

Rector's Annual Report to the Congregation
1/28/24

Good morning and thanks for being here to take stock of the past year and look ahead to where God may be calling our parish in the coming year. I want to start by thanking those who composed the ministry reports to the parish that you received in an email this week. If any of you would like a hard copy, we will have them available in the parish hall after our Eucharist. I think these reports do an excellent job of portraying where our parish stands today, both in terms of our ministries and our finances. I will not be repeating any of these reports but instead will be giving my reflections on the overall state of our congregation.

Unless you have been living in a cave these past 3 years you must have noticed that there has been a change in our numbers in terms of attendance on Sundays since the pandemic. We are not alone in seeing this. It is repeating in the Episcopal Church and in most other denominations. But it is certainly not in all, and I am especially struck by churches that have done online worship well—meaning they have the equipment and a group of techies to run that equipment—they have been seeing increases in their attendance.

We are not that church. Oh, we did online worship well enough to get through the months of isolation, but the vestry decided that we did not have the resources to continue to offer worship online. We can't do everything, that is a given, but we can and must look at what we have in resources and people to continue our ministry here on the Palouse. And there are other ministries that we have had to let go of over the years because we just don't have the people power to accomplish them; Meals on Wheels and Family Promise to name the most recent. I am sad when I think about what we can no longer offer to our area and yet I continue to be reminded that Jesus has shown us in his death and resurrection that when one thing dies it can be the seed planted so that something can grow from it and blossom into a new ministry. This is the lesson in Jesus' saying that when a grain of wheat dies it can then bear much fruit. But if that same grain of wheat wants to stay just a single grain, it bears nothing.

I believe that we are being called to this kind of transformation. God is asking us to listen to our neighborhood, to each other and to God and to hear where the needs are now, listen to where our hearts find our purpose, listen to what God has in store for us in carrying out the mission of St. James as we go through this time in our lives and the life of our region. And not just that, but also to understand our gifts to find out where we can connect those gifts to the great longings of our world.

What are those gifts we have for ministry? First, generosity. From the moment I stepped into this pulpit as your rector I found out that this is the most generous congregation I have ever served or heard of. Just this year, in addition to your yearly pledges we raised money to not only raise the roof but to upgrade the kitchen. We have raised money to make our outside more inviting and meditative and to bring more light in to the building. I must admit, there have been times on this journey at St. James I have talked to God to ask how we will get the money to pay for things and it has always appeared from one of you! Some of our generous givers who have been blessed and blessed us with the funds we needed have gone on to the greater presence of God and yet they have left behind a legacy that continues to help us as we look to the years ahead. Others of you, though not blessed with a lot of money, have given so generously of your time, because you have it to give. I often tell my kids, in life you either have the money to do stuff or you have the time to do stuff—it's often hard to have both! I am grateful for all your generosity in whatever form it comes to St. James.

The second gift we have here at St. James is flexibility. That has been proven many times in the last few years. From having worship and study and even the annual meeting online, to moving worship when the gas is off, or the furnace is broken, or the front door is flooded, this is not a complaining congregation. We put on our boots and our jackets and forge onward finding a way to make it work. When I am ready to throw up my hands and say forget the building a visitor tells me how beautiful it is, and I am encouraged to take our troubles in stride.

And we have started new ministries on a shoestring, I am thinking of Youth Group, that has been wanted by parents for a while and having Charlie Hammerich step up using his gifts that he has honed for years at the Eastern Oregon Diocesan Camp and those same parents providing for dinner for those kids as we start a new ministry. Those teens are giving us an example as they invite their friends to their Youth Group to get it going so that their faith in God can be grown in the church they love and feel at home in. Flexibility in trying something new and adapting something old. That is certainly one of the gifts of this congregation.

And third, there is a genuine care for one another. I see it at church and at coffee hour. And what other church has a choir who visits a member shut in his home and sings with him! Quite a pastoral presence. And so many of you are involved in other ways around our region caring for friends and giving a helping hand to those in need in our schools, daycare, and senior center. Then there was the tremendous care and partnership with the Palouse Choral Society when Jim Reece passed away

quite unexpectedly last March. This church was at capacity and the hymns sung, with our choir and the Choral Society, sent shivers up my spine, they were tremendous. This, I thought, was St. James at our best. Sharing our beautiful liturgy and music, our gloriously alive space, and our tremendous hospitality. It brings tears to my eyes as I write this.

Gifts. We have been blessed with so many gifts. And yet this year has brought challenges too. As Dennis has described well in his Treasurer's report, the loss of givers through death, moving and disability has taken a toll on our budget. We ended 2023 with a loss and we project that we will end 2024 with a loss as well. The Vestry and I have been working on ways to reduce our expenses for the coming year and tapping funds for their intended purpose to help ease the burden on our General Fund: the fund that pays our operating expenses. We are fortunate that when we had surplus years, we put that money away for just such times as these; saving money for the rainy day we knew was inevitable.

This year our Vestry will be working with a consultant to organize some of our funds to make clear when and how much we need to tap in to those endowed funds to preserve the principle while using the proceeds as we need them. This is the rainy day we have been saving for and yet we must also prudently set ourselves up for success by planning for the future.

Last year I came to you, asking all of you to fill out a survey to understand better the religious life of our congregation. The word that stuck out to me in that feedback was "Complacent". I would use a less loaded word such as "satisfied" or "settled". It is a good way to be and yet as a church, I believe following Jesus means to never be satisfied until we bring forth God's reign of peace and fulfillment for all, especially our neighbors. We will never be satisfied until God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. And so, we have set two big goals for the coming year.

The first goal is a follow up to the Renewal Works survey. We heard a desire to get a deeper understanding of scripture. We will read a book together as a parish, and that book is the Gospel of Mark, the shortest gospel in the bible I might add. We will break down the gospel into chunks to be assigned each week. Each Wednesday during Lent we will have our usual soup and bread supper to include our Deacon Ted Nitz giving us a deeper look into the passage for that week. I will preach on a part of that passage on Sunday to give a spiritual look at it. Our Adult forum will also learn more through a video study series.

Our second goal is having the first “John Brewer Memorial Art and Music festival”. We will be hosting a professional installation titled “Icons in Transformation” by the artist Ludmila Pawlowska. These are a collection of traditional Icons plus the artist’s interpretation which brings a modern look at religious art. The artworks, some small others up to the ceiling plus sculptures will be displayed in the Nave, and throughout the building. We are also planning some music concerts to take place in the space with the exhibit and lectures and workshops with local icon experts.

I have asked Mary Flores to coordinate all the various committees and individuals who we will need to stage this exhibit. We will need publicity, people to give tours, arrangers and even people to sit at the exhibit when it is open to the public. So basically, we will need everyone to do something. We will invite city dignitaries, church people and the press to the opening reception with the artist which will be a grand reception. At this point, the exhibit is scheduled for September 15-November 10th. I have a PowerPoint in the Parish Hall with a slideshow of the exhibit at other venues including the Seattle Cathedral. Please take a look. My hope is that we will position ourselves as a spot for music and art and where you can meet interesting and educated people. We will leave for God the work of conversion, but we will welcome everyone here.

In conclusion, the Spirit of God is at work here at St. James. The love and care we have for each other is evidence of this. We are facing challenges that this church has faced before; finances and people. Yet just like in the past, a faithful people can overcome these challenges and continue to do the work God is calling us to do: being **a community of faith rooted in God’s unconditional love, seeking to express that love to one another, our neighbors, and the world.**