

Epiphany 4A 2023
Rev. Dr. Adam T. Trambley
Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1-12
January 29, 2023, St. John's Sharon

Rector's Annual Report

I think our readings today are very appropriate for an Annual Meeting Sunday, especially given where we are as a church and a society. Both the readings from Micah and the Sermon on the Mount focus on who God wants us to be in the midst of challenging circumstances.

In Micah, the people and God are having some disagreement about how life is going. The first few lines have God challenging the people to bring their case against him. Then God asks them what he has done wrong, since he was the one who brought them out of Egypt and repeatedly saved them. We hear the people recognizing their guilt in the conflict and asking what extravagant gesture God wants to mend the relationship. God says he doesn't need any of that. He sounds here like the frustrated parent telling their kid, "I don't want an expensive gift, just please clean your room." What God says he wants is that we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

These instructions aren't easy. They aren't about accomplishing anything in particular or making some extravagant sacrifice. They lay out a way to be and to live in relation to the world around us. Justice and mercy and walking with God is a path for living as God's children in the world, bringing the light and love of God wherever we are. God wants us to see the world with God's eyes and let our hearts break with the things that break God's heart. Then we can respond as we imagine God would have us respond, all the while recognizing that we are not God and looking for where God is at work. Sometimes what we see will be joyful and amazing. Sometimes what we see is gut-wrenching and tragic. Wherever we find ourselves, we share what God gives us to share.

Jesus' beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount lay out something similar. We hear that blessed and happy are a whole bunch of folks that most people don't think are blessed and happy. The poor in spirit, those mourning, the meek, those desperate to see justice done in their lives, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for righteousness sake. We are not called to remedy everything so that no one mourns again; and we certainly aren't supposed to make as many people mourn as possible so that they can later be comforted. The call is to be godly people in the midst of the kind of conflicts that call for peacemakers, or when receiving injuries that cry out for justice or call for mercy, or amid tragedies that involve mourning or losing so much that our poor spirits can't even dare to hope. We aren't promised any way out. We are promised that God is present in the midst of those situations. When we find ourselves surrounded by such circumstances, God is with us, and when we see others in such circumstances we minister to them instead of judging them or fleeing from them.

These readings are appropriate, I think, because we are in a time when we really can't fix everything. I don't need to recite the litany of woes the past three years have brought. We'll touch on some in a minute. For now, we recognize that they aren't over. The challenges to our

world, to our nation, to our community, to the Church broadly, to the Episcopal Church as a whole, and to St. John's Episcopal Church in downtown Sharon specifically are all pretty significant and have proven beyond our ability to solve. What we have, gratefully, is a call to be present with justice and mercy and love and humility. We can help people recognize that they are blessed even in the midst of suffering because God is with them. In some incredible situations, we are even offered the awesome privilege of being used by God to make his presence known.

This year, we cannot be about big plans or fancy programs. Collectively, we are still processing too much grief and trauma. We still need to build time into everything for the possibility of illnesses and any number of other delays. Responsibilities to family members and other loved ones have increased for many people. Many have less free time as everything takes longer, our bodies need more sleep to recover and fight off disease, and space for prayer, silence, nature, walks, rest, and play are even more essential to help our souls and psyches deal with the overwhelming changes and losses we have all experienced. We talked some weeks ago about the struggle of being in the neutral zone after huge changes, and we are still there.

As a church, looking back at last year and ahead to next year, in many ways the road is clear. We are to be present to one another and to our community in the midst of everything going on with the care and compassion of God. To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. To recognize the presence of God with us and know we are blessed in the middle of all of this. And the things I know for sure to report to you are that God keeps showing up here, again and again, and we are OK. Your love for one another, for me and my family, and especially for God, have created an environment that welcomes God in our midst, and I believe that as we try to be faithful, God will keep us doing whatever we need to do.

In terms of other specifics, I'd like to share a few things, apologizing in advance for anyone or anything I miss.

First, concerning our worship services: Our Sunday morning services are mostly stabilized again. We have about two-thirds of the numbers we did before COVID, which is not bad and probably about where most churches seem to be. New people regularly come to St. John's and often stay. Our choir has restarted and is building up again. I think our worship is meaningful, Spirit-filled, and appropriate for the current size of our congregation. Thanks to Ron for his leadership, for the choir, and for our readers, Eucharistic ministers, ushers, altar guild, the Facebook live film crew, and morning munchy folks, all of whom help make Sunday morning happen, and to our Eucharistic Visitors, who help take our worship out to our shut-ins.

We are primarily missing two groups in worship post-COVID. First, we've had 44 burials over the past three years, and that's a large group of folks who are still worshipping with us, but from much better seats. The second group is families with children. Children are often sick under the best of circumstances. However, over the past year, the waves of illnesses hitting children has been particularly virulent. Additionally, parents are very reluctant to take sick to church, both because the children need time to recover and because they do not want to spread infection. On top of all of that, disruptions to school and learning have been such that Sunday mornings may be required for making up days of work needed for child care. Dedicated families are often

unable to regularly attend. Neither new programming on our part or an increased desire on the part of young parents seem like viable solutions to this very real problem.

In addition to our Sunday morning services, Ron continues to read Noonday prayer on our Facebook page. This ministry has formed its own community, including people from beyond our parish or even our local area. Also thanks to our deacon, Erin Herald, for her work. She may not be able to be here every Sunday, but she is sharing St. John's in her own circles and praying with and for us.

In order to reach young people at the best time for them, our youth Sunday School has moved to Sunday evenings. We are using a Love First curriculum that focuses on our children being part of a church full of love, where they can use their gifts and grow. If you can share your ministry or work with our youth, please let us know. Thank you especially to Laura Peretic, Sherri Lowery, and Heather Ulan for their continuing work with our younger parishioners. Thanks, too, to Barb Lipinski for organizing the adult Sunday school group that meets between services.

We continue to care for people in a number of ways. Our Community Lunches have returned this month to in-person seating. This re-opening allows us to return to getting to know and build community with our guests, which was one of the pillars of this ministry. Last year, the lunches provided 10,001 meals to people. Episcopal Community Services, our food pantry, provided thousands more meals through their monthly distributions of groceries. The dedication of the volunteers of both of these ministries is enormous and I am very grateful for all your work.

Episcopal Church Women were able to hold another successful Winterfest, which raises money which they distribute to numerous agencies. They also had a good time baking cookies, which is probably as important. We have an amazing group of women who reach out to help others and who also check-in and care for each other. They are the backbone of this church, and I am grateful to them for all that they do.

One new initiative this year is our Becoming Beloved Community work. This initiative came out of a response by our Diocesan partnership to some of the events of the past couple years. Our parish has held two dinner to discuss the movie American Creed, taken a field trip to visit some underground railroad sights, and has other plans to learn about and respond to racism in all its forms. Thanks to Laura Peretic for spearheading this work and to all those working on this committee.

To do what we do in this facility requires a fair amount of administration and upkeep. I am very grateful for Tina and all her work. She has officially retired, but is continuing to keep our parish books and do other administrative pieces. She also has a great institutional memory so that we don't miss things we need to do as we adapt and change. Much of her work is able to be done at home, so she is not always in the office, but what she does matters.

I am also grateful that Jay Koborie has joined us this past year as our sexton. He is keeping our building clean and ready for our activities. His work also allows us to be hospitable to other groups. Even while we have not been open for social events, we have two Girl Scout Troops meeting at St. John's, two twelve-step meetings, a variety of meetings from the Behavioral

Health Commission, and a TOPS groups. We will once again likely be a site for the All of Us medical research group, and other groups contact us from time to time. We have great facilities and people using them are very appreciative and often generous.

Our facilities themselves have had a bit of work over the past years. Specifically, the floor underneath the sanctuary has been repaired. We are looking at flooring options to replace the carpet. That process was delayed by the floor repairs and then health issues and travel schedules of some of those involved in the exploring our options.

Along with our facilities, our finances also enable us to do our ministry. Thanks to Augie Santillo, our Treasurer, our Finance Committee, our counters, our ushers, and especially to all of you who give! We'll talk a little more at the Annual Meeting, but I want to highlight two things you might see in the budget. The first is that our endowments, like all investments, are down significantly this year. Everyone says they will come back in a year or two, so we are being patient. One implication is that our projected budget for 2023 has a pretty sizable deficit. You will also note that our 2022 budget projected a deficit and we ended up with a hundred dollar surplus, even without withdrawing some budgeted investment income. I fully expect our expenses to be somewhat lower than our 2023 budget and hope again to be balanced at the end of the year. However, we chose to project a deficit as a worst case scenario, hoping to still minimize expenses and wait on withdrawing some of our unrestricted funds until the market recovers. We can provide more details to those who may want it.

Before closing, I'd like to touch on two other things. The first is that I want to thank you for my sabbatical earlier this year. Especially after the pandemic shutdown, I desperately needed the break and the opportunity to rest, recharge, and regain some perspective. It was very good time for me, for what I needed and to have some time with my family. I think you had a good couple months with Dean Downey, as well, and I'm grateful to him and to the Diocese for allowing him to be here.

Finally, I want to give a brief update on the preschool project. In December, we received a cost estimate on what was an amazing basement renovation plan. The estimate came in at \$1.2 million. This was significantly more than I had expected, and is probably more than we have available. While disappointing, this probably means God has a different location in mind. A recent survey we did showed a need especially for after school and evening care. With the results of that survey, Dr. April Torrence is finishing a business plan for us. In the next few months we hope to begin looking at that plan more closely and figuring out details about how, when and where we can serve the needs of young families and children in our area. Please keep this, and all our parish efforts, in your prayers.

I remain very grateful to be your priest. You are an amazing congregation, and I am blessed to be part of St. John's. What the next year and decade will bring are pretty much anyone's guess, but I have no doubt that God will keep showing up and we will be blessed to be part of it. So do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.