Epiphany 4 A: Annual Meeting

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All Saints’, Wolcott

 By custom, the sermon on the day of the Annual Meeting serves as a sort of “state of the Church” address, but since everything we do as Christians is accomplished in the light of the Gospel, it seems to me important that we take some time to unpack the lectionary readings appointed for today and see how they might enlighten our life together as the community God has called into being under the name, “All Saints’.”

 Imagine standing on the top of that mountain with Jesus, and being blessed with the vision with which he is blessed; seeing what he sees. What do you see? I daresay that Jesus’ view encompasses us and all of this sinful, broken Creation which he brought into being and loves still, with all its faults, and *at the same time* it includes a view of this Creation transformed into a just and heavenly Kingdom where the only rule of life is love. Jesus turns to you and says, “Do you see? This is what I bring to you; this is the life I desire and have prepared for you. Help me reveal its glory to the world.” And you say to him, “But, Lord, how can I do that? There is so much anger and hate, so much division, so much sickness and death, so much evil at work in Creation. Who will hear me?” And he answers in words that we have heard so many times before in the Bible: “Do not be discouraged, do not be afraid; I will be with you. By your words and by your actions let everyone know what it means to be blessed. Keep your eyes on the vision of the Kingdom, and you can’t go wrong.” And you say, “Lord, show me the way to that Kingdom.” He answers, “Long ago, there was a prophet named Micah. He had not yet met me, but he knew the way to the Kingdom. His directions are timeless and should be sufficient for you: “do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.” And when you say, “What does it mean to walk humbly with God?” Jesus replies, “Those who are poor in spirit know that blessing. They know what it means not to put anything else in the place of God, including themselves, because that’s what got this whole Creation into trouble in the first place. Allow yourself the grace to depend on God alone, and you will know that blessing, and it will lead you to the Kingdom.”

 Both the passage from the prophet Micah and from the Gospel according to Matthew are well-known prescriptions for living what an older version of our Confession of Sin called “a godly, righteous and sober life.” Both address the importance of recognizing and trusting the presence of God always at your side. Both deal with the blessing of that Presence. A part of our vocation as Christians is to participate with Christ in the unveiling of God’s presence and glory in the world. The blessings which God bestows upon Creation reveal that glory in a profound way, yet the evidence is that they come often at unexpected times and in unexpected forms and call us to new and unexpected ways of being. They expect of us humility; to say that a person is “poor in spirit” is another way of saying that that person “walks humbly” with God; it is language which acknowledges that the world does not depend on *me*, but on God; that I am not the one in ultimate control of my life - God is. That may come as a real shock to some, in this “me first” culture in which we live. However, that is one of the reasons the presence and practice of the Church is so important. It turns our expectations upside-down.

 This passage from the Gospel of Matthew is the beginning of the famous Sermon on the Mount. It’s important to us in this congregation because it is also the appointed Gospel reading for All Saints’ Day, and so it seems particularly appropriate that it should arise again on the occasion of our Annual Meeting, because this is the day on which we consider intentionally the specific ways in which this congregation lives into the gift of blessedness. Some of us spent time this past summer in a Kerygma study of the Beatitudes; whether or not you were part of that exercise, I’d like to suggest that you go home and get out your Bible and read all the way through chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew, and hear how Jesus prescribes the blessed life, before we come to the Mount of the Transfiguration on Feb. 23. It may open your eyes a bit wider to your vocation as a follower of Jesus.

 Meanwhile, let us consider the blessings which we enjoy here at All Saints’ and contemplate ways in which we might extend those blessings to others and invite them to share in the vision.

 This is a giving congregation. At the heart of our giving is a sincere desire to benefit children and families in need in Wolcott. To that end, the annual golf tournament raises thousands of dollars, all of which are used to serve the needs of children in the Wolcott public schools – by providing everything from shoes to field trips to band instruments for those whose families are not able to afford them. Such donations not only provide light, but also bring new life to those who struggle with the darkness of poverty. The simple practice of bringing your empty bottles and cans to the church to be recycled provides scholarship assistance to graduating seniors is also an excellent act of stewardship of the environment and care for Creation. Providing breakfast foods for the Wolcott Food Pantry on the first Sunday of each month means that some families who have little in their own pantries will be able to start the day with sound nourishment and energy to do the work of the day.

 This is a growing congregation. The Toddler Division of the Church School, begun a couple of years ago, now engages five little ones in learning the stories of the Bible and Jesus’ love. The Lord sends to our doors on a fairly regular basis persons who come seeking God, and works through our warm welcome and sincere hospitality to show to them the love of God in Christ.

 This is a loving congregation. When one or more of us is in need of something, members of the parish rally round to provide it – rides to church, companionship to those who are lonely, Communion to those who are home-bound; reminders of the healing presence of God. I continually feel extremely fortunate to serve a parish which I believe is one of the healthiest in the Diocese of Connecticut, and maybe the entire Episcopal Church. There is no underlying conflict here, no “dis-ease” which infects the community, no secrets being harbored; there is solid and capable leadership in our Vestry, our Church School teachers, our music department. We have much to look forward to this year: a Lenten Kerygma Bible study and book discussion, the possibility of a Diocesan ECW meeting in March, Bishop Ahrens’ Visitation with Confirmation on June 18, continuing Second Sabbath ministry with the Congregational Church, and the community Thanksgiving Eve Service, which I believe will be here this year. We are truly blessed. This does not mean, however, that we are without our own needs – it is not a Pollyanna-like statement.

 Like all faith communities, we live on the edge, financially. Every faith community, is seeing lower attendance, lower income, fewer full-time and more part-time clergy. We do very well in comparison with some. We have a remarkable number of pledges for a congregation of this size, and for that generosity, we give thanks to God. In addition, unlike some churches, we do have some endowment funds, thanks to the sale of the old rectory years ago, a share in the resources of now-closed congregations, and a generous organist from thirty-some years ago, who, before he died, made All Saints’ the beneficiary of a $20,000 life insurance policy which continues to provide benefits to us to this day. (This is a good time for me to encourage you to consider including All Saints’ in your own estate planning!) This past year, we received a generous memorial gift from a parishioner who wishes to remain anonymous. The Vestry has not yet determined what to do with that gift, but it has been invested in an account which will help it grow while decisions about it are being made. Nevertheless, our expenses continue to grow, as do those at your own house. We have lived with a deficit budget for many years – sometimes more, sometimes less, but it eats away at our endowment when we resort to the use of it to cover gaps in our budget. So this year, we have made some changes to reduce the deficit to almost nothing. The major change is in my own compensation. (I can discuss this later at the meeting.) The fact is that I have requested that my compensation be reduced to be more in keeping with the hours of service that are normative for a half-time clergyperson in this Diocese. This encourages us to look at the future clergy needs of the parish in a more realistic way. It does not change what I do here, but it does reflect the actual service I provide to the parish as your spiritual leader.

 Average Sunday attendance is good, but could be better. Like every other congregation, we struggle with competition from Sunday sports, the availability of Sunday shopping at the mall, and just plain exhaustion of people who are too busy. There are times when I long for the “good old days” of blue laws! Four of our young people who were confirmed last year will be leaving for college in the fall, and that will leave a big hole in our hearts, as well as in our attendance figures!

 Nevertheless, money and attendance are not the things which define us. We are defined by our blessedness – our desire to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.” We are defined by the blessedness of being humans who are sometimes poor in spirit; who are sometimes called to mourn the death of a beloved family member or friend; who are meek – not willing to be walked all over, but willing to serve, knowing that Christ walks with us; hungering and thirsting for righteousness and respecting the dignity of *every* human being, loving even – and especially – those whom we don’t like; being merciful (kind) – serving the poor, the outcast, the most vulnerable, welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison; working for justice and peace, and *being* peacemakers in our own homes, schools, community, and the wider world; most of us have not been persecuted for our beliefs, but we hear all the time about those who are, and we need to help them as best as we can, through prayer and action, standing with them against violence, danger, intolerance, poverty, and disease. We do all of these things because God has first done them for us, in Christ Jesus, and given us the honor of continuing the ministry of Christ in our own day and time, so that glimpses of the Kingdom of God may be seen through us. God came to us in Jesus to share and understand our humanity, to forgive the times we fail to make the mark, to encourage us on the way, and, finally, to lift us beyond the grave to that place where all will one day know the fullness of the Kingdom of heaven.

 Such is the blessedness of being All Saints’.