

Epiphany 4 2021
Rev. Adam T. Trambley
1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28
January 31, 2021, St. John's Sharon, Pandemic Worship Service
Rector's Annual Report

From our reading this morning from First Corinthians: *for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*

Paul here reminds us of what we know: that we exist from God and for God through our Lord Jesus Christ. He also reminds us that God is one. This reminder is helpful in times like this pandemic, when we also face various political and economic anxieties. Even in all of this, God is still the same, Jesus is still the same, and the purpose of our lives to offer glory and praise to God remains the same.

Our purpose at St. John's, to *Worship God, Care for People, and Grow as Christians*, also remains the same, even as we scramble to find ways to live into that purpose in this new and ever-changing environment. This morning is our Annual Meeting, and this is my Annual Report. We don't need to go back and reread our last annual report to know that most of the past year did not turn out the way we expected.

We as a parish have suffered a number of real losses in the past year. Some of these, like the suspension of in-person worship services, and not being able to be in church for Holy Week, Easter, or Christmas, are sacrifices we have made to protect one another and our wider community during this pandemic. Yet doing the right thing can still be difficult and painful. Similar losses fell more heavily on individuals within the congregation, such as being forced to mark weddings and funerals with small private ceremonies or no ceremonies at all, and to have baptisms and confirmations delayed. We were not able to recognize the efforts of our musical scholars that had sung with us for two years, and many of them are now off at college. Most poignantly, last year we had thirteen deaths in our parish family, including some people that died following a COVID illness. Others in the parish contracted COVID and are still recovering with lingering symptoms many weeks later. We pray for each other in the midst of such losses, and support one another however we can.

In the midst of changes and challenges, we have continued to offer ministry and to live into our purpose. Our food pantry and community lunches have both radically changed how they distribute food, but both have consistently fed the hungry through this pandemic. They have also been an important distribution avenue for others to offer assistance, as well. On at least one Saturday, our lunch volunteers distributed the hot meals that they had prepared, as well as frozen meals prepared by others and boxes of fresh produce. I want to thank the dozens of volunteers that help make these ministries possible.

We have also continued to find ways to worship, whether that has been modified in-person services, streamed services, Zoom evening prayer, or parking lot services. Kudos to Ron for all of his work in these settings, and especially for his Noonday prayer on Facebook that has offered

an important time of rest and peace in the middle of the day to many, including those he is reaching that are new to St. John's. Our on-line efforts have also allowed a number of parishioners who have moved to other places or who are shut-in or in nursing homes to stay connected to us in worship. While none of us wanted to do our services this way, we have discovered some important tools that will help us reach more people when the pandemic is over.

This new digital environment has also pushed us to update our on-line presence. We have used Facebook more regularly. Deacon Erin has started a Facebook outreach called the Kindness Crew. We launched a new website at the beginning of this year, and have also revamped our weekly e-newsletter. Our services are being streamed, and we are looking at additional platforms such as YouTube. We have also been able to join our Diocese and Diocesan Partnership for new on-line options such as the Sacred Ground course that a number of people from St. John's participated in last fall.

At the same time, our parish has taken advantage of traditional media. We have tried to keep connected with cards, letters and phone calls. Those who have been sick have told me how much all of your cards and notes have meant to them. I am very grateful for calls from people who are in touch weekly or more frequently with multiple parishioners and make sure we know when people need special prayers or are facing particular health challenges. These networks of love are the foundation for everything else that we do at St. John's. They are the core way we care for people, and I am so grateful for the ways you bless one another with that care.

Many of our regular ministries have continued in a more irregular fashion. Thanks to Laura Peretic, Sherri Lowery, and Heather Ulan who continue to offer programming for our children and youth, both through our youth group Facebook page and through packets that are home-delivered. As most of our income is now donated via mail or the internet, how we count contributions and even how we pick up mail from the post office has changed. Thanks to Tina for continuing to do her work, both from home and sometimes the office, and to Donna Stamoolis and Marilyn Gozik for counting and other assistance. I am also grateful to Barb Lipinski and Tracy Schliep who have stepped up at times to clean our sanctuary and other parts of our facilities since we are currently without a sexton. Special mention goes to Frank O'Stafy for his incredible work as Junior Warden on so many levels. Thanks to our vestry for their continued leadership as we navigate all these challenges, even via Zoom, and for Frank, Donna Stamoolis, and Matt Wertz whose have just concluded their terms. Thanks also to Victoria Barletta, Donna Billioni, and Augie Santillo who have agreed to run for vestry this year.

I am not even going to try to predict what the next year will hold for us. We still don't know what will happen with the virus and the vaccine rollout in the coming months, or how the events of this past year will change us and our world going forward. I do want to share a couple of things that we are currently working on, and which I hope we can accomplish in the coming months.

We have contracted with Jesse Fiske to do some needed sanctuary work. We will be fixing the plaster, painting, and dealing with some window issues, then get new carpeting. My hope is that much of this work can be completed while in-person worship has to remain suspended.

We are also beginning a new concert series at St. John's. We recently received a grant to establish a concert series in memory of Anna V. and Milton J. Smith. Since many musicians have lost performance opportunities due to COVID, our plan is to kick off this series in early March with a streamed concert. Ron, the vestry, and I hope to be able to help local artists as well as introduce people to St. John's in this way. When the pandemic is over, we can transition to live concerts.

As things change, we will also continue to communicate as best we can via e-mail, regular mail, and phone calls. The flexibility and resiliency of this congregation is a testament to your love of God and of each other. I appreciate your understanding as we all do the best we can in this environment, and am deeply grateful for the support you have shown to me and to all our staff and volunteers. St. John's remains an amazing parish, and I am grateful to be your rector, even and especially during this time.

I want to conclude with this thought. For us, this is the first pandemic we have experienced directly. However, God has brought St. John's through at least one other worldwide pandemic, and through world wars and the Great Depression. If you read our history, St. John's was in dire straits during some of those periods, but God pulled the church through. God is going to pull us through, as well. I look forward to being with you again in this sanctuary together, singing, and continuing to Worship God, Care for People and Grow as Christians. I don't know when it will happen, but it will. God bless you and thank you for all your support of St. John's and of each other.