

The Time is Fulfilled; The Kingdom is Near

The 2011 Annual Report of the Rector

St. Luke's Episcopal Church

Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 22nd 2012

"The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.(1-5) When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (10)

You can run but you cannot hide:

The prophet Jonah is called to deliver a message that seem without hope

Our first lesson according the Revised Common Lectionary is quite a brief. The compilers of the Common Lectionary are giving us a lot of credit; that we can remember the entire story of Jonah and Nineveh. Now, we do get some hints in these six verses. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a *second* time." Well, that makes us all recall that there was a first time. The *first* time God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh and announce its impending destruction, Jonah ran in the opposite direction. But his attempt to elude the Lord only succeeded in landing him the belly of a great fish for three days and three nights. After that near death experience, Jonah has a big change of heart. Chapter Two of the Book of Jonah ends this way: "Yahweh spoke to the fish, which then vomited him onto the dry land." (Unlike some other preachers of late, I am not going to take the most uncomfortable word in that passage and preach on it.)

So today we pick up the thread in chapter 3. After returning to dry land, Jonah goes to Nineveh to deliver the message from God. Now Jonah's message is NOT repent and return to the Lord. This is not a city of Israel, a city of Jews. Nineveh was in ancient Assyria in what is now northern Iraq. It was an enormous city for its day and infamous for its cosmopolitan depravity.

Interestingly, the Lord God of *Israel* has had enough of the wicked ways of Ninevites and the message is one of destruction not invitation to repent. Jonah doesn't just go to the outskirts of this vast city, but walks a day's journey into the city and then cries out to the people of this not yet but almost God-forsaken city, "In only forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown."

And the Ninevites believed it. They believed their lives were about to come to end as well as all the family, friends and possessions they held precious.

A conversion of imagination

Now at this point in the account, the conclusion of v5, the RCL recommends we skip over some verses. I had those verses put back into our reading this morning because I think we should consider the behavior of the King of Nineveh. He, too, believed that Jonah has proclaimed God's true intention to destroy the city and all who dwell therein. He also took off all his royal finery, put on sackcloth and sat down in ashes and gave out rather specific instructions for the fast which included the flocks and herds of livestock. A fast not just from food but also from water for every living thing.

But then the King made the critical leap of faith that we might miss if we don't pay attention. The king commanded the people not only to make the outward signs of lamentation and contrition, to fast and sit in ashes, but he exhorted them to actually change their lives, their behavior and their ethics. After all they had fasted until destruction.

While Jonah, God's prophet, resisted God's will, the King, ruler of a pagan/gentile nation commanded his people to go beyond religious symbolism go beyond their fear and resignation and to pray to God with all their might that each will relent and renounce his or her evil ways and violent behavior. Who knows? Perhaps God might change his mind. (v. 8-9)

The king of Nineveh had no particular reason to think that God would relent. But the king did have some inkling ...some ray of hope that things could be different. The king had *the capacity to imagine a different future from the one being predicted*. "Perhaps God will change his mind and relent and renounce his burning wrath, so that we shall not perish. Who knows?" The king asks.

And that is exactly what God did: Scripture says that when the Lord saw that the people and their leaders did more than go through the motions of remorse but began to change their practices, God had mercy on Nineveh and spare them from the destruction they deserved.

In the King of Nineveh, I think we find an excellent example of a conversion of imagination. The king saw an alternative not only to what *is* but of what *is expected to be*. He imagined a different future from the future being predicted. Because the king could imagine Nineveh without violence and immorality; because the King could conceive of a God whose mercy exceeds his wrath, the King could imagine the Lord God staying the execution order.

When God shows mercy instead of punishment, Jonah is furious. This is found in the last chapter of the Book of Jonah. As Jonah says in the last chapter, and I quote: "I *knew* you were a tender, compassionate god, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, [one who] relents about inflicting disaster." The Book of Jonah is full of irony. A king who is not completely familiar with the ways of God, puts his trust in God's mercy. The prophet who is quite familiar with the ways of God, is so stuck in his own concepts of justice that he cannot imagine why God would give such flagrant sinners a second chance. It is the Gentile King, not the Jewish prophet who experiences a conversion of imagination and, as a result demands that the kingdom of Nineveh should radically realign itself with the Kingdom of God.

Imagination is related to hope, but not the same as hope. Imagination is the ability to conceive of something that does not exist in a way that gives it a sort of potential existence. If someone tells you a particular idea is a figment of your imagination: I suppose you might take that as poor feedback. But if something can't exist first in our imagination, how can it have a hope of coming into existence? Imagination is connected to creation. If you want to create music, you have to first imagine a tune. If you want to find a way to fly you have to imagine a vehicle that might work. If you want to violence to cease you have to imagine non-violent ways to settle problems.

And if the church wants to be a beckon of peace and justice and mercy, if the church wants to carry a prophetic word of God's love and God's justice to a city suffering under the weight of violence and poverty and injustice, then we the church must always be ready for a conversion of imagination. We, the ambassadors of God's love and mercy, must never be satisfied with "business as usual" or taking a sideline seat while those other people receive their just desserts.

Discipleship is about call; mission is about conversion of our imaginations

When Jesus began his ministry on the shores of the Galilee, he proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Now the people of God

had been looking for the Messiah for centuries. They thought they knew who and what they were looking for: a political and military champion who would throw out the occupiers and restore the kingdom of Israel. When Peter, Andrew, James and John IMMEDIATELY dropped their nets and answered Jesus call to “Follow me,” they were experiencing a conversion of their imagination. Something about this Jesus – not a rabbi from inside the Jerusalem establishment, - compelled them to think about their futures differently. And not just their own personal vocations – trading fishnets for lives of itinerate preaching. The future of their towns, their nation, their families, their history and the history of others town, and culture and nations, was at stake. Something about this invitation – follow me- drew them into thinking about God and life and community and faith completely differently.

This conversion of imagination is more than hope for a better future. This conversion of imagination is more than the wish that God will overthrow our enemies and leave the rest of us alone to enjoy an improved business climate. This conversion of imagination causes disciples...like Peter, Andrew, James and John...disciples like you and me to completely reconceive our world and our place in it. “The Kingdom of God is near” cries Jesus. Look up from what you are doing and come and see.

By no means do I believe that Durham or the greater Triangle region is the Nineveh of our times. We don't live in an especially large city though we do live in a rapidly growing metropolitan area. We don't live in an especially wicked region, but violence and destruction are known in our community. Poverty continues to drain hope and sap energy from increasing numbers of families. The impacts of increased cuts in local and state budgets mean decreases in early childhood education and increased crowding in classrooms from EK Powe, to Durham Techs to the entire UNC system. Such underserving and overcrowding in our schools is likely to increased crowding in our prisons. Voices of retributive justice – “lock them up” – may drown out the voices of restorative justice – allowing the perpetrators of crime make amends to the victims of crime.

Against such a backdrop – a metropolitan area with quite a mix of the good, the bad and the messed up– is it possible that an ordinary place like our modest parish might be called to “walk into” the city, so to speak. That our parish might have a word to speak to the city: to proclaim that the kingdom of God; a kingdom of mercy and healing as well as justice - is near?

Faithful and creative responses to the Challenges of 2011

[St. Luke's first Faith Team] Last spring one of our parishioners - a single mom who has to travel a good bit so doesn't have just loads of spare time - learned the son of a dear friend was in prison. The whole affair was heartbreaking. This same St. Luker made the time to go on retreat down at the Trinity Center with some other St Lukers in early May. Together these friends read scripture in an entirely new light, experienced a conversion of imagination and returned ready to ask how they might help newly released convicts reenter society with the support and resources necessary for half a chance at success. The creation of St. Luke's first Re-entry and reconciliation team - Faith Team for short - is a light in the darkness; a sign of God's mercy as well as justice. Eight or nine St. Luke's parishioners stand in a kind of faithful solidarity that says we all need forgiveness and we all need to believe we can start over.

[Our school closes; other opportunities open up] Last spring the teachers and staff of our beloved school and our vestry came to a moment of truth. After many years of providing outstanding early childhood we realized that something that had been working for well for so long was no longer working so well. Changes in the economy and in the culture and in our personnel brought us to a point of reimagining how best to serve the children of our parish as well as our surrounding community.

And yet, out of that crisis came opportunity. Through re-imagining the use of space in the Elizabeth Gray building, we now have not just adequate, but gorgeous and enticing Godly Play classrooms. The youth now have enough room for bible study, foosball, pizza and watching DVD's. Adults now have adequate space for a bishop or a professor from Duke to address classes of forty or more people.

[Hospitality and Fellowship a part of every] A hallmark of proclaiming the good news at St Lukes is that good fellowship is a part of almost every endeavor we take on. We have neighborhood dinners out in the homes of parishioners and picnics out on our grounds and oh, by the way, we learn more about God and stewardship. Fellowship takes place stirring stew and chopping BBQ or at impromptu square dancing lessons at the end of the Every Member Canvass. There is a time for ashes and mourning. There is time to contemplate the end of life. But even when we gather to mourn the deaths of loved ones, we find gentle ways to celebrate our lives together as well as the life to come. We continue to miss John Santa and Carl Fonda and Bettye Smith andUntil we also are gathered to the heavenly banquet we will continue to give thanks for the many tables of hospitality that are set by this parish family: in the good times and hard times. And especially the cakes!

[Stewardship] For the last three years the world economy has been riding some rough seas. As a parish we have weathered these times well: slightly battered but not bowed. Despite all, our parish is in good financial health. Our households have given generously and sacrificially so that St. Luke's might remain a warm and welcoming port in these stormy economic times. We ended 2011 in the black. We have added to our modest reserves and now have some dedicated funds for anticipated capital replacements. We now also have an emergency fund for unanticipated setbacks. Our treasurer, Hope Galunas, and the finance committee have invested many hours and great wisdom into creating more clarity in our financial planning.

[Outreach] This encouraging news about wise financial stewardship is second only to the even greater news that we continue to leverage more and more dollars for outreach to those with the least social and economic advantages. Yards sales, Stew and Q sales, Alternative Gift Fair – those continue to be outstanding efforts and the proceeds go to support housing the homeless, feeding the hungry, and taking care of children in Durham and Belize. In 2011 we also provided support for seminary students attending Bishop Gwyn College in South Sudan, where our beloved friend, Father Joseph Taban Lasuba is the dean.

[Netsforlife]But I think we should be particularly proud of our Netsforlife effort. St. Luke's parish bought over 400 mosquito fighting nets for sub Saharan Africa which means 1200 lives will be protected for from ravages of malaria for the next five years. And if pride is a sin then we best get down on our knees because how can we help but be proud of and grateful for Deacon Jan Lamb who helped lead the diocesan wide Netsforlife campaign. Tens of thousands of lives will be saved thanks to our diocesan agitators, people like Jan who keep reminding us that our ministry only begins with worship and then reaches out to the ends of the earth – once we get up and out and moving! Thank you, deacon Jan who stirs up holy trouble.

[Pastoral Care] How the church reaches out to the needs of the world is a major way we proclaim to the Ninevehs of our day that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom is near. But the way we know the kingdom is near is also dependent upon how we draw near to one another, how we build up our fellowship and care for one another right within our membership. Our various pastoral care ministers our visitors and healers are also engaged in a conversion of imagination. Our pastoral care committee is implementing a new model of care and attention to the special needs and concerns of our fellow parishioners. This will help us better care for those who are near as well as far off.

[Growth] As anyone can tell you, I am not a numbers person. Numbers are only one metric and one among many ways of measuring progress. I am happy, nonetheless, to report that our membership is growing. If you attended the baptisms this year, if you found it crowded around the font area during the Easter Vigil. It was hard to find a seat the happy day of Bishop Curry's visitation and confirmation back in May. You know that we are adding not just numbers but wondrous, special and dear new members to our parish family. For 2011 membership is up; pledging is up; average Sunday attendance is up. All good signs that we are healthy.

Yes, this all happens by the grace of God, but by the grace of God working through all the ministers and ministries of the church: the clergy, the choirs, the altar guild, the committees, the pastoral care visitors, the planners and leaders of Christian formation, youth advisors and Sunday School teachers, the green team turned techy team, the ushers, the counters, the hospitality volunteers, the ECW. There is not a group in this parish not gifted in the art of hospitality. But I don't know a group that better leveraged the hospitality of the parish than our ECW when they hosted the ECW diocesan annual meeting. I mean we all got involved. If you didn't- I want to know what rock you were hiding under! It was great to have all three bishops here and to once again let them see St. Luke's at its finest.

But I guess it was too small a thing to have the North Carolina bishops over for supper in November. When we went and invited the Bishop of Virginia to come down in December and ordain our beloved Lauren Winner. Perhaps Bishop Shannon Johnston asked Lauren, "Can anything good come out of Durham?" And she said, "Come and see." Folks from all over the country did come and did see that Lauren has found a fine church home among us. And we are so glad and so blessed by her presence among us.

[*omitted from the 8 am service]..A silver lining to our proximity to one of the world's great medical centers is that those who were once strangers are now friends. Medical needs, urgent healthy challenges bring folk from all over the world to our city of medicine. Peggy and John Bowditch have been sojourning among us for almost year now. As ready as we are for John to receive a lung transplant and for both of them to return to their home in Virginia, we have surely been blessed by their presence among us. They are far from the only Duke Hospital related visitors we have in a given year. Every few weeks we see and meet people who have found solace, peace and renewal worshipping with us while walking a difficult path at one of our area hospitals. Human physicians and all the resources of medical science cannot cure every disease. Mortality, in the end will bring an end to this life. But the parish of St Luke the physician can lift high the cross –the *sign* of God's ultimate healing presence – and welcome all who come into our fellowship of love and prayer even if but for a short time.]*

[Evangelism] There are other *signs* of reaching out and moving out beyond the doors of our church. Consider our many new event signs letting "the street" know what's happening at St. Luke's and *All are Welcome*. Peggy and Michael and Anne and Mary Jane have put their talents to work in creating signs inviting all to stop and Turn Here. Come taste and see how good it is to gather in the name of the Lord. Maybe its Pancakes one week or BBQ another. We can't be content with just waiting for people to walk through our doors. We want to find ways to invite more people to experience a conversion of imagination of what it means to be church. (You know, a lot of people have a terrible impression of what church means. Church means rules and judgment. Insiders and outliers. At least that is what many think church means. But maybe a taste of pancakes, or Brunswick stew or some pastoral care when other doors have closed, or a feast for the senses in music and candle light and an angel choir the colors of the rainbow of Lights – will give the streets of Durham a sign that says come, taste and see "how good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity. (Psalm 133)

Clergy and Staff faithful to their respective calls

Of course, as important as it is to feed people, it is even more important to just love 'em. And our priest associate, Jim Craven, is master at loving other people. Now Jim can kid with the best of them. He can poke with rapier wit. Yet his heart is as full of love for one and all as anyone I have every known. While age only seems to make me more crabby, Jim remains a timeless treasure to this parish.

I want to raise up another sign of the goodness of God while traveling over troubled waters. Last April the phenomenal Joe Hensley breathed a sigh of relief on Easter Monday. Despite the fact that the rector had the nerve to take her sabbatical over Lent and Easter, the people of St Luke's were well nourished by the liturgies, programs and pastoral care appropriate to the season. With Lent and Holy Week over, surely smoother sailing was ahead. Of course, as most of us know, it was the next day that Joe and Sarah found out that their yet to be born child had a spinal cord defect: *spina bifida*. The weeks and months that followed were a whirlwind of emotion, medical appointments, tears and prayers. Our parish family as well as a vast network of friends and family joined together in prayer – and in logistics- and we walked in faith, led by the grace and strength of Joe, Sarah, Lucy and Stella. And now baby Owen is among us; miracle child; answer to prayer. With every wonderful milestone he reaches, our own faith grows by leaps and bounds. Joe, we admire you, trust you, learn from you, depend on you. Thank you for all you do for this parish.

Leaps of Faith taking us into 2012 and beyond

Did I say leaps? Leaps of faith. That is what we have made and must continue to take: leaps of faith. Scary, risky, exhilarating leaps of faith.

[Dream Team] Our Dream Team Committee, led by Bill Gutknecht and Babs Wise has gotten us off to a tremendous start along a path of dreaming, prioritizing and planning next steps. Again, all a part of opening up ourselves to a conversion of our imagination. That the best days are ahead of us.

Let me tell you about one particularly important leap of faith. El Buen Pastor - our sister parish of Spanish speaking Episcopalians - is teeming with children who want to do well in school. This fall, when they ran out of room for tutoring in the basement of their small building in East Durham, our vestry invited them to move in to our school building on a trial basis only. The project now includes many St Lukes teenagers and adults as volunteer tutors, and has been a great success. So much so that Bishop Curry has committed \$20,000 over the next two years for the creation of LEAP: Latino Education Achievement Project. LEAP is a partnership of the Diocese of NC, St Philip's, El Buen Pastor, and St Luke's and soon to be announced other area Episcopal Churches. The purpose of LEAP is to address the particular needs of Spanish speaking children who want to realize their full educational potential.

Let me tell you the part of LEAP I find most exciting: next month your vestry will decide if we want to allow one of our preschool classrooms to be used four mornings a week Fall 2012 for a kindergarten readiness program for Hispanic four year olds. Where one door closes, a whole other world of possibilities opens up. You can come learn more about LEAP at a special presentation to the vestry on Monday, February 13th at 6:30 in the Gray Building.

Think about the ways in which St Luke's continues to trust, believe and work for the appropriate educational care for young children: Godly Play, St Cecilia's Choir, Holy Cross Anglican School, and now, perhaps another LEAP of faith awaits.

And there is more; so much more. But not enough time to tell you all the ideas being researched; things like solar panels on Johnson Hall; more improvements to our landscaping including addressing some water problems. Under Kaye Sloan's inspired direction, our choirs are growing into a garden of musical

delights. Guess what, Kaye is only getting started, and a conversion of imagination may bring improvements to the acoustics of our worship space.

No Rector's annual report would be complete if I did not give thanks for the marvelous Kathy Barnes, our parish administrator. Kathy is the glue that holds it altogether. And if Kathy is the glue Monday through Friday, then Carol Joyner is the rubber band and masking tape that holds together a lively Sunday morning combination of hospitality to all ages.

This is the seventh year I have preached on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, the Sunday we hold our annual meeting. This is the sermon (or Rector's Report) where I typically feel compelled to apologize to any visitors with us today because you have inadvertently chosen to come on the Sunday we are conducting family business. I make no such apology this morning. Just like every sermon, I am preaching the good news that by the mercy of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, our parish continues on a faithful if not always perfect journey of discipleship. Over and over we need conversions of our imaginations so that our hearts and minds and bodies are put to the service of God, loving our neighbors, seeking justice so that all can live in peace. Today we have looked back over our blessings and our burdens. Let us now look forward to loving God and our neighbors even more passionately in the year to come. *AMEN*