

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 31, 2021 (Rector's Annual Address)

As I've taken some time to reflect upon the year that has passed, I promised myself I would not use terms like "unprecedented" and "new normal" or even "dumpster fire." At one level, 2020 was all of those things. And much, much more.

At St. John's, as in the world at large, the past 12 months have been revealing in ways both painful and hopeful. At this time last year, we were gathered in Upper Weld Hall, following a lively service in the church. We had just received communion, hugged each other at the Peace, shook hands on the way out, scooped out a bowlful of Dorothy's famous soup, grabbed a cup of coffee, and sat next to one another ready to celebrate another full and fruitful year of ministry at our beloved parish. We looked back and we looked forward, ready to enter a new year with faith and vigor.

There is much to mourn as we gather around our computer screens this morning. This global pandemic has taken its toll not just through lives lost, but through traditions sacrificed and communities dispersed. Our hearts ache for the deep connections and relationships formed through this parish. We yearn to be together, to worship and laugh and weep and rejoice as one.

Yet, since March, we have made the commitment, as difficult and heartbreaking as it has been, to love one another by staying apart. We care too much and love too deeply to risk the health of the body of Christ that is St. John's. As much as I miss being with those whom I love, I am so proud of each and every one of you for embracing being the church in new ways. This has not been an easy time, but it has been one of profound faith and love. The resilience of this community has been a joy to behold, even amid trying and frightening circumstances. We have never stopped praying and worshipping, learning and loving, reaching out to strangers and one another. And those are signs of a deep, vibrant, and abiding faith.

Not that any of this has been easy. We have all had to learn new skills and adjust our expectations and engage in new ways. I, for one, never thought I'd become a televangelist or do ministry in such a two-dimensional fashion. I never wanted to be an amateur epidemiologist or video production specialist. Our Sunday School teachers never wanted to learn how to teach virtual classes. Buffy never wanted to learn how to use Garage Band to blend voices into a digital choir. Jack never wanted to teach Confirmation Class and lead Youth Groups online and become our resident expert on all things Zoom. Yet here we are.

We have all adapted to hold this community together, to keep everyone safe, to reach out to those in need, to welcome those tuning in from all over the country, and to keep faith at the center of our lives, even as everything else swirled around us. From Zoom Sunday School to Youth Group Pop-Ups, from Virtual Choir Anthems to Zoom Morning Prayer, from Children's Chapel to the Online Christmas Pageant, from the Drive-Thru Pet Blessing to socially-distanced outdoor baptisms and burials, the flexibility and creativity of this community has been astounding.

We have, of course, had to let go of a number of beloved traditions that give context and texture to our common life. Besides worship, I'm talking about events like SummerFest, the Not-So-Spooky Haunted House, the full-blown Holiday Boutique, Parish Picnics, Movie Nights. The list of things we grieve goes on and on.

But this time has also forced us to return to the essentials. From the moment we shut down, the COVID Response Team sprang into action, pairing those with needs in our community with those who could lend a hand. From postcards to St. John's face masks to conceiving our Pandemic Prayer Network, the members of this team embodied our response to this crisis and continue to do so. Just this week, they launched an effort to assist fellow parishioners who need help making online vaccine appointments.

The other group that arose during the early days was the Regathering Task Force. This faithful crew has met weekly throughout the pandemic to examine state and diocesan guidelines, look at our context, and make decisions based on our guiding principle of loving one another. This has been a tremendous responsibility and has not been easy work. I assure you, everyone has opinions. But the task force has stayed faithful to its mission and I will continue to lean on them for guidance moving forward as the health climate changes and restrictions, hopefully, begin to ease.

Our outreach efforts continued as the need in our local area grew. From food drives to backpack collections to Christmas gifts to B-SAFE to Laundry Love, people at St. John's have continually given of themselves and their resources during this time. It's been inspiring to watch faith-in-action take place at a time when people need help now more than ever. In fact, a number of parishioners with the means to do so have quietly given to my discretionary fund, allowing me to directly assist families in our community and beyond, who are unduly shouldering the burden of this pandemic.

I can't say enough about our Associate Rector's ministry throughout this time. Her passion and compassion, her giftedness and doggedness have helped keep our children's and youth programs not merely treading water but actively thriving. This has been a particularly challenging time for our families. Many of you are simply overwhelmed and the existential fatigue is real. Jack's invitational approach and ability to creatively adapt to the changing needs of our youngest parishioners has been inspiring. And on a personal level, it's hard to express just how helpful it's been to have a valued colleague, friend, and pandemic comrade-in-arms literally at my side during this past year.

In the midst of everything else, we ran a successful capital campaign. Yes, it was disappointing after two years of planning to scale things back. But I applaud the Vestry's decision to move forward, focusing on our most urgent building needs. While not everyone was in a position to donate to this campaign, we were very clear that this was fine. That putting off the campaign – the first one we've done in 15 years – and deferring much needed maintenance, would only mean higher costs in the future. The campaign leadership did a tremendous job pulling this all together and I am so very grateful to everyone who supported our Cornerstone Campaign to secure the long-term future of our sacred space.

Is the church pleasing everyone and meeting everyone's needs? Of course not. Online worship and formation don't resonate with everyone. Some feel we've been too cautious with our regathering plan. Not everyone agreed with the decision to move forward with a capital campaign – even in its scaled back version – in the middle of a pandemic. Some people think the church has become too liberal; others think it's too conservative. But I'll tell you this. The leadership and staff at St. John's has never worked harder or been more committed to the ministry of this church and the needs of its people than they have been over the past year. Sometimes we get it right, sometimes we get it wrong. Sometimes our approach feels strategic, sometimes it feels like we're stumbling around in the dark. But always, I believe, with love, compassion, and faith at the center of it all.

There is, as always, more work to be done. In the days ahead, our newly-formed Anti-Racism Task Force will be offering ideas and practical ways that we can truly live into being an anti-racist community of faith. This past year we bid farewell to our Sunday School Director, Alexis MacElhiney, after five years of ministry among us. That leaves a large hole in our parish and, while Jack's role, for now, has moved to focus primarily on children, families, and youth, we do need to address this critical piece of our common life.

There remains a tremendous amount of uncertainty in the world, in our nation, and here at St. John's. While we're all hopeful that we will be able to fully regather in person, we don't yet know when that will be or what it will look like. There are a number of individuals and families who pledged to support St. John's financially in 2020 who have not done so in 2021. Some of that is rooted in economic reality and some is a lack of engagement with online church. Ultimately, this impacts the ministry we are able to offer through this community.

A post-pandemic church *will* look different – none of us can know for certain what the future holds and what changes are in store. The church and the world will look different in the years ahead. And I am convinced, knowing this parish, that we will continue to faithfully adapt to whatever comes our way. But what will never change is the hope upon which our community is built.

On the wooden reredos behind the altar, underneath Jesus' feet, are carved the Greek letters Alpha and Omega. Jesus proclaimed "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." And that is precisely why even as everything changes and shifts under our *own* feet, the bedrock of our faith endures. For Jesus Christ is the same "yesterday, today, and forever."

My friends in Christ, despite all the challenges we've faced this past year – and perhaps even because of them – it remains a privilege to follow Jesus alongside each and every one of you. May God bless us all in the year ahead.