

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
Goochland, Virginia
Annual Parish Meeting
Jan. 30, 2022

Rector's Report

I'd like to start with a look back at this past year. I want to do that by first of all saying 'thank you' to Ashley Cameron for the brilliant idea she had to shape the presentation for our Annual Reports booklet chronologically. I don't know about you but to be honest, this past year feels a little blurry to me. But Ashley's work in chronicling the events of this past year brings the year into clear focus with fresh remembrances and I find myself thinking, 'oh my, that's right, that happened! Wasn't that amazing!' I hope you'll take some time to look through this booklet and see all those places where we saw that God was near and grace shined through and the Spirit blew enough wind in our sails for us to just keep going. I think it was no small thing 'to just keep going' this past year. I think it was a great grace given 'to just keep going'. It must've been grace because there was also joy and the abundance of life Jesus means for us to have in so many things.

And as I look back, it seems to me that we can draw strength and wisdom by putting the journey we are on alongside the journey that the Children of Israel made through the wilderness on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land. Like them, we are on a long journey. Really long. And they just kept going too even if it wasn't always pretty. And when it seemed like it was just too much to take, God gave them water from a miraculous source and fed them with manna food from heaven. Which they eventually got sick of and complained about too, but it was enough to just keep going. When I look at the pictures in the booklet Ashley prepared, I see signs of things miraculous too.

And like the Children of Israel, we're seeing what the wilderness is like in ways we've probably never experienced. In the wilderness, all the familiar sights and sounds, all the regular habits and patterns of life just disappear. And in the wilderness, you think it may never end. In the wilderness, we find out what we're made of and what we're not, we see our strength and we see our weaknesses, and especially we can learn what really matters and what just doesn't.

For the Children of Israel, when they looked back on their time in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, they saw that God was always with them – in their rejoicing and in their complaining – and that especially God was preparing them for their special vocation and calling. God was preparing them to be light to the nations, by being a people through whom the faithfulness and goodness and love and mercy of God would shine through.

So, I wonder if this time in the wilderness for us isn't preparing us too. And if that's so, for what special purpose? Well, we'll need to think and pray about many things, I think, probably over time. We'll need to think about how we have been changed and what we are learning. I'll tell you about a group in just a minutes that's been called by the vestry who are doing just that right now. I keep coming round to some advice Bob Hetherington gave. He asked, during times of real change, what is it that God is trying to get us to see.

I want to tell you about two little exchanges I had this past week that speak to my own heart about what God is trying to get me, at least, to see. This past Monday, I was in a grocery store in the bakery section. I was looking into a chilled display case and had my eye on something in particular. The woman working in the bakery came up behind the chilled case and said, 'Can I help you with anything?' I said, 'Yes, ma'am, I'd like that strawberry shortbread cake, please.' She said, 'the whole thing or one of the half cakes?' I said, 'Oh no, I want the whole thing! I want to festive up Monday a little because it's a good day!' And she laughed and took the cake out and boxed it up. And as she handed it to me she said, 'Thank you, I really appreciate your spirit. People are so mean to each other these days. It makes me so sad. I'm just so tired of it. It is a good day. I appreciate you. Thank you.' I said, 'God bless you, ma'am'. 'God bless you too', she said.

A couple of days later, I was getting blood drawn at a doctor's office in the late afternoon for something routine. The person who stuck me was really good at it so I said, 'Gosh you're really good at sticking. I barely felt a thing. That's a gift'. She said with a kind of emotion that suddenly seemed right on the edge of tears, 'thank you! You're the first person who's been nice to me all day. Everybody's been so mean, yelling at me.' All I could think to say is, 'I'm sorry'.

So those are just two little things. They don't tell the whole story about anything. But I was struck by how close to the surface what those women were feeling was and how much they needed someone to hear them. I think those two little exchanges may well be emblematic of how on any given day, there are hurting people in this world. And I think, no, I want a place like St. Mary's to be a part of mending what's broken, and healing what's hurt for the sake of Jesus. Because that was and is his life's work. I think we, St. Mary's Church, are prepared in a way we probably weren't before to be a part of Jesus work to bind up and heal what is hurting, and to proclaim the Good News of Christ. I wish those two women find a place like St. Mary's. I wish they would come here. With that in mind, can you think of a more exciting time to be the Church, an earthen vessel that – by grace alone – bears an eternal treasure.

So, I want to tell you, briefly, about two ways I see us 'leaning in' to the call of this extraordinary time we have been given. Then I want to say some 'thank you's' and finish up.

First, our Senior Warden, Harry Baldwin, had a marvelous idea to ask some parishioners to think about the days that lie ahead and questions the vestry needs to be asking to strengthen our church in its mission and ministry. That group has met twice and is led by the remarkable Tim O'Shea. They are doing really good, really important work, I think. I think they're going to provide the next vestry with beautiful ways to think about what God has been preparing us for and what do we want to do about that.

And the second thing I want to tell you about in particular is a new ministry of Outreach. Our astounding Outreach chair, Charmaine Trice, along with Harrison Higgins have gathered a group who feel called to help find a home and a new life for what will probably be a family of refugees from Afghanistan. They are working with the International Rescue Committee of Richmond. More information about this and how you can be a part of this ministry will be included in this week's eNunciation. But it will include naming a group of 10 parishioners who will receive training to be involved in a hands-on way in helping. There will be lots of opportunities to help whoever it will be make a home and a life here. I am so grateful for Charmaine and Harrison and others who have been working on this and so grateful for this opportunity.

Now some brief thank you's. I want to thank the amazing, talented, faithful, hardworking, hysterical members of our parish staff. Thank you Paul and Amelia and Ryan and Elizabeth and Eleanor and Ashley and Kilpy and Harrison and Tyrell and Lauren and Tyron. And I also want to say 'thank you' on their behalf. I haven't asked permission from them to say this, but on behalf of the staff, we would like to say 'thank you' to the people of St. Mary's Church. Thank you for your support and encouragement and faithfulness, thank you for the spirit that is in this place. Thank you for giving us such an amazing place to do the things that mean everything to us. Thank you.

And finally, thank you to those members of the vestry, Class of 2022, who have nearly completed their ministry and will be rotating of at the February meeting. I'd like to ask Harry Baldwin and Ann Ramsey and Christy Gurkin and Danny Williams to please come forward. They had one year's service before the pandemic happened. Since then, they have been pillars of fidelity to their ministry on the vestry for these past two years and have been instrumental in helping to create a vestry that has been steady and wise and inspiring and encouraging for all of us. On behalf of this parish church, thank you!