choose Your Own Adventure" element to this book, so you can skip the parts you already know in order to connect more deeply.

In order to share our story, we have to be able to connect with their stories. This book hopes to aid you in that translation. So here's a quick vocabulary lesson to get you started as you level up in your understanding of the geek community:

n00b: A newbie, or someone who is new at this. A lot of geek speak reflects computer lingo and comes from online gaming communities. It reflects a certain keyboard style that may be unfamiliar to, well, n00bs to the community. n00b can be used derogatorily or affectionately, depending on how much your newness is messing with someone else's gaming experience.

XP: Experience points, earned as you leave your n00bhood behind and complete portions of your quest. Every so often, you gain enough XP to . . .

Level up: At various points, you gain enough XP to add a new level to your character. In geek quests, this is usually once you've found enough treasure, killed enough bad guys, explored enough territory, and you gain new skills and better weapons as you go.

RPG: Role-playing game. These games can come in video or tabletop varieties, but they always involve building a character and completing a quest as that character. The best-known tabletop RPG is *Dungeons & Dragons*, but there are lots of other varieties in that vein.

DM/GM: Dungeon Master/Game Master. In tabletop gaming, this person controls this adventure. They "run" the game, setting up encounters for the characters, interpreting rules, and playing all of the bad guys.

PC/NPC: Player Character and Non-Player Character. A Player Character is played by someone sitting at the table/video game controller, a Non-Player Character can sometimes be controlled by the player(s), but is designed by the DM or gaming system. NPCs are usually allied with the player(s), but watch out for sudden but inevitable betrayals![1]

Alignment: Players can choose their own moral code. There are two choices of three: Lawful, Neutral, Chaotic and Good, Neutral, Evil.

The next several chapters will take us through the basics of church: the Book of Common Prayer, vestments, going to church, the person of Jesus. Come and see the Great Story reflected throughout geek culture. And if you still get stuck with the lingo, there's always "Worlds Unknown" to clarify things on page 155.