

Jan 29, 2023

Annual Meeting and 4th Sunday after Epiphany, year A

Blessed Be: Rector's Annual Report

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

Today after the liturgy we will have our annual meeting, where we elect additional Vestry members, and representatives to diocesan and deanery meetings, we review the year, and we thank people who are stepping down from ministries. We reflect on who we are as church, and in a way, we count our blessings.

The sermon on this day has typically been the rector's report on the year. Perhaps this is save some time, or to make sure that everyone gets a little taste of the meeting, even if they don't stay for lunch. Or maybe it's to ensure that lunch comes a little faster. So with all that in mind, my sermon today will be my reflection on the year, and a look into the future.

The Beatitudes that we find in our passage from Matthew's Gospel today are very helpful in this regard. They are a way of counting blessings. Robert Schuller wrote a book many years ago called the *Be Happy Attitudes*. But if you look closely at the beatitudes, they are not really about feeling happy, rather they describe really tough situations – experiencing loss, and yearning for something better, feeling small and poor, being in situations that require mercy over judgement. They describe experiences of conflict and persecution and threat of death. They describe the uncertainty that comes with following the Gospel, being church, wanting a better world or to be better in the world. And the long wait that involves.

In our Season of Many Epiphanies the beatitudes suggest that God is making the divine self manifest right in the middle of our mess. God shows up as blessing right now, even in the middle of the struggle, before the arriving the promised land, or heaven, or spiritual perfection, or the end of COVID – whatever it is that will replace the mess one day.

But the blessing is now. That's the point of the Beatitudes. And blessing implies God's presence, God's goodness in the moment, God's favor. It's not Blessed will be you, but blessed are you now when you suffer as a result of having the loving heart of God beating within you. The blessing is now, the promised fullness of God's life is not yet. But we can taste it; it sits on the tongue right now.

So let's look at the past year through the lens of the beatitudes to see how Jesus has been present with us.

This time last year, this congregation was still reeling a bit. Your previous rector, the Rev. Emily Richards, had just left for a new position at St. Thomas Whitemarsh. It wasn't clear what the search for a new rector would look like. The annual meeting was marked by questions about process and how this new "interim-priest-in-charge-idea" might work out. I know because I read the minutes.

And in that wondering and confusion was real loss and mourning; there was a hunger and a thirst for the right thing to happen for St. Peter's. There was a feeling of poverty and of meekness that comes from not quite knowing what will happen next. There were hard feelings and conflict and a need for

mercy. There was a now at that time that was pretty uncomfortable, and there was a very uncertain not yet.

The sign of the Christ's presence, the beatitude in it, was how well this community followed those blessings right into the unknown, how you walked by faith if not by sight, as Paul would say.

And so you took a leap of faith and you invited me to be your interim-priest-in-charge, without a lot of interviews or time to consider. The diocese gave you one candidate, and that was me. And I remember how worried you were – what if the relationship doesn't work out? And I could sense that fear of the messiness, the pain of again losing a leader and feeling rudderless. I remember saying, "we'll know soon enough if it is working or it isn't. And if it doesn't work out, we'll know what to do." And trusted each other in this. And it worked out.

And while we walked by faith, if not by sight, we looked inward and we surveyed outward and you created a parish profile that reflected who St. Peter's was this past year, and the kind of leadership you needed in order to be who God is calling you to be.

We carefully watched the changes in COVID, and took off masks and put them back on, got vaccinated, got sick and got better, reached out to one another, gathered when we could, distanced when we had to. We planned things and canceled them sometimes. We got good at protecting one another, and ourselves. Our tech team made sure that people could tune in on Facebook, if they were sick or traveling or being careful. And everyone benefitted from the blessings of the merciful.

There should be some bespoke Beatitudes made especially for this pandemic: Blessed are those who are limited by COVID precautions for one day you shall have fellowship hour, and Communion in the hand, and a common cup and hugs at the sign of peace. One day you shall see your families and friends return, and new people will be welcomed at church on Sunday, you shall have leisurely Christmas services and a Shrove Tuesday Talent Show. One day you shall have lunch club to stay instead of lunch club to go – and 30 people will gather for meatball subs made by Karen Sayer. One day you shall laugh.

We saw many of these promises fulfilled this year, on the heels of those beatitudes – those signs of God's presence with us, even when we were still waiting for things to open up and to get better.

Our numbers grew from 40 on a Sunday to an average of 90. We formally welcomed nine new families and individuals, with more in the wings. Children and youth – some brand new to the parish -- stepped forward to lead us in Scripture and in prayer on Come 4th Sundays. And on the other Sundays at the sign of peace a stream of children would return from Godly Play and Children's Chapel and take their place among us, if we remembered to go get them. Thanks Alex. Many of those kids found their way into a brand-new Christmas Pageant for the very first time.

We sang numerous choruses of *All Hands on Deck St. Peter's*, and listened to dear members share their reflections of what this community means to them through St. Peter's Reflections and Stewardship talks.

We also mourned losses and buried several friends and family members this year – we held long-delayed memorials for people who died before this year when we couldn't gather properly to celebrate

their lives. We had two baptisms this year as well because life kept happening here, even during our losses.

We stocked our food cupboard, filled ditty bags for seafarers, cut scarves and made hats, delivered cookie tins to people who needed a pick-me-up. We became known as the Toothpaste Church at St. James School, because we kept our promise to them to help stock their Welcome Table.

In this season of Many Epiphanies we did our best to see God, which is the promise that goes with being pure of heart.

Scripture Scholar Paul Minear describes blessings as being a two-way street, an act of reciprocity between God and God's people, an intersection where they meet. ¹ "God blesses them as a mark of his grace and favor; their blessing of God is a recognition of his presence among them," he writes.

And so it is with the blessings that we call beatitudes. In our year to come we shall make time to reflect deeply on all the places in our faith community where God has bestowed divine grace and favor, and we will ask ourselves and God how we should put those gifts to work in our community in new ways. And we will bless God by celebrating Jesus' presence among us, Epiphany after Epiphany.

Blessed be.

Amen.

¹ Paul Minear, *Blessing* in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Edited by: Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195046458.001.0001/acref-9780195046458-e-0110?rskey=TJkMmm&result=8>