

THE REPORT OF THE RECTOR ON THE YEAR 2012

The Rev. Jane Soyster Gould, Rector

St. Stephen's Memorial Episcopal Church, Lynn, Massachusetts

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 10, 2013

Readings: Exodus 34,29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2; Luke 9.28-43a

Between the transfiguration and Moses on Mount Sinai, our readings today invite us to reflect on theophany—those moments when God breaks into our lives, those moments when God's glory shines in and around us. Certainly, as we read and reflect on the stories of ministry contained in the words, photographs and financial charts of our 47 page 2012 Annual Report, we know that God's glory shone brightly through us and among us.

In the story of the transfiguration we heard this morning, Jesus, Peter, James, and John get away from the crowds and crush of the world; they go to a mountaintop so that they can be alone with each other and God; they go away to pray. In that sacred place, they see Jesus transfigured before them, and his clothes become dazzling white. On the mountaintop they glimpse God's glory; they hear God's voice claiming Jesus as his beloved. Perhaps it's not surprising that Peter hoped maybe they could stay; maybe he could construct three tents so that they could all abide in that holy place forever with God very near.

In the 4th century, St. Augustine of Hippo preached: "Peter sees God's glory radiating from Jesus, and as a man savoring the things of men says, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." He had been wearied with the multitude. He had now found the mountain's solitude; there he had Christ the Bread of the soul. What — should he depart once again to labor and suffering now that he had a holy love for God and a holy way of life? He wished well for himself. But Jesus says to him: "Come down, to labor on the earth; on the earth to serve, to be despised, and crucified on the earth." In fact, the Gospel could not be clearer about the real world challenges awaiting Jesus and the disciples. As soon as they come down, a great crowd and an epileptic boy thrown into convulsions, rolling on the ground and foaming at the mouth, meet them. Their vision of God's glory was not a gift in itself or some sacred talisman; it did not spare them sadness and struggle; rather, it prepared them to engage the world as it is and to seek to transform it.

Whether we look to Moses on Mount Sinai, or Jesus and the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, God always returns God's faithful servants to the world to do something. As Brother Geoffrey Tristram, Superior of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, makes clear, God "always calls us for a purpose, a purpose that usually involves sending us out into the world. God comes to us to transform us, so that we can take part in God's transforming work of redemption, to help bring about God's kingdom."

As I reflect on St. Stephen's in 2012, I'd have to say that we lived as a community of the transfiguration. In our relationships, our community, and our world we strived to embody the light and love of God. Echoing this morning's epistle reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Brother Curtis Almquist also of the Society of St. John the Evangelist writes: "You

are a living mirror. Bear the beams of God's love. Let God's light teem from your own countenance. Look upon others and be radiant with God's love for them. They may otherwise never know how much God loves them." As the body of Christ made up of many members, we did what we could this year to make real and tangible God's abundant and amazing love.

In our Wardens for the last three years, we have been blessed by the leadership of Victoria Harriss Provost and Christopher Trahan. Their complimentary passions and styles supported and encouraged us in taking on new challenges. But most of all, their love of the people and place of St. Stephen's radiates from them in all they say and do. While Chris is running for Senior Warden and we will enjoy his leadership for a few more years, we must let Vicky move on to other arenas of leadership for St. Stephen's, the Diocese, and the broader community.

Three years ago as I prayed about who might be our Senior Warden, Vicky came to mind and heart. My rational mind reminded me of all the reasons why the idea did not make sense. But I know enough of God not to ignore what rises up in prayer and I asked Vicky to consider the possibility. Although stunned at the prospect, she responded as she has responded throughout her term of service—thoughtfully and prayerfully. From her saying yes to running for Warden, through her modeling hospitality for the Diocese in our hosting of Convention to her leadership of the TogetherNow Campaign to her turning us from donuts to green smoothies, Vicky has taught all of us what it means to "bear the beams of God's love and to let God's light teem from our own countenance." We will miss her as our Senior Warden but we will not lose her radiance as one of God's beloved children here at St. Stephen's.

In 2012 we baptized eighteen people, half of whom were adults or young people old enough to speak for themselves. On All Saints' Sunday, Helen, Whitney and Joanne stood with Wednesday as she expressed her desire to be baptized. Having gotten to know her through our Thursday Healing Service and Tea and Talk, they acted as family for her at her baptism. Among the eighteen baptized, we also welcomed into the household of God seven children and babies whose parents grew up in our youth programs. These adults returned to St. Stephen's wanting to provide for their children the same formation and community of welcome they experienced here.

From Church School to acolyting to Kids in Community to all of our youth programs, children and young people know they matter at St. Stephen's. Teens from the Lynn community make a priority of coming to the Spot, LYON and Oasis. They say, "Being part of Oasis gives me the feeling of acceptance. Showing up every Friday is something that's on the top of my list." (Guelmi) "Oasis is a place where I can learn new things and not be ignorant about my world. It's a place where I can spend my time with those I love." (Miguel) "Oasis is a place where I can be myself and express it without judgment." (Stephen) "Being part of Oasis gives me a sense of community." (Marcus) A teen says she goes to the Spot because she likes "the bonding and the communication." One teen says he participates in the Christmas Toy Drive because "I love shopping and I love seeing the faces on the parents and children." Another says the Toy Drive "is the reason why I do so much volunteer work now; it really opened me up." The same teen credits LYON, the Lynn Youth Organizing Network, with "helping me become more comfortable with speaking in public. I used to be terrified, but now I can at least speak in public." Indeed, last February Guelmi surely did overcome his fear, addressing an audience of over 1,000 at the Youth Jobs Rally in Boston.

On Friday afternoons at our Food Pantry, our volunteers offer people groceries and good cheer. Sally, Anthe, Karen, Maryan, Harry and Neil make certain that we have food on the shelves and show hospitality to all who come. As Sally Gosselin represents St. Stephen's with the Lynn Hunger Network and the Massachusetts Coalition to End Homelessness, we increase our capacity to advocate for those who come to the Pantry. While we let go of our Tuesday evening "ministry of presence" at My Brother's Table this year, we continue to serve lunch the fourth Sunday of every month. Teens and young adults join our regular team of Judie, Helen, Paula, Josephine, Virginia, Neil and Janice at the Table while many others bring desserts, warm clothes and other contributions to our ministry of love and service.

Through study groups, cookouts, coffee hours, and fundraising dinners, we enjoy building community through food and fellowship. We sometimes even manage a little learning along the way. Victoria Kozicz's faithful leadership of Bible Study at the Towers along with our regular celebrations of Holy Communion definitely gave us more of a presence in our 121-unit elder housing building. In our fundraising endeavors, Debbie Potter and her team filled the dining room with soul food and food for the soul as Horace Smalls of Union of Minority Neighborhoods issued a call to action at our 10th Annual Soul Food Celebration. And, in the summer, we packed the Port Hole Pub as Heather Collis Puro and Carolyn Hoy led us to a highly successful Big Money Raffle drawing party.

Even as we strive to "bear the beams of God's love" within and beyond St. Stephen's, we heard both in the Vestry's relational listening campaign in the Spring as well as ECCO's one-to-one campaign in the Fall that we still have work to do. We need to reach out to members of the community making sure that all feel valued and included; we need to strengthen our pastoral ministry with sick, homebound, and hospitalized members; and we need to build our ECCO team so that we work together to improve life in Lynn and on the North Shore.

The theme of the Stewardship Ministry Team's pledge campaign for 2013 was "Blest Be the Ties that Bind." The response to the campaign has brought us close to \$140,000 pledged, which definitely is the highest pledge total in St. Stephen's history. The challenge for us, as we look at Dorothy Post's collage of faces on the back of the Annual Report and as we consider St. Paul's image of the body of Christ made up of many members, is to reach out, step up, and stay connected. We are blest by the ties that bind here at St. Stephen's but we need to care for the fabric of the community so that we all might know the radiance of God's love.

Even as people are central to how we experience God's love, the transfiguration also reminds us of the "power of sacred places to open us to the grace and power of God, to transform and transfigure us, to change us, as St. Paul says, 'from one degree of glory to another.'" (2 Corinthians 3.18) Brother Geoffrey points out that "It is good for us to seek out sacred places, places where God seems quite close, since our world often seems increasingly frenetic and complex. It can feel unsafe and even hostile. We seek out places where we may go to be 'held': held by the physical stone and bricks, held by prayer, held by the beauty of worship and the power of silence. We seek out places where it is safe to bring our pain and suffering, safe to open ourselves up to God and allow God's healing and renewing love to fill us and transform us."

When I read these words of Brother Geoffrey, I thought about this sacred space in which the people of St. Stephen's worship. In the midst of the Vestry's relational listening campaign as well

as the TogetherNow Campaign, we heard story after story of people feeling held by these old and crumbling stones. The windows and walls of this church form the fabric of faith for many who were baptized here. The sense of the sacred-- as one man said "the feeling that this place has been prayed in--" speaks to many who walk in for Sunday worship or perhaps a wedding or funeral of a friend. Surely, this sanctuary blesses us as it has blessed generations before us.

When we launched our Diocesan Collaborative Campaign to support chancel restoration, our goal of \$250,000 seemed daunting. When we had already received commitments of \$203,000 over five years when the campaign went public on Palm Sunday, we knew we could hit our Diocesan goal and wondered whether we could reach the \$450,000 needed for restoring the chancel arch. When we closed out the campaign on June 24, we had pledges for over \$400,000. While we aren't quite at \$450,000, work on the roof is scheduled to begin once we get rid of all this snow and ice. Through the TogetherNow Campaign, we discovered how precious this sacred space is to all of us and we showed the Diocese how sacrificially we will give to preserve and restore our historic properties.

This year we also took on the work of making connections with those who care about preserving architectural and artistic treasures. We applied for and received a \$45,000 grant from the Massachusetts Historic Commission to support our chancel restoration work. Thanks to the dedicated leadership of Irene Axelrod and the Restoration Committee, we opened the church to Civil War reenactors and other visitors during the Lynn GARs commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. In addition, we participated in the Lynn Open Studios tour so that people could experience the artistic treasures of the city. Beyond these public events, we've hosted visitors from the John Jay Museum, the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, and many Tiffany window experts. Marilyn and Rick Cloran's photographs of our Tiffany windows now have us included in various museum displays, academic papers, websites, and even a coffee table book. The people of St. Stephen's and the city of Lynn need sacred space to welcome and hold us. Our legacy will be to hand on this sacred place for the blessing of future generations.

Amazing as this church is, it is not the only place that "changes us from one degree of glory to another." Each week in Lent our numbers grew and the last Tuesday evening in Lent more than twenty from St. Stephen's were at the SSJE Monastery in Cambridge for worship and supper. Their sung mass, smoky stone, and generous hospitality reached deeply into our community and held us. While I suspect each pilgrim had his or her own reason for joining the monks on Tuesdays in Lent and Advent, the journey drew us closer to God in worship and in fellowship with one another.

Beyond church spaces, Barbara C. Harris Camp "changes us from one degree of glory to another." At Camp, our young people encounter God in nature, lively liturgy, Bible study, and Christian community. This past summer 36 St. Stephen's children and youth attended 40 weeks of Camp at BCH, and two of our young adults worked on the staff. The parish provided about \$1,850 in scholarship assistance and the Diocese about \$14,000 to make it possible for all the kids of St. Stephen's to go to Camp. Running the premier Episcopal Camp in the nation costs a fair amount of money but just ask the kids who go the impact the experience has on their life and their faith. BCH opens young people to the grace and power of God; it transforms and transfigures them.

As we look ahead to 2013, the focus of our life together will not change. We will continue to soak in God's beams of love so that we might radiate God's love in the world. Our choice is to let God's love transfigure us or we can be certain that the world will disfigure us. As Brother Geoffrey says, "If we want to transform the world, then we have to allow ourselves to be transformed by God. So the life of discipleship is a constant movement between seeking the presence of God for renewal and transformation, and then going out to bring that transforming love to the world. God's world—the torn canvass of God's beautiful creation—needs mending. We are called to mend it, to bring healing, and to give new hope."

We do our work of mending, healing and bringing hope through our relationships and through our sacred spaces. We must persist in the work of restoring our historic buildings so that they continue to offer our community a sacred space for refreshment and inspiration as they serve the mission of our 21st century church. We must not allow our beautiful buildings to become burdens that crush the ministry of St. Stephen's. To advance our goal of renewing our sacred space, we will participate in a Diocesan program "New Dollars/ New Partners for your Sacred Place." The program is offered by Partners for Sacred Places, which "brings together a national network of expert professionals who understand the value of a congregation's architectural assets, its worth as a faith community, and the significance of its service to the community at large." Partners will work with us to prepare a case for the renovation and restoration of St. Stephen's, and to find individuals, charitable foundations, and governmental agencies that might want to invest in the future of our treasured buildings.

To be God's radiant beams of love in the world, we need to deepen our relationships with one another and with God. As we enter into Lent this year, we will begin this work with Gay Cox's murals of the Way of Salvation, which offer us new ways to experience God's redeeming love as we use our sanctuary space in a new way. In addition, we will strengthen our relationships with the Brothers of the Society of St. John the Evangelist by joining them for worship and supper on Tuesdays in Lent as well as for their Saturday workshops on engaging God through prayer.

To strengthen our Christian Formation for young people and to facilitate relationship building in the 10:00 worshipping community and with the Kiswahili Congregation, we will experiment in Eastertide with a new Sunday morning schedule. Few of our children arrive on time for Church School at 9:45 and their staggered arrival times challenge teachers. In addition, many of our families come from traditions that believe children should be in church, which means that their children receive no formal religious education. Beginning the Sunday after Easter, when we hold our Soul Food Celebration, we will shift our formation time from 9:45 to 11:15. Young people will leave worship after receiving communion and continue in class until noon. Adults will have the opportunity after worship to enjoy various adult formation options as well as relaxed conversation time with fellow parishioners. The basic footprint of Sunday morning will not change but 10:00 worship will be somewhat briefer and we will claim time at the end of worship for religious education and community building. Given the shift in our Sunday schedule, all 10:00 worship will be all-ages worship experiences with everyone in church together. While this means AWE Sundays will disappear, we will continue the exploration begun during our worship Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Sunday on how we might use music and multi-media presentations to enliven our worship.

As I prepare to go on sabbatical after Easter, we also know our need to strengthen our lay Pastoral Care Team. Always it is a blessing to have lay people delivering flowers on Sundays, visiting with sick and homebound members, and bringing communion to those who can't make it to church. But, when we have one fulltime priest and a part-time sabbatical priest, rather than our usual two-fulltime clergy, the active engagement of a lay Pastoral Care Team becomes a necessity. There is both a desire and a need to strengthen our community of care.

To build deeper relationships with God, one another and BCH Camp, we hope to take a large, multi-generational group from St. Stephen's to Family Camp this June. Since the Camp opened Bishop Bud Cederholm has hosted Family Camp. As we have focused on getting kids to Camp, we have overlooked the possibility of sharing the Camp experience of fun and faith formation with the whole community. We have not taken a multi-generational group to Camp since the wonderful celebration day when the Camp opened ten years ago. Thanks to a Diocesan Congregational Development Grant, we hope to make Family Camp, not free but affordable for anyone who wants to go.

Beyond our St. Stephen's community, we want to reach out in our neighborhood with more intentionality. We hope in the next few weeks to hire a Kids in Community Coordinator who will work some hours year 'round while working fulltime in the summer when KIC is in full swing with its 100 campers and 20 teen mentors. During the year, the KIC Coordinator will work 12-15 hours a month to prepare for KIC in the summer as well as to build relationships and plan events for the extended community of KIC campers.

We also are exploring the possibility of sponsoring a community garden in our churchyard. The hope would be to invite our land-limited neighbors to cultivate small gardens on our extensive space. Gardeners would sign contracts committing to the care of their plot as well as the overall care of the churchyard. In addition, they would share produce with our Food Pantry on Fridays so that we could distribute fresh veggies during the growing season. Several Episcopal churches have experience with sponsoring community gardens and the Food Project in Lynn is also excited to partner with us in this endeavor.

In addition, as ECCO rebuilds we have the opportunity to become part of transformative change on the North Shore. More than 150 people representing 20 congregations attended ECCO's Issues Assembly last Monday evening with St. Stephen's represented by a delegation of 15. Over the next several months as teens continue to work for youth summer jobs, ECCO will research and address economic insecurity, crime and safety, and immigration. These issues hit close to home for all of us. The stories and the organized energy of St. Stephen's with other people of faith in Lynn and across the North Shore are essential if we hope to be radiant beams of God's light and love in the world.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminds us, "We are all agents of transfiguration," who are challenged by Christ "to transfigure our relationships, our communities, and our world, so that they become hospitable to joy, to justice, to freedom, and to peace." St. Stephen's has been about the work of transfiguration in 2012 and by God's grace we will continue to bless and be blessed by God abundant and transfiguring light and love in 2013. Amen.