Epiphany III C : Annual Meeting

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Susan L. Davidson

All Saints’, Wolcott

The sermon on the day of the Annual Meeting is usually intended as a “State of the Church” address, setting forth the ministry of the parish in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Savior. Let us, then, first, explore these powerful words of Scripture which are provided for us today by the Lectionary, and examine how they might enlighten our understanding of who – and whose – we are, in the mind and the heart of God.

The Church Year is a time of following the entire life and ministry of Jesus Christ. With Mary and Joseph, we waited for Jesus to be born; at Christmas, we welcomed him into our hearts for yet another year of learning to walk with him through his journey of life, death, and resurrection. On Epiphany, we saw how “wise men from the East” were led by a star to seek this newborn king of the Jews. The entire season following the Epiphany, beginning with the Baptism of Our Lord and continuing through all 9 Sundays this year, is a time for the faithful to examine ways in which the glory of God in the light of Christ is made known to people in various ways, near and far, and draw them in to seek, find, love, and serve the Lord of mercy and the God of Grace and Life.

I found it timely that, on Friday, the Waterbury paper published a two-page article on a very interesting new book titled Jesus’ Bible, by Watertown native and biblical scholar Christopher Dost. I’d like to read it, and I invite you to join me! In today’s Gospel passage, we are presented with Jesus in Nazareth, newly returned from 40 grueling and dangerous days in the desert, joining the sabbath congregation in synagogue (as was his custom), reading from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah – the only so-called “Bible” he knew – and building on it his first sermon, based on the identity which he found there, written hundreds of years before. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he read to those gathered in the synagogue, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He continued, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And how did this first sermon go over for our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ? Tune in next Sunday and find out!

We are also presented today with a powerful moment in the history of Israel when, following their return from captivity in Babylon, and in the course of renewing and reconstructing the Temple which, half a century earlier had been destroyed by their captors, the priest Ezra read to the people Israel from the Torah – the Law of Moses, which with great rejoicing, had been discovered in the rubble. He read to “all the people of Israel gathered together,” it says, and he read “from early morning until midday.” And then there was a sermon – it tells us “they read from the book . . . with interpretation,” much as our own Liturgy of the Word takes place, and much as Jesus did in the synagogue, some 500 years later. In the worship of God, there’s not much new under the sun!

And how does the power of the words of Scripture and the Word-Made-Flesh transform those who listen? Together, they have the power to unite those of many races and cultures, to unite those divided by gender, faith, abilities, and circumstances, says the Apostle Paul, and make of them one body and one Spirit, who seek and serve Christ in one another, each offering their own particular gifts to build up the risen and living Body of Christ in the world today, “that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” This is the Church, as Paul understood it, and, I believe, as Christ expected it to be. That said, here’s how *we* measure up to that model, as seen over the past year, and as we look toward the future. How do *we* bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind? How do we, anointed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, as was Jesus, “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor?”

The past year was pretty good for us. There were *no snow days* on Sundays in 2018! We rejoiced together over five Baptisms – five new Christians added to the Body of Christ! And we – individually and together - have the privilege of helping them grow in their knowledge and love of the Lord, and into developing their own gifts for ministry. Will they be apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, or any of the other parts of the body which Paul lists? How many of us recognize those gifts within ourselves? Let us continually seek and serve Christ in one another, and indeed, in all persons, as we grow in our relationship with the Word Made Flesh.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I want to say that we have a splendid Vestry in this parish, and each brings their own gifts to that ministry. We have had multiple issues with water over the entire nine years I have been at All Saints’- either water to drink, or water from ice dams on the roof, or water to wash and flush! All of you stepped up, when necessary, and brought gallons of water when we had a year of drought a couple of years ago and the well went dry, and when that was past, the problem with bacteria endangered the drinking water. But this past year, we added a system which purifies the water with light and now, all is well (you should pardon the pun!).

One major change happened in the course of this past year. Our Music Director, Roberta Stocksdale, having silently endured considerable arthritis pain for over a year found it necessary to retire, for health reasons, early in Lent, and later to have a hip replacement in early fall. But God – who always provides what is needed – provided for us an interim in our own Pam Lindvall, who graciously stepped in to serve in that role through Holy Week and Easter and into the early summer, when we were able to welcome Yves Venne into the ministry of Music Director. We are grateful to God for providing for us all that is needed for us to praise the Lord in “hymns and psalms and spiritual songs.”

It has been my desire for some time to enter into study and discussion about how we might help in healing hearts and lives from the sin of racism. When the diocesan Convention last fall mandated that same sort of study, I found a kindred spirit in Ouida Green, and together we have been leading readings and discussions around this important part of our spiritual life. About a dozen people gathered last fall to discuss the book, Waking Up White, by Debby Irving, a fine study of how insidious and subtle are the cultural events which can so easily lead us astray. I invite you to enter into those discussions. The next will be on February 10, after church, when the group will discuss an article titled “Ten Myths of Racism.” A copy will be provided upon request.

Also on February 10, All Saints’ will host a Scout Sunday – the first in my time here – when members of Cub Scout Pack 230 will join us for worship; some may be involved in various liturgical ministries that day. I know you will welcome them with the famous All Saints’ welcome!

The annual Golf Tournament last fall involved more golfers and raised more funds than in the past, and all of those proceeds go to help children and families in need in the Wolcott schools. It is a great joy and privilege for us to love and serve our neighbors in this way each year! Because of your generous donations of bottles and cans, we also were able to provide three scholarships this year to graduating seniors. The outreach of this faith community is quite wonderful.

For all the years I have been at All Saints’, I have heard of and witnessed personally the need for updating and renovation of the kitchen. Donna Lydem, who has been the leader of the Kitchen Angels and other food hospitality ministry, has been talking about it on a regular basis, and every year the Vestry agrees about the need for it, but we have not had the funds to do such a major project. Resolving the water problems brought the issue front and center. This year, through a legacy which she received from a family member, Donna was able to “put her money where her mouth is” and to make a significant contribution toward the renovation of the kitchen. We have no idea yet what the actual cost will be, nor the scope of the project, which is still in the early planning stages, but we now have significant “seed money” to work toward that goal. Gary Byram has volunteered to oversee the project, and will, of course, need your prayers and your help in many other ways. A few of you may be invited to participate in a planning team; I hope you will consider that, if invited to do so. Like all renovation projects, it’s exciting and terrifying at the same time, but we have God’s promise: “Don’t be afraid; I will be with you.”

Another thing to look forward to this year is the annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, which will take place in Hartford on Saturday and *Sunday*, October 26 and 27. The business of Convention will take place on Saturday, but the entire Diocese is invited to worship together on Sunday morning, as we did a few years ago. You will hear more about this as time goes on. I hope we will all be able to join in the joy of that Sunday morning experience!

We have four young people preparing for Confirmation sometime this year – before you ask, we have not yet received a date from the Bishops’ office – and several adults who have indicated an interest in being Confirmed or Received. If you feel called to that action, please let me know; I’ll be planning an Inquirer’s Class for some time closer to the time of the Bishop’s Visitation.

In the end, being a member of the Body of Christ at All Saints’ is about living into the great privilege of living, loving, and coming to understand the words of God in Scripture and the Word Made Flesh in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has called us into being the Church, his risen and living Body in the world. The witness of Scripture is that God, who has called us into being, is always calling us to something new – providing occasions every day to die to old ways and allow ourselves to be resurrected to new and abundant life in ways that we might never, on our own, have imagined.

I’ll close with a quote from the recently-departed poet Mary Oliver: “Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”