

RECTOR'S ADDRESS

TRINITY ANNUAL MEETING 2023

By Fr. Chris Corbin

The pandemic has given us a number of new ways of looking at and marking time that I don't think any of us could have expected we'd encounter. March of 2020 stands in our memories as a kind of radical break point, with many of us probably still thinking in terms of BC and BC—before Covid and after. March of 2021 can be remembered as the time we came back together in-person in Church, only for us to be hit by Delta that summer and Omicron that winter, threatening to roll back or undo our attempts to come out of quarantine. As we look back at 2022, we stand at yet another, far more positive, post-covid milestone. We've been able to go through an entire year, both secular and liturgical, worshiping in person! Can you believe it?

And what a year it's been!

When I arrived at Trinity just as we were coming back to regular in-person worship, the community was understandably feeling pretty uncertain and beat down, feeling disconnected from each other and uncertain about the future. It would have been easy to close in on yourselves, to resign yourself to slow decline and death—but you didn't. You went out on a limb with a new priest and made the collective decision that you would try new things, you would take financial and programmatic risks, you would commit to opening up to the community around us, that you would seek to be more flexible and more hospitable.

And it bore fruit. In 2021, at a time when many churches were hoping for a return to 90 or even 80% pre-Covid numbers for worship, we saw our numbers grow from the time right before the lockdown in 2020!

And we continued with that spirit of growth, of flexibility, of risk-taking, of faithful in God's caring guidance, of opening outward into 2022. We have so much to celebrate. Dedicated volunteers continue to ensure that our facilities and gardens remain in working condition and offer an inviting and spiritually edifying space. We've had a second successful year with our cooling station at the Farmer's Market. We welcomed Kristin Davies to the position of office administrator, and she has proven an incredible asset to the smooth functioning of our life together. We're seeing numbers for guests at Loaves and Fishes going up. We ensured that children would receive gifts for Christmas. We reached down deep into pockets to partner with our companion diocese to help start a dairy herd in the diocese of Masvingo in Zimbabwe. We welcomed a refugee family and helped to ease the very difficult transition

into a completely new country and culture, and we did it while building relationships with other churches. We have made considerable progress toward discerning the future most faithful use of our facilities, opting to truly weigh the pros and cons and the needs of our community and the neighborhood around us rather than taking the easiest decision out of a desire to mitigate decline.

We've seen the return of ECW, including an incredible \$1 bag sale to cap off the incredible ministry of the rummage sale and thrift store as well as very well attended fellowship opportunities for the women of this parish. Hospitality has continued to be off the charts, with a dedicated team—a team always looking to recruit new volunteers I should add—offering truly top-notch refreshments to let us gather in and around services for better relationship building between members at a time when this work is vital, having just come out of a period of such severe isolation during quarantine. This hospitality has extended to how we've opened up our space to other groups in the community, from the girl scouts to Esther, to listening sessions and relationships building with residents of the town motel.

And we can't forget the amazing things happening with our prayer, worship, and spiritual lives. WE have, for what I'm told is a relatively new focus at Trinity, an ongoing, dedicated, and consistent group meeting for Bible Study. We have returned to having music in our worship, continuing our history of having truly outstanding music associated with our congregation. We have a full altar party just about every week and a choir helping to support and enhance our worship experience. We've begun being able to say the Daily Office—when Facebook's connection doesn't get in the way—every day of the workweek!

Trinity is on the move!

AND we need to realize that we're really only now being able to face the reality of just how unknown and open the future is before us. Last year, right before our annual meeting, I proposed that the best way of thinking about our status as a congregation was like that of Judah returning from exile, faced with the challenge of rebuilding amidst the ruins of a land that had been left fallow for 70 years. This year, I think the image that best describes where we are is drawn from what the prophet Micah offers us. With his reference to Moses Aaron and Miriam we are invited to think about the Hebrew people in the Exodus, brought out of long years of bondage and hard work in Egypt on their way to the promised land. In particular I want to recall, as Bishop Sean Rowe recently did at a meeting of those involved in the Trialogue, the incident of the people at Mt Sinai. In Exodus, we first get how God brought the people out of bondage, out of slavery in Egypt—this is the story most of us know well. But this is only really the first 1/3 of the book. God does not simply lead them immediately to the promised land but first brings them to Sinai, to where they will receive the Law that will form them as a people set apart and consecrated for God. And to receive this Law, this gift and responsibility of being formed as God's people, God brings Moses up on the

mountain while the people waited at the base. Well, God had a lot to say. In Exodus WE as readers get to know what God was saying to Moses, how he was giving rules and regulations like the ten commandments and especially the instructions for the tabernacle, the instructions that would guide the place where God would appear in most focused form in the midst of the people. But for the people waiting down on the ground, all they knew was that Moses disappeared into a cloud on a mountain. And as they waited and waited and waited a sense of uncertainty and impatience began to set in. What could possibly be going on? What was taking so long? Was Moses even up there still? There was no template for what to expect, no clear instructions for how long it would take, and so in the midst of that uncertainty, in the midst of great anxiety, the Israelites did what is so easy for us humans to do: They reverted back to what they knew. Having all sorts of gold they had plundered from the Egyptians on their way out of town, a mark of their freedom from captivity in Egypt, they rope Aaron into melting that gold down and making an idol for them just like the idols they would have seen worshiped back in Egypt.

Moses and God, of course, are not pleased. God in fact wants to wipe all the people out for their inability to sit with their tension and trust the God who demonstrated obvious power and faithfulness in freeing them. But Moses talks God down and the end result is “only” 3000 people die. But ultimately the Israelites get, as a people, a second chance. And what a great thing this is. Instead of a golden calf, a boring, dead, single object, an object that relied on the workmanship of one person, Aaron, the people would get the tabernacle, a glorious structure, calling forth the gifts of many different people, made of many different materials, of gold and fabric and beautiful wood and precious jewels, a structure ultimately that would not house a dead idol, a harkening to past bondage, but the living God, the God who brought them to new life.

We’re in many ways at a point of standing there like the Israelites at the base of Mt. Sinai, waiting to hear God’s direction for us. The luster and excitement of coming out of our confinement, the joy of just being able to be together again, an excitement and relief that glossed over all manner of things that in ages past would have been cause for frustration or irritation, is starting to wear off. We’re long enough away from Egypt to start forgetting about all the really awful things that were left behind in this new start and opportunity, and we will be tempted with an unhealthy nostalgia, to resolve the tension of our uncertainty by just reverting to how we’ve done things, since, even if they weren’t working or weren’t working anymore, but at least we know them.

And we’ve got some uncertainty we’re waiting for. We’ve stepped out into the uncertain with going to one service and we’ve again changed things somewhat. I can say now that we *have* decided on an ongoing time for our regular Sunday Eucharist. Dozens of people voted and made their perspective known, people spoke to me to let me know why they preferred a

certain time. This was a significant enough decision that I took it to the vestry and got their input at well—and we did get a majority of Trinity’s congregation and vestry preferring and recommending 9:30 for our Sunday service time, which is what we will be going with, a time that will allow a little extra time for the choir to get to the church and practice and warm up their voices, a time that will allow a little more time during the winter for the roads to de-ice, and a little more time to get going for those who, for age or others reasons, need a little more time to get going, going.

However, this was not an overwhelming majority. A sizable minority of our congregation and the vestry thought it best to keep our service at 9:00, a recognition of the fullest compromise possible in combining the 8:00 and 10:00 services. This is a question that didn’t have an overwhelmingly obvious solution and it may occasion some tension and disappointment. And yet it will also bring new opportunities, opportunities to expand on the goods that have already come with a single service such as a fuller experience of a worshiping community, a regular choir, and a complete altar party and ushers and lectors most Sundays. We will be able to focus on strengthening even more our worship which is already one of our strong points, offering what may set us apart most in our community, the chance for traditional liturgical worship with an inclusive community and theology.

A similar position of uncertainty exists with our Parish Hall. We have recommendations before us, a recommendation borne of months and months of dedicated work, of hard reflection and discernment and collection of data and hard numbers, but a recommendation that nonetheless calls for action when the status quo has been to take no action, to leave the Parish Hall unchanged. Going forward will invite us as a community to do even more to clarify our purpose and identity in the community, to figure ways to be truly good stewards of the resources we have and to be the best neighbors to our downtown community. It is a great opportunity, but it is one filled with uncertainty about what people would start coming into our community, about who we would have to start sharing power and control with.

The Episcopal Church as a whole in Wisconsin is standing at the edge of such a point of uncertainty and tension as we stare down reunion as a possible future. The rejoining of our three dioceses offers tremendous opportunity for new ministry and support, for sharing resources for a common mission in this ministry of reconciliation. But there is also uncertainty, uncertainty about finances, about cathedrals, about church culture, about how often we’ll see the bishop or bishops. And in that uncertainty we may be inclined to ask whether it’s worth it. Is it worth embarking on something unprecedented in The Episcopal Church, of reuniting dioceses not out of financial necessity but out of shared mission?

Of course, being able to step out into the unknown, to allow ourselves an openness to what God is going to draw us into a future that is not yet clear to us, on a timeline that is not clear to us, is going to be necessary more and more in this COVID managed world. The “new

normal” is still being created and there is in fact no going back to something before, even if we can draw on and learn from previous experiences.

But I know we can do it. Because in truth, we’ve shown a capacity to sit in our uncertainty and continue to move forward. This last year was not just one of positive growth, but of significant change. The ECW has taken a step into the unknown by changing when it has meetings and socials, and this has resulted in an increased vitality as women previously unable to engage because of work and family obligations have become active participants. We had two long-time faithful leaders, deacon Sandy Muinde and Marianne Chaudoir retire from active liturgical ministry, retirements that were more than deserved after so many years of such faithful service but that also raised questions about what our worship life, this part of our identity that is so important to us. Yet we were blessed with Tim Fale and his extensive experience and skill, and we saw Deacon Nancy going above and beyond to ensure that our worship continued to model all orders of ministry. We were faced with uncertainty over the very act of combining services, fully prepared for the possibility that we would have seen our numbers drop by staying with our summer pattern throughout the fall, and yet what we saw was slight growth!

In the midst of a year that offered as much uncertainty as it did positive ministry growth, we have nonetheless seen astounding signs of life and vitality. Looking at our numbers, we have continued the trend of growth, increasing our average Sunday attendance for a second year in a row, a testament both to increases in our invitational spirit and our capacity to follow up with and show hospitality to guests. Our parish cleanup this fall saw 19 volunteers giving their time, almost double what we had last year. We have four times as many baptisms as we did funerals. We had five confirmations and receptions, signs of new members seeking to go even deeper with their faith and membership as part of our community. This is all that much more astounding given that the numbers for the larger episcopal church for 2021 paint a picture of continued decline. We are bucking the trends that would expect only sickness and death, showing signs of spiritual vibrancy and growth.

And already I can see opportunities taking shape that are opened up by our willingness to sit in the uncertainty before us. By having a service at 9:30, I plan starting next week, at least on a trial basis, to still come at 8:00 and put on a pot of coffee and offer that to worship volunteers, choir, ushers, and anyone else who wants to come early and chat. We encounter the possibility of more opportunities for fellowship while making the job of our dedicated coffee hour volunteers less time consuming.

Now of course if we look at the story of Moses and the Israelites after Mt. Sinai, it’s not as though they just had smooth sailing after they finally got the law and the design for the tabernacle. There were a number of missteps, of difficulty, of lapses in faith, even by Moses, and they had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. We don’t know if the future will open

up to going into some promised land right away or if we're looking at a period in the wilderness. There will no doubt be frustrations and difficulties and failures and conflicts. We're going to have plenty of opportunities for us to throw up our hands and want to just go back to what we knew, to the idols of Egypt. But what we can be assured of, even in the face of the uncertainty of the unknown of the wide-open future is that if we are faithful, God will guide us more and more into fullness of life. And we know from past experience that we can be faithful, that we can put our trust in God when tempted by anxiety and impatience, that we can move into a fuller and more glorious future together through Christ.