This morning I took my first steps up the Cathedral stairs, down the center aisle and now up into the Canterbury Pulpit for the Opening of School service of our exceptional and beloved National Cathedral School! I am filled with awe, wonder, and inspiration, and I am honored and thrilled to be your new Interim Head of School and to welcome you to the 2019-2020 school year!

As I think of our school year together, I think of the first steps we are all taking—whether these steps lead us into a new grade, a new classroom, a new office, or a new team or activity. First steps are exciting, and they can be a bit scary! First steps take us to unfamiliar places, places filled with possibilities and, potentially, challenges we may need to navigate.

For a moment, let us think of other first steps.

Think of the risk a baby takes as she finally lets go of the table she has been using as her practice ground for walking.

Or the first step onto a field before a game or a stage before the curtain rises.

Think of stepping onto a bus, Metro train, or plane as a journey begins.

And think, too, of walking through the doors on the first day of school—like you and like me!

With each of these, we have butterflies in our stomachs. We should also be proud of taking those first steps. First steps move us toward new experiences, goals and achievements.

When we read the Bible, it reminds us that steps forward can make a positive difference in other people’s lives.

In the story we heard today, of the Good Samaritan, a man had been beaten by a gang of robbers and left by the side of the road.

The first two men to approach this suffering man chose to leave him alone. Perhaps they had good reasons to pass him by. Could they have feared that the suffering man was a decoy, planted by the robbers to lure other people toward attack? We will never know.

The third man to approach was the Samaritan. At this time in history, there was real animosity between groups of people, and the injured man was considered the Samaritan’s enemy. Therefore, it was very unlikely
that the Samaritan would help the suffering man in any way. However, the opposite occurred: The Samaritan unexpectedly “stepped forward” and crossed the road to help. By showing compassion, he demonstrated the importance of overcoming hostility and differences and getting to the core of what truly matters. The result of this decision, to step across the road against all odds, potentially saved someone’s life.

Every day we are confronted with decisions that affect others, and the Samaritan’s step toward assistance was a giant step forward in terms of making a positive difference. His actions could have even led to forgiveness and reconciliation within his greater community. Our school, full of courageous, brilliant, and unique individuals, has an opportunity as well! I encourage all of us to reach out to each other and the greater community, to share empathic support, and to help make each other’s lives as full and meaningful as possible.

Through the decades, many first steps have been taken on the Close. When NCS opened its doors on Oct. 1, 1900, 32 boarding students and 16 day students stepped inside to blaze new trails. We continued first steps to develop a strong national reputation as a top academic institution.

There have been fun first steps—including, in 1931, when the purple and gold teams were established.

Transformative steps, as in 1975, when the math department acquired “Daisy”—the school’s first computer—and students took steps into the technological world.

Meaningful steps, such as in 1985, when the Black Student Union was founded and the peer leader program began. In 2006, a student group stepped forward to assist relief efforts in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, and in 2009, other students encouraged sustainability steps by installing solar panels on Hearst Hall.

Finally, first steps can be momentous, even newsworthy. Recently, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first step on the moon, an unimaginable achievement up until July 20, 1969! What made it happen was perseverance, collaboration, and bravery from thousands of people on the ground, behind the scenes, and in the Apollo lunar module—which, would you believe, was named the “Eagle.” (Our school mascot!) Now, a moon rock from the Sea of Tranquillity, collected on the mission, is part of one of the National Cathedral’s beautiful stained-glass windows.

My aspiration for all of us today, and for this year, is that we have the courage to take our own new first steps, with hope and confidence, and that we support each other as we learn, teach, discover, and explore.

We should expect mistakes and missteps. No one is perfect. But we can learn from our stumbles and move on. Please know and remember that each of you matters and makes a profound difference in the lives of others in this community and beyond.

As I prepare to take my first step down from this pulpit, I am eager to get to know each of you, hear what matters to you, and support you on your journeys through a productive and meaningful school year!

Amen.