

Who did we say Jesus is in 2024?

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

A lot is going on today. It's Come 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday, when our kids come forth to be seen and our newcomers come forth to be welcomed. It's the annual meeting, where new leaders are elected and look backward and forward to our work as church. And it's also a day to celebrate our Patron Saint, Saint Peter. We moved his Jan. 18 feast day to our Annual Meeting Day so we can celebrate St Peter and St. Peter's today.

This morning, you may have noticed some special touches that are unique to St Peter's. Jesse Robson, Jeanne Robson's sister, wrote the hymn celebrating the St Peter's community that we sang as our entrance hymn. Our processional cross was created at our last youth and teen gathering by Alyssa Clemons and Sophia Kelly and the youth ministry team. Even the image on the cover of our leaflet is unique to us – created for St Peter's by graphic artist Ned McConaughy.

Our Scriptures today are also a little unique; they come from a version of the Bible called "The Message" translated by Poet and Scripture Scholar Eugene Peterson. He uses delightful current language for his translations. I like how Peterson translates Jesus' reply when Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah.

*Jesus came back, "God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.*

Now that's saying something.

On our Annual Meeting Sunday the sermon serves as the rector's report on the parish, a Year in Review. I guess that's so anyone who doesn't stay for the meeting afterwards, gets a taste of what's in store. That question "Who do you say that I am?" is a good one to use to reflect on the past year. Or to say it another way: Who did we say that that Jesus is, through our actions as church this year? How were we a church "so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out? -- that church that Jesus started to build on Peter, the rock?

Well one gathering where that really came through this year was Pentecost on May 19. Remember Pentecost? That was the day when the bishop came to St Peter's. We confirmed six youth and welcomed three adults into the Episcopal church, and baptized Ennis McCunney Bond.

We also welcomed candidates from two other parishes. St. James Parish in Collegeville brought 18 people to receive these sacraments, as well as family, friends and parishioners. They also brought two sheet cakes and printed the bulletin. Members of their choir joined ours in the loft. In addition, four Confirmation candidates and their families and clergy joined us from the House of Prayer in the city. In all, more than 30 people were received and sacramentally welcomed in some way that day.

More than 280 people filled the church. We put rows of chairs on the floor, and we used the high altar. The service lasted more than two hours. It was unprecedented.

Who did we say that Jesus was that day? We said that Jesus welcomes into his body all who desire to make a life there, all who would be part of his church. We said that Jesus loves diversity and inclusion – by age, race, gender and sexual identity, location, background. That Jesus makes room in our hearts and our pews to share good news with others. We said that Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to fill all the spaces in between. The gates of hell didn't stand a chance that day.

But that was one day in the life of St. Peter's. This year we said that Jesus calls us forth, with new gifts, with new members, with new vision. Kristina Marchuk became our parish nurse this year. Carol Cei joined us as our new music director. We started a Stewardship Committee and revived our Eucharistic Visitors ministry. Our Welcome Team made welcome bags for newcomers, and handed out fliers about St. Peter's, and we all started wearing name tags and pronoun pins.

Our attendance grew to an average of 90 people a week. We welcomed 23 people, kids and adults, at Come 4<sup>th</sup> Sundays in 2024. That's the same number that we welcomed the year before, so we're growing at a steady rate.

We said that Jesus calls disciples and puts them to work. Bob Smith, a postulant for holy orders to the diaconate, completed his internship here. He will be ordained on Feb. 22. Let's plan to cheer him on. And our own Rosalinda Ibanez Memba was accepted to the process to discern priestly ordination.

We said that Jesus invites us to be in Awesome Communion with him. Some of our youngest members showed us how that's done by making bread, and learning the story of the last supper, and creating stoles that symbolized what that meal means. They dressed up and wore their stoles to Awesome Communion Sunday – and that made Eucharist more meaningful for all of us.

We also thought long and hard about how we receive Communion, about the importance of having choices and options so that receiving both the bread and the wine were available to all – whether you feel more comfortable sipping or dipping, or if you needed a gluten-free option. We said that Jesus is flexible, that Jesus comes to us in ways that we can receive him. And we can do the same.

We said that Jesus empowers us to be stewards to care for both the church made of brick and mortar as well as the church made of living stone. We finished our Warm Regards fund raising campaign in 2024, which paid for the heating system we installed in 2023. We did with the help of a matching grant that took us over the top of what we needed and allowed us to create an additional fund for capital improvements. Consider how cold it was this week, and the three energy efficient boilers that are keeping us warm. Thanks Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego!

In 2024 we also said that Jesus empowers us to care for others and to seek justice. We made tons of sandwiches for St Mark's homeless ministry in Frankford this past year. Parishioners went regularly to Beds for Kids to assemble bedding for children in unstable home situations. Mary Rivera formed a gun violence committee, and we prepared to bring the Souls Shot portraits here this month. We had a series of candid conversations on Gender Identity, and we hosted the Anti-Racism Commission's program, Singing the African American Spirituals with Integrity.

This year we told the world that Jesus calls us home to life with him, and that the saints in light are as near as God. 2024 began for us with the loss of our beloved Rev. Emily Richards. And just last Saturday more than 80 people gathered for her final interment of ashes here in our memorial courtyard. And we tearfully celebrated all the ways that Emily remains with us and blesses us in the resurrection life that we proclaim as St Peter's Church, as followers of Jesus.

Our Patron Saint, Peter, is such a wonderful role model for our parish – a community whose members earnestly love, follow willingly, try our best to understand each other, goof up sometimes, make amends. When I look at our readings today I'm struck by the changes Peter went through in his life as a disciple – from that earnest fisherman who managed to get the right answer to Jesus' question: who do you say that I am; to that healer in the Book of Acts who performs miracles in the name of Jesus, to the eloquent leader of 1 Peter who encourages his fellow shepherds to tend to their flock with love and tenderness. We do not hear the stories today of Peter's mistakes, the doubt that sunk him when he tried to walk on water, his denial of Jesus, his struggle with how to include gentiles in the early Christian community, his fights with St Paul. But we do see that he grew, and that the wonders he performed and the leadership he exhibited happened because he allowed the grace and love of Jesus to form and shape him into the disciple God called him to be.

And that's the Rock we're built upon, the foundation upon which we stand as St Peter's Church, a tiny part of the Jesus movement. We know 2025 promises to be a year in which our work as followers of Jesus is cut out for us. We will be called upon over and over again to say who Jesus is this year by both what we say and what do. To do that we will have to reach for every bit of love we have, stretch every muscle of welcome, activate our courage and open ourselves fully to the grace and wisdom of God.

Many of you likely heard part or all of the sermon that Washington DC bishop Marianne Budde gave at the inaugural interfaith prayer service last Tuesday, when she asked the president to his face to have mercy on all those who were frightened, threatened, and mischaracterized by his actions and political promises. And she gives us perhaps the best example of how we, as followers of Jesus and descendants of St. Peter, must live into 2025. Bishops, like the Rt. Rev. Budde, trace their vocation all the way back to St. Peter. Episcopal, in fact, means bishop. We gave our church this name to lift the fact that our leadership walks in Peter's footsteps, shares in this unbroken line of shepherds. We saw this week Bishop Budde lead by example, using the pulpit she had in the National Cathedral, which is an Episcopal Church, to say who Jesus is. In this she was just doing what Jesus called her to do, when he called her to follow in Peter's footsteps. We saw how insulting that was to those who did not expect to hear the gospel proclaimed in that place on that day.

And that says to me how powerful, and disruptive, and effective the name of Jesus and the love of Jesus is in the face of hatred, greed, dishonesty and oppression. This is what Jesus empowers us to be: a church so expansive with his energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out. Happy Feast Day.