

**Rector's Annual Meeting Address/Sermon
January 27, 2008**

Collect for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*



My dear friends in Christ, it has been my custom to deliver my annual meeting address at the time of the sermon at the 9 am service in the Historic Sanctuary for it's the gathering at which we have the most people present. Let me begin by saying that I have no startling things to say. This presentation is part Year in Review, part State of the Church and also part sermon. Things are very good and we have much to celebrate.

We need to acknowledge that this has been a year in which we lost a number of faithful congregants. Louise Eckhardt, Saint Louise as she was known, died soon after last year's annual meeting. She was spiritual director and spiritual companion it seemed like to all 2700 of us at times. Her presence is one that we miss. We also lost Virginia Sumners who died in July. Virginia was a member of this congregation for over six decades. Her late husband, the Reverend Charles Sumners, was rector of St. David's from 1939 to 1975. One cannot begin to quantify the contributions that she made along with her husband as they faithfully served this congregation. In July, we also had the privilege of being part of the service for Claudia Johnson, also known as Lady Bird, where we celebrated a member of this parish who contributed much to our culture and our world. Nearly one year ago to the day, we grieved the loss of Tom Camp, friend, faithful servant and vestry member. Tom's loss is still dearly felt by our staff and his many, many friends in this parish.

We also had many things to celebrate in addition to these peoples' move to eternal life. We put many resources into our children's choirs and that's an area of great growth for us. We gave thanks for the ministry of Carol Heath, who as Director of Children's Ministries when we moved into the new building set us on the right path. We rejoice that Susan Goodman has come to fill that spot as Coordinator of Children's Ministries. We recognize Traci Whitney who left our staff after 5 years in various positions. Traci brought huge energy, faithfulness and enthusiasm and I publicly express my gratitude for her service and faithfulness.

This year also saw the addition of Terry Nathan who came on board as Parish Administrator. I only somewhat jokingly say that he was spending so much time as a volunteer we might as well put him on payroll. Terry brings to us a great faithfulness and business acumen that is a great help. This year I finally came to realize that St. David's, in addition to being a church that proclaims the gospel, is a business with a \$3.5 million budget and over 70 people on the payroll. I'm particularly grateful to the wardens, Lowell Keig and Don Kuykendall, for encouraging me to seek out Terry. When I asked Terry to consider coming to work here, it was like interviewing a priest who was pondering a calling and he certainly fulfills that for us.

This was the year in which the Next to New Shop, our consignment shop, finally got its new building. We rejoice greatly in that and, coincidentally or not, sales are up immensely since we moved into the new place.

First and foremost I would recognize the amazing year we've had in stewardship. You have been immensely faithful. It's been my practice to take someone out to lunch when I want to thank them. I wish I could take all 2700 of you out to lunch to say thank you. For the third consecutive calendar year we finished in the black and pledges came in at almost 98%. Some had to cut back on pledges because things changed during the year and others said, "It's been a good year and we can do more." 98% is a remarkable number. In addition to that, the 2008 stewardship campaign has brought in more money than St. David's has ever seen to enable us to do ministry. I am so pleased and proud of you all—our average pledge is up \$600 in the last 5 years and \$300 in the past year. We all give, as the New Testament tells us, according to our ability. Your ability is great, friends. Thank you.

In 24 years as a priest, I've never been so excited about a budget. While our budget does remain smaller than many parishes of our size, it's my first time to experience something beyond "bare bones". This is really exciting. You have been faithful and I know that our God is pleased—which brings me to a statement my first boss later a bishop, Bill Wiedrich, used to say. He would look at the congregation at a gathering such as this and say, "God is pleased." "God is pleased." And then he would say, "Wouldn't we like to make God very pleased?" So I want to talk about some things that I think might make God very pleased.

First, personal. It's easy at an address like this to talk about what the parish can do but a parish is made up of individual souls and their relationship with Jesus Christ. I want to issue some personal challenges to each of us. I would hold up for us four areas of faithfulness: Worship, Study, Service and Fellowship. The good news in a parish like this is the fellowship spans everything. We really like being together, but I want to talk about worship. I want to challenge each of us to do our prayers. Being a Christian, as you well know, is not just about an hour on

Sunday. It's about prayer during the week. A lot of times we say, "I'm not sure how to do that." I invite you to call your clergy or other leaders in the congregation. We'd love to sit down and talk about what it is to do our prayers on a daily basis. This is the first thing we're called to.

The second is corporate worship. We are to come together week by week to worship the living God. We do pretty well with this but I want to challenge us all to seek a deeper level. If you are a sometime attender, why don't you try to move to more Sundays than not this year? If you're coming more Sundays than not, how about four out of five? If you feel pretty good and you're there on Sundays, what about a weekday service or the 9 pm Compline on Sunday night? We are more when we're together as a Body and each of us as individuals are more when we're together.

Now I'm going to send a mixed signal here; I'll warn you in advance. To the parents of young children: do whatever you can. I mean that. We don't take attendance. We just want you to be here when you can. There are weeks when you need to be home. Many of our parents find that one parent sneaking away for the 5 pm service can get an hour of retreat. We want to be there for you; our primary job for the parents of young families is to say, "What can we do for you?" Yes, be with us, please, but above all everyone remember that God does not traffic in guilt. Don't feel guilty about what you cannot do! Just strive to be faithful.

After worship comes Christian formation. Every Christian, child and adult, should be in some ongoing class or small group to build up their faith. I'm an old physiology student. I know that if you don't exercise a body part, a muscle, a system, it wastes away. The same is true of how our spirit and soul work in our relationship with God. If we do not exercise our life of faith, we can easily find ourselves feeling distant from God and drifting away. Please be faithful to the formation opportunities and if you don't see one that works, talk to us—to exercise that faith muscle, if you will, week by week and day by day. I particularly draw your attention to the Journey groups beginning in Lent as an opportunity for a bite-sized piece of time when you can come together in study and fellowship with other parishioners.

Service. We need to be faithful in giving of self and resources. Being a Christian is not a passive thing. We are called to offer ourselves in service to others, to give of ourselves and that which has been entrusted to our care: time, talents and treasure. I am very proud of this congregation but each of us needs to continually ask our God, "What am I called to do?" There are service opportunities across the board—locally, regionally, nationally, internationally—at St. David's and we are looking to add more.

I want to put another challenge here. We have a budget that's beyond a bare bones budget but there are still 90 pledges from last year outstanding that would

total over \$100,000 at the same level as last year. I can only dream about what we can do now that we've reached a really great point. At present about 40% of our households make a pledge of financial support. That's about the national average. But that's the only place where St. David's is only average so let's see what God might call us to do. I invite you to help us become more than average here as we are in so many other ways.

One other area by way of personal challenge and invitation: I noticed the tag line on my wife's email recently. It said, "Wag more; bark less." Wag more; bark less! As Christians we have a responsibility and a call to be reconcilers. I would encourage us to wag more and bark less! In the parish, in our understanding of the larger church, in the political struggle that is going on with an election, it's easy to become a barker. I believe we as Christians can change the world by wagging first. So in all of our actions, all of our relationships—at home, at church, at work, at school, let us be those who wag first and bark later. There are times to bark; we can come together and do that as we are led.

Moving from the personal to the Corporate, I would address some of the issues of the larger Church. One, I would tell you that things are okay. I suggest that if you desire to know what is going on in the Episcopal Church nationally or the Anglican Communion worldwide, do not consult the media only. They are not trained in who we are. They often unfortunately—and we have a lot of media people in the congregation that I greatly respect—but often the media goes for the fast nugget that might only be a part of the truth, that which is controversial. I invite you to seek out the official agencies of the Diocese, the national Church and the Anglican Communion—you can access them from our web site—to hear what's being said from the people who are the Church.

There are 3 or 4 dioceses out of 112 in which the Bishop or leadership have expressed a desire to leave the Church. Hear me, that's 3 or 4 out of 112. The media would seem to indicate it's a majority. There are clergy, parishes and lay people in a number of locales who have expressed great unhappiness. We must wag *with* them, not bark *at* them. We must understand that people are called to different places and do our best to be reconcilers. Sometimes it is appropriate for people to leave rather than make themselves and others unhappy. That's far from our first choice but if people feel they must, we need to love them and support them in that. I will say that I have been terribly impressed by the House of Bishops of the American Church, many of whom I call my friends. They are not all of one mind, but I truly see that they are working together to do what Christ is calling us to do, many making compromises for the sake of the Body. I promise you that where there is great unease in the church and people who are leaving, the Presiding Bishop, at the direction of the House of Bishops, is working to keep the church or to reconstitute the Church where it's necessary. There is, to the best of

my knowledge, no dissent that's going to tear us apart. I believe that. There may be people who feel called to leave. Our job is to love them.

I am delighted to say that in the Diocese of Texas we are not all torn up. We do not agree on everything but one of the great tenets of Anglicanism is that unanimity and unity are not the same thing. Along that line, I ask your prayers for the diocese as we elect a new Bishop this spring. Some of you have asked, I do not feel called to be a part of that process except as an elector and supporting how I feel the church can best be led.

I also would share with you that the Archbishop of Canterbury this week released a report about the upcoming Lambeth Conference, the every-ten-year meeting of Anglican Bishops. It had a great perspective in it that the first Lambeth Conference was called at a time when the church didn't feel it was communicating well and there were people of different minds. I'm delighted that he revealed that over 70% of the Bishops of the Anglican Communion have already registered to attend. This does not sound like a church in huge turmoil. We certainly are a church with things to work on. If I had the ability, I would give them the same counsel that I have shared with us this morning: Wag more, bark less!

When I came to be with you 4 ½ years ago I was asked, "What is your vision for St. David's?" The question made me immensely uncomfortable—first because I did not yet know this place and second, just because I'm the rector doesn't mean that I'm the one to state or develop the vision of or for this parish. I can be, however, a primary articulator of the vision which comes from the parish—from you and from the God we serve. I can articulate a vision which I believe comes from you and us but it is only my articulation unless you and I decide together, it isn't ours.

One part of my vision is continued excellence. In worship and music we do amazingly well, but we need to develop some of our contemporary services and look seriously at an entry point service for all those people moving downtown in the next few years.

Outreach and Service: When I came, I had a vision that St. David's could be involved locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. I'm delighted that we've done that. Trinity Center, our outreach to the homeless in downtown Austin, is ever growing. We've also grown in our ability and our desire to give grants to nonprofits in the Austin area. Regionally we've had folks working in New Orleans. Nationally we support the national church through the work of Episcopal Relief and Development. Warm Heart International is our international outreach arm thus far doing work primarily in Malawi. So we're on the right track. We're continuing to grow but our call as the Church is to reach out to the darkness and brokenness of the world and bring Christ's light to it.

We're on the right track in Christian Formation as well. The Vestry made a decision this year to establish a staff position to oversee the intentional formation of small groups, absolutely necessary in a parish the size of ours.

We are reaching excellence in responsible and faithful stewardship. We must stay there. We must be very careful how we spend that which is entrusted to our care for the good of the community and the world and for the building of the kingdom.

Pastoral Care. As I talk about reaching out more and more to those who are not here, that does mean that we are going to stop caring for those who are. As both clergy and lay persons, we need to expand our ministry of communion to shut-ins, rides to church, make sure that we don't lose people who drift away, and follow up with people after they have surgery. We all have a responsibility to care for each other. Please see yourselves as a part of the pastoral care team. I remind you of two things. In the Prayer Book it says that if someone is ill they should contact the church and let us know. We care. The second is we do house calls!

This coming year we have some things in front of us. I'm absolutely delighted that your vestry has commissioned a year long study of the Historic Sanctuary to make sure the foundation is solid and the walls are not moving. That will be an ongoing study to prepare for a restoration—which is not a renovation—a restoration of this historic sanctuary. This place, this building, this house of prayer is a gift to us and to the community and good stewardship demands that we care for it well.

Finally, the biggest call I see before St. David's at this time is evangelism. I'm not going to make any jokes about how for Episcopalians that's a dirty word. It's part of the gospel. It is our call to share the faith. Our house is in order at St. David's. Our debt is under control because of the Foundation and the parking garage. Our budget is solid. It's time to lift our eyes and look beyond ourselves. 7000 people walk by our front door every week. Many of them come in. We've done some innovative and creative things such as our coffee shop, the Strings Attached concerts, and other things to bring them into the building. I'm calling us on us now as individuals to take seriously the call to share the good news of the Gospel.

The collect today has the petition that we may "answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works." It's not that hard. We generally don't do evangelism by hitting people over the head with the Bible or by threatening them. The collect from one week ago gave us a wonderful format. It prayed that Christ may be "known, worshipped and obeyed." Some of us shy away from an evangelism that seems to start out with "obey." We start out with Christ being known. It is through our love, the love that we know in

this place, that Christ is made known and so I invite us to seriously consider how we might reach out to those who are not here. The Old Testament lesson today said that the world is a place of darkness. We know that, but we come to Christ, to St. David's, because we find the light. Evangelism is nothing more than saying to a friend, an acquaintance, or someone in distress, "I know a place where you'll be accepted, where you'll be loved, where people will care for you. Would you like to come?" I'm challenging us to different processes that will lead us to be better evangelists so we can bring more and more people to know the grace of God we experience in this place.

I want to close with a prayer that's become known recently. It's attributed to Sir Francis Drake, written in 1577 according to the legend. It is- a prayer that we not be content.

Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to help us push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love. Amen.