

St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Amenia, New York
Priest's Annual Report 2024
January 14, 2024

(For the scripture readings referenced in this address, click [HERE](#).)

Happy New Year to you all! I know we're two weeks into the new year, but this is the first time we've been able to meet in person for worship in 2024 because of last week's snowstorm.

For those of you who are new to St. Thomas or the Episcopal Church, today's worship is going to be a little different. Toward the beginning of each calendar year, we hold our parish annual meeting. We present the budget for the coming year, we receive reports from the various leaders in charge of different parts of our community life, we celebrate and give thanks for what the last year has been, and we look forward to what the coming year will bring.

I want to begin with a few words of thanksgiving. First, to the Vestry. Without their leadership, it would be impossible for St. Thomas to do the life-changing, gospel-centered work we do in our community. Jolly Stewart, John Stewart (our clerk), Donna Christensen, Peter Doebele, our wardens Samantha Lucas and Brian Distelberg, and treasurer Christine Clare, Thank you for your steady presence in the life of this community and for being out front, as leaders who trust in the Spirit to accomplish God's good plan for this community. A special thanks to Brian—thank you for a year of service as Co-Warden during a year filled to the brim with challenges and joys and for being your priest's council and colleague. And to Christine—you have given years and countless hours to your community as our treasurer. You have led us through times of plenty and times of want. You have been so faithful to your call as treasurer of this parish and our missions. Thank you so much!

And to the Altar Guild. Thank you for your quiet, behind-the-scenes work to pay attention to the beauty and grace made available to us in our worship. Anne Wright, Laurie Nussdorfer, Katie Crum, Donna Christensen, and Jolly Stewart, Thank you!

And our community ministries! To the dozens and dozens of volunteers who dedicate untold hours at Food of Life/Comida de Vida pantry, to Danny Hutnick, the Pantry Manager: Thank you all for carrying the light of Christ into our neighborhood; for making tangible the kingdom of God, where all are loved, all are fed, all are included.

To Marsha Kaufman and her very dedicated team in the Giving Garden: The love you show our community through your tireless care for the earth, for the healthy food that made its way to hundreds of our neighbors' tables this year, thank you!

And to those involved in our newest community ministry, the Jean Krulis Teaching Garden: Jim Wright, Danny Percefull, Coco de Marneffe, Juana and Pablo Lopez, Marsha Kaufman, Gaye Parise, Pam Jarvis, and many others. For creating a beautiful space to connect to each other, to connect to nature, and to find communion, thank you! And thanks to Jean, for her love of gardening, her love of St. Thomas, and her love for God's goodness.

And thank you to John and Jolly for the new "Spear and Square!" It's keeping us informed, keeping us connected, and deepening our relationships as a parish family!

As all the reports presented today will show, 2023 was a very full year. Our missions evolved, grew, adapted, and connected more and more with our community. We celebrated the gift of new life through baptism with seven of our sisters and brothers. In coffee hour conversations, we wrestled *together* with the reality of violence in our world, our role in promoting peace, and Jesus's insistence on non-violence.

And we began to recognize that we were—we are still—dealing with what I have started calling a "collective COVID hangover," the result of continuous stress and always being focused on the emergency that is right in front of our noses, out of necessity, especially those first 2 years. This meant that, as a faith community, we became habituated to *reacting* to what was happening more often than we proactively planned for what we were being called to do and be in our community and for each other.

The primary symptom of this COVID hangover has been a lack of long-term vision. No solid plan for where we're going, what God is asking of us, and who we are called to be. As your leader, I have and will continue to own my part in not helping to define that vision. The hangover has affected me, too. And to stretch the metaphor almost to breaking, like many of you, I am still figuring out how to get rid of the headache.

It took the leadership—me, the Vestry, and many of you who have been in positions of leadership here for many years—a while to put our finger on what was happening. And now that we have, we can do something about it!

The Psalm we sang together this morning, Psalm 139, is one of my favorites. Maybe you're like me. I can very easily forget that every part of my life—my thoughts, my hopes and dreams, my worries, my shortcomings—all of me is known intimately by God. That intimate knowledge is extended to our parish family, too. God knows our collective hopes and dreams; God knows our worries and doubts; God knows our conflict. And God knows the future to which God has called us.

In our gospel passage this morning, when Jesus meets Nathanael, he not only shows that he has seen who Nathanael is before Nathanael was even aware ("Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.") He also announces

that he knows what *will be*. That a greater and fuller expression of God's Reign is coming, and that Nathanael will see it and be a part of it.

The scriptures are full of examples of God announcing to someone that God is about to accomplish something new, something unexpected. And that God's people are called to be a part of what is to come. An intimate, vital part. Time and again, God comes to someone, announces what is to come... and their first and most important response is to say, "Here I am!" Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel in our reading today, Isaiah, Mary the mother of Jesus. All of them are approached by God to be a part of something big and they respond, "Here I am!" The first step in moving into God's future is openness, curiosity, and a willingness to listen for what the Spirit has to say. It requires no special innate power, no particular personality traits, no secret knowledge. Only openness and the willingness to listen with love to what God says through our conversations, through our neighborhood, and through our prayers.

That is *not* to say that it isn't hard work! The task of listening to each other, of truly hearing what the Spirit is saying through and around us is very hard work! To set aside the preconceptions we all bring to the table and truly listen for what God has in store takes practice!

The majority of the time in our December Vestry meeting was devoted to a parish-wide conversation about the times when we've felt the most like the connected Christian family we're called to be. And asking how we might increase that intimacy and sense of shared purpose. It was in that meeting that we recognized openly that we have been functioning reactively instead of proactively. And it was in that meeting that we identified three areas to focus on first:

- A group was formed to think more strategically about our involvement in Latino ministries in our area.
- We also created a group to "develop our brand," or, in other words, evangelism! What are the best ways to tell our story, show the world who we are, and invite our neighbors to follow the Way of Jesus?
- And finally, several years ago there was discussion about removing the pews in the church. Over the last year there has been renewed interest in this project, especially if it could mean furthering our connection to and ministry with the community. A group will meet to research how a space with moveable seating might encourage community, both inside and outside our parish family. Of course, wider parish discussions will take place before any decisions are made about anything at all.

I think this is a very good start. And I also recognize that this process of listening for God's call on our future, the process of Visioning (or in the corporate world, what would be called "strategic planning") needs to have structure. Specifically, the process of listening for the Spirit's plan for our future must be three things: visible, measurable, and time-framed.

- **VISIBLE:** We need to be able to see and hear about what is going on. The Spear and Square has been wildly helpful in this regard!

- MEASURABLE: We will be able to demonstrate movement by creating goals, defining steps toward reaching those goals, and reporting on them.
- And TIME-FRAMED: Giving ourselves timelines for conversations, for listening projects, and for planning keeps things moving, motivates us, helps us accomplish things that then invigorate us to keep moving into God's future!

Many of you are probably familiar with the concept of professional coaching, where a colleague with special skills in listening and reflection helps someone think through their professional life, their goals, and so on. I have had a coach, off and on, for several years now. Beginning in the late fall of last year, I engaged that person in the work of helping keep *me* on task. Specifically, to lead this congregation through the process of listening for God's call on our shared life; to *vision* what our future together can look like; to help us tell the story of St. Thomas and the impact we will have on the lives of our members and our neighbors. His commitment to me is that our work together will also be VISIBLE, MEASURABLE, and TIME-FRAMED.

The three groups we identified in December are an important component of this listening process—the visioning of our shared future. *And* there will be more, beginning in the late winter/early spring. We'll create space and time to do more of what we did at that December vestry meeting. Specifically, to hear what motivates us, to share those times that we have felt the tangible love of God and each other, and to weave that into a dream for our future. We will tell the story of who we are in a year, in five years, in a decade.

More will come. A specific timeline, specifics about when we'll have these sharing sessions, what will come out of them, and what work is needed to prepare and follow up. All the while, we will gather here at least weekly to hear of God's saving work through Jesus and to be welcomed to God's table. We will continue to commune with God and each other. We will share the Body of Christ and *become* the Body of Christ. We will carry Christ into the world. We will carry Christ's message of unity, of reconciliation, and of peace into a divided, warring, and vengeful world that can and *will* be changed.

When he hears where Jesus is from, Nathanael says, "What good can come out of Nazareth?" He finds out pretty quickly! What is coming out of this small unassuming village is the very essence of Good, the Divine, God's very self. We might be tempted to ask "What good can come out of St. Thomas? What can this small church in a culture that doesn't value religion or faith really do?" But I think we'd be asking the wrong question. Here's the question I put to you this morning: What good *can't* come from a community of love, welcome, inclusion, and hope?!

What good will come from this small band of believers? All we must do is listen. Let's be surprised. Let's embrace God's future for us!

Amen!