

The Rector's Report

(Inspired by the lections for Epiphany III/C.)

We've just heard one of the defining moments of Jesus' ministry according to Luke's Gospel.

On the move throughout Galilee,

Jesus enters a synagogue on the Sabbath "as was his custom."

He reads from the prophet Isaiah, declaring

that "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

Release to the captives. Sight to the blind. Freedom to the oppressed.

To proclaim that this – even this – is the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus immediately goes on to cleanse a man with an unclean spirit and heal those sick with various diseases,

thus establishing a pattern between what he professes in worship and what he does in the rest of his life.

Now if Jesus sought this balance

between worship within the faith community and

action in the larger community, how can we manage on less?

I'd like to think that what you'll see in the Annual Report is our attempt to find this balance.

Here are some highlights of the care taken of our worship space this year: power-washing the outside of the building

to make a positive contribution to our neighborhood;

"converting" from an aged oil furnace to more efficient and cost-effective gas;

redesigning our Memorial Garden to accommodate more families while maintaining an intimate outdoor worship space;

and enhancing St. Luke's Chapel to make it more attractive and easier to navigate.

Rumor has it that we may keep going down the hall

freshening up some of the other rooms too.

In the virtual world, we've updated our website and expanded

our use of technology to better communicate with one another and the public.

This represents countless hours of volunteer labor, expertise and generosity.

And when you think about it, someone must've also exerted

considerable effort to sustain all those synagogues Jesus visited.

This reminds us that it's the people who make a worshipping community.

We're what our namesake Paul describes in today's epistle to the Corinthians – each one an essential, working member of the Body of Christ.

Here too we're blessed.

Taking the plunge a couple of years ago to change our Sunday schedule and hire a DRE is now a vital part of our life together.

You can see and hear for yourselves that our Choir and Choristers are growing in both quantity of members and quality of musicianship.

Many of us are getting to know each other outside of church at our informal "Supper 8" home potlucks.

Our beloved Holiday Tea has been taken on by a new generation.

Now we just need someone to coordinate the well-oiled machine that is the Holiday Fair.

All this is mostly about tending our life together within this house of worship.

This is where we come together to hear that the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, sending us out to live the good news.

Jesus' witness shows that we need this movement in both directions – the grounding in worship, study and mutual support found here AND the adventure of sharing God's love everywhere we go the rest of the week.

Here again we're blessed with a litany of opportunities, beginning with our everyday lives.

As a parish, we're gearing up for our third service trip to help bring clean water to Nicaragua.

This effort is energizing us to form a Mission Committee to support our many ongoing service projects (the Shelter, Master's Manna, Covenant to Care, etc.) as well as identify other local service opportunities. Amen to that!

Many thanks to the volunteers who braved snow flurries in October to expand our presence to both days of Celebrate Wallingford.

We participated in the Garden Market and Holiday Stroll, and are thinking of offering explicit opportunities for prayer at these events in the future.

The church itself is now open for prayer and reflection midweek.

We'd love to expand this with the help of a few more hosts.

The Vestry has also encouraged that, in addition to our three Ash Wednesday services, we offer Ashes-to-Go on Main Street.

I'm currently organizing a team to assist with this so please let me know if you're game.

One of my favorite events of the entire year was that sunny morning back in May when we streamlined the service to get out on Main Street in time to cheer on 3,000+ participants in the Autism Awareness Walk.

We ran out of bottled water, but it hardly mattered.

The walkers seemed genuinely thrilled to see us out there smiling and clapping and thanking them for their efforts.

Many of them paused to thank *us* for being there.

(And, oh yes, dear choir, we sang those same three hymns about walking how many times?)

We aren't just reaching out to folks here in the center of town.

Our Vestry hosted a dinner with the Vestry of St. John the Evangelist in Yalesville to see how we might collaborate.

We hosted a member of my former parish, Zion, North Branford, to offer a workshop on Healing Prayer.

It was attended by nearly 40 people, many of whom have continued to meet, study and discern how to deepen our spiritual lives and reach others. Stay tuned.

Of course the past year saw the Anniversary Committee begin planning a year-long celebration of our 275th anniversary.

Maybe you've noticed the "275 Alive!" fun facts appearing in the weekly bulletin.

I hope you already have some of the big dates on your calendar.

Soon enough you'll see a bright red anniversary banner hanging over Main Street.

Again, stay tuned – or better yet, get involved with the planning.

You'll note that we're not celebrating the 275th anniversary of this building, but the worshipping community that long pre-dates it.

This community has met over the centuries in places as diverse as Pond Hill Road, Christian Street (probably named after us), an earlier more modest building on this site and, for a time, the basement of the Baptist Church.

Through it all this community has sought to live out that pattern of life

Jesus shows us – coming together for worship,

and then going back out to serve the larger community.

It is by doing BOTH, by the grace of God, that we're still here privileged to celebrate our 275th year.

As we raise up our history throughout this anniversary year, we'll see that this parish has weathered tremendous change. From so modest a beginning that it took folks from Cheshire, North Haven and Wallingford to form a fledgling congregation. Our Church of England forebears, God bless 'em, on the wrong side of history struggling to stay afloat after the American Revolution. A church built on this spot in 1846 only to burn down about twenty years later. Then rebuilding this magnificent structure, grander than ever.

By 1895, on the occasion of his 25th year as rector, the Rev. J. Edmund Wildman reflected upon the changes and challenges of late 19th Century Wallingford. Speaking to those who sat in those pews before you, he asked:
*“Are we holding ourselves ready for these changes . . . and eager to spring to the task, or do we need another disaster to lift us out and up to our broader views and plane of duty?
 [Are we] alive to our responsibilities and duties?
 [Is there] an adequate rallying of forces and directing of energies?”*

We live in times at least as tumultuous as those of Father Wildman and his flock. I venture that we live in a time of such rapid change that – no matter how young you are – the world we live in today is not the one you grew up in. This is true in most every aspect of our lives – not just in terms of technology, but spiritually too. We know that Sunday morning “Sabbath” time is no longer sacred, with families having to fight for time away from sports and other commitments. But that’s just a sign of the times, with “nones” (as in “none of the above”) being the fastest growing category on surveys of religion. “Nones” with no religious affiliation are now almost a quarter of U.S. adults. Of these, nearly two-thirds say that religion is “not important” to their lives. Here in New England we live in the least religious part of the country.

This is where we are at this moment in time, living in a rapidly changing post-modern, post-Christian world.

To be a Christian, to attend worship, to put one's faith into action is a statement. A profound statement.

Yet even with the troubling statistics I just cited, I believe that it's a statement people in our time are hungry to hear.

For most of those very same surveys touting the rise of the "nones" say that many people still seek community and a sense of connection to something to larger than themselves.

They want to make a positive difference in the world.

They need to know love, unconditional.

This past year the Episcopal Church elected a new Presiding Bishop, the dynamic Michael Curry.

The day after his consecration he released a video on social media.

That alone reveals his eagerness to speak to our times.

But the content was equally powerful.

It begins with him standing in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

Then he walks down the aisle out the door into the street.

He keeps moving as he says to the Church, to us, that *we can no longer wait for the people to come to us, we must go to the people.*

"Now," he says, "is our time to go.

To go into the world ... to be instruments of God's reconciliation.

To let the world know that there is a God who loves us,

a God who will not let us go, and that love can set us all free."

For we are "the Jesus movement".

Presiding Bishop Curry's charge to us is not so different from what Father Wildman said to the people of St. Paul's here from this pulpit more than a hundred years ago:

"You now occupy the vantage ground for great things.

May you more and more be persons having understanding of the times and be ready to do your part in the places assigned to you."

That's our task in the year ahead for which, pray God, we've laid a good foundation in years past.

Faithfully submitted, *Dee Anne* + The Reverend Dee Anne Dodd, Rector

