

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 27, 2019 (Rector's Annual Report)**

What will the St. John's of the future look like? I think about this often. I wouldn't say it keeps me up at night, exactly, but I do regularly ponder the question.

Last year at this time we embarked upon a period of discernment. As a parish, we gathered in small groups to dream about the future and share our own ideas of what St. John's might look like in the days and years ahead. There's a physical side to this, of course, but more importantly, a spiritual side. How will we as a parish continue to spread the good news of Jesus Christ in this community and beyond? How will we be nurtured ourselves through Word and Sacrament to go out into the world and do the work we have been given to do? How will we reach out to the least and the lonely and the lost in authentic, compassionate ways? How will we continue to build up the body of Christ, whose physical manifestation in our context is the community of St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts?

These were some of the questions that informed our discernment process, and continue to resonate as we determine next steps. What became clear is that any future physical improvements we choose to undertake must support the spiritual mission of this parish.

And in this vein, I believe we are now ready to start thinking about our broader capital needs. To this end, we have a committee in place that is analyzing the discernment data, looking at the recently completed capital reserve study, speaking to those involved in various ministries, and consulting with staff on issues of space use. They will then meet with an architect to draw up some possible plans for improvements to our physical plant. These aren't just frills or gilding the lily that is St. John's. These will be mission-driven improvements dictated by our vibrant, Christ-centered ministry.

Once we have some renderings, we will bring them back to the congregation and ask you to rank all the possible projects as high, medium, or low priorities. Obviously we won't be able to do everything that we have dreamed about. Which is why the next step, if we decide to move forward, would be to conduct a feasibility study. This would give us an indication of how much money we would be able to raise if we decide to undertake a capital campaign. So the results of the feasibility study paired with the ranked priorities would provide the roadmap to the projects that we, as a parish community, could fund.

What would these be? I'm not exactly sure; and that's a decision we would need to make as a community. But some of the things that bubbled up through our discernment phase were a choir room, expanded Sunday School space, a refurbished kitchen, additional parking, a sanctuary face-lift that might include air conditioning, enhanced lighting, and repairs to our beautiful but aging stained glass windows, a conference room, and a heated swimming pool at the rectory. Okay, one of these things didn't actually make the list. But the possibilities are exciting and I'm eager to see how this all unfolds.

As I reflect on 2018, I also want to reiterate just how grateful I was for the great gift that was my four-month sabbatical. I have never traveled so much in such a short period of time, as my adventures took me to Florida for Spring Training with Ben, coffee farms in Nicaragua and El Salvador, Baltimore and Washington, DC to visit my mother and brother, Seattle to experience the heart of American coffee culture, an Orthodox monastery in Pennsylvania where the monks roast and market their own coffee, a video game tournament in Chicago with Zak, and Rome and Amsterdam with the whole family. All courtesy of a clergy renewal grant I received from the Lily Foundation. My time away also gave me space to finish the manuscript for my book on coffee and faith, and I look forward to sharing *Holy Grounds* with all of you when it's released the first week of April.

One of the great joys for me was returning to a parish that, as I had fervently hoped, did not just tread water in my absence, but actively engaged in new ministries. I was thrilled to see a congregation with a budding sense of self-confidence in its own ministerial abilities. While I was gone you tried some new things and took a creative approach

to ministry. One example was a refresh of our usual year-end picnic. Rather than grilling after church, you invented an early evening Summerfest, complete with worship, rides, food, a chowder contest, and live music. It was a great success with nearly 300 people joining in the festivities and, quite frankly, I'm sorry I missed it! You also welcomed a group of youth from South Africa, as we continued to live into our evolving global partnership. And, who could forget, you nearly burned down the church at Easter!

The Vestry also received the aforementioned discernment feedback while I was away and, following a retreat at the convent in Duxbury, focused on addressing some of the non-capital issues that arose as a way to improve life around St. John's. Through the impetus of several Vestry task-forces, a number of small but effective changes were implemented. Streamlining the communion flow by starting from the back pews; tweaking the coffee hour circulation; forming a communications committee and conducting a communications survey to learn how we might better communicate with parishioners and with the community. I was delighted to see such spiritual and organizational maturity take place while I was away.

And, speaking of the Vestry, when Danielle Magner moved out of state, rather than wait for me to return, the leadership decided to fill the open Vestry position. They didn't engage in hand-wringing and wait for me to come back to offer my opinion, they prayerfully charged ahead; and I was so proud of them for doing so.

2018 was also a year of transition as we bid farewell to the Rev. Noah Van Niel and his family after nearly three and a half years of ministry among us. I was pleased with the care, intentionality, and love that accompanied their leave-taking. Noah expressed just how much this place and all of you positively impacted these early years of his vocational life and we sent him forth with prayer and goodwill into the new ministry to which he has been called in North Carolina.

The Annual Meeting serves as an opportunity to look both backward at the year that is past and forward into a future brimming with hope and possibility. It is telling, perhaps, that our new Associate Rector, the Rev. Jack Clark, began her ministry the first week of the New Year. I am delighted that she has joined us on our continuing journey of life and faith. Authentic relationships take time to build and Jack has begun this work with enthusiasm, wisdom, and a gentle spirit. It will be fun and inspiring to see how this relationship evolves over the coming years. Even though it's been barely a month, each day I am moved by Jack's passion for justice, her deep faith, and her insights, and I am reminded that collegiality in ministry is one of the great blessings of serving at St. John's.

With the addition of Jack as a member of the clergy team, we have reason to be optimistic about the ways in which we will engage with God in the days and years ahead. We are poised to grow in our collective and individual relationships with Jesus — all of us. Me, you, our children, our teenagers, our young adults, those of us in middle age, and the seniors among us.

But we also have a responsibility, a deep and profound responsibility, to share this good news of Jesus Christ with others in this community and beyond. I speak often about keeping one foot firmly planted within our four walls while simultaneously stepping outside the friendly confines of this parish. Otherwise we risk becoming an insular and inward-looking club. That's the spiritual danger for a thriving church, for people who truly enjoy one another's company. It's easy to ignore what goes on beyond our walls as not our concern. But we do this to our spiritual detriment. And we must continually guard against this temptation, even when it takes us outside our comfort zones. No one ever said being a Christian would be easy, that following the way of Jesus would be without discomfort. But it is the path of salvation, the way of finding meaning in the chances and changes of this mortal life. It is the way of freedom and peace.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, it remains a privilege to follow Jesus alongside each and every one of you and to proclaim Jesus in Word and Sacrament as fellow pilgrims on this journey of life and faith. May God bless you, and may God bless us all in the year ahead.