

Rector's Address

Annual Meeting

St. Peter's Episcopal Church, 2018

To the beloved of Christ who are the people of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Spotswood, New Jersey: Grace and peace to you in the name of our Risen Lord, Jesus the Christ. May the joy and presence of the Holy Spirit, with the abundant blessings of God the Father be upon us and fill us with all things necessary to continue the great work our God has begun in us! This address to you all marks the observance of my seventh year in your midst as priest and pastor. It has been the joy of my ministry to mark the seasons of our common life together for the better part of this decade, knowing and supporting each of you as we all seek to become stronger in our practice as followers of Jesus, and as we seek to share the blessing of that strength with all whom we serve in his name.

St. Peter's marks its 261st year of mission and ministry to the people of Spotswood and its surrounding communities. As I mark my 22nd year as a priest to the Church, and enter the second 50 years of my own life, I continue to give thanks that this portion of it has been blessed to serve Christ alongside our venerable community. This Church has deep roots, and this history both provokes us to, and nourishes us in a heritage of witness and outreach that continues to offer the abundance of God's blessing to those around us. It also serves as a reminder that while what we do today is important, it is also a note sounded in a long symphony of praise to our Redeemer.

This past year has seen deepening commitment to our common formation as disciples of Jesus. Our work in witness to his love is only so effective as our formation is ongoing and both personally and communally challenging. We have seen profound growth in spirit, knowledge and confidence as our Wardens and Vestry have grown not only closer to each other in ministry and collegiality, but also in the depths to which they travel as they strive to link their spiritual walk with God to their material lives while modeling the same to our membership. Our lay ministry leaders express to me continually how moved they are by the work undertaken to serve, and how that witness serves to feed their own souls. As they lead, so also are they led to deeper awareness of Christ at work around them, and in them.

Every pastor knows that his work is impossible without the heart, care and counsel of devoted lay leadership. As your rector, I could not serve you without the presence and care of our lay leadership. St. Peter's is blessed with two amazing wardens, whose guidance and insight are only exceeded by their love of this parish and Christ. Cathy and Laura offer their time, their talents and their hearts completely and lovingly, that St. Peter's may flourish. You are well served, and I am well guided, by their care. The same can be said of your Vestry. They are a gathering of people from across the spectrum of the parish, and their passion for mission is balanced by their openness to growth in Christ.

From the worship ministries of altar guild, chalicists, lectors, ushers, acolytes, choirs and chapel leaders to the care and teachings of our Sunday School and VBS leaders, we see our learning turning into service. Our staff, Arlene and Liz, continue to do everything they are able to ensure that their ministries support St. Peter's own. Our outreach leaders and volunteers remind us that we are always called upon to not only learn about and proclaim Christ to the world, we are also to be Christ's hand and feet devoted to the care of our fellow human beings at home or afar. This year, we have seen our Sunday School and VBS programs grow, family participation in worship and service increase and our outreach ministries blossom as people find new ways to serve the ongoing needs of the people we love, our neighbors in need.

We welcomed back our deacon, the Reverend William Balmer, as one called to serve St. Peter's, and to lead us into deeper awareness that the Church and the World need to be united by our service, care and prayers. Deacon Bill brings home to us a pastor's heart and a servant's hand. His willingness to pitch in and help, wherever and whenever needed is a testament to his faith in his calling, and his leadership in both our Community Supper and with the Men's Ministry affirm the Holy Spirit's wisdom in returning him to us and those whom we serve.

Our outreach and service continue to expand, with the Thrift Shop having again a hallmark year of growth. Not only does the profit from this ministry sustain our mission, the work and witness of its volunteers and leadership continue to tender a much-needed resource to the community. Up-cycled items that are donated become found treasures to our customers. Customers become friends, and many become volunteers. We are blessed by their work, and their love for our mission.

The same must be said of the leadership and volunteers of Community of Hope Ministries and Alice's CUP Food Pantry. You will see that we have a new volunteer executive director in the person of Jennifer Alexander, and I ask you to join me in both welcoming her and celebrating her work this past year to affirm and build on the legacy of Alice Ryan and Ryan Galway. Her work to affirm what works, and build up what needs renewal has quickened our work together. We are grateful that Jeannie Fitzpatrick, our cooks and volunteers of the Community Supper continue to provide fellowship and food, both in generous measures, to our people. We say farewell and thank you to the innumerable contributions and persons of Bob and Eleanor Stocker, while at the same time celebrating a new chapter in ministry for them, and a welcome for Rich Doran as our inventory supervisor, and Kellie and Sam Baker for their pickup service with MCFOODS and ShopRite.

Helping Hands and the Parish Garden allow hands quickened for service in the name of Jesus to find outlet. Blankets comfort the newly baptized and those who are aged or ill. Scarves and hats warm seafarer's abroad. Fresh vegetables nourish the food-anxious and hungry. We are blessed to serve!

Special gatherings have been supported by your fidelity and generosity, with our Change for Change providing ongoing outreach support locally and internationally. We also had a special gathering for the people of San Pedro/St. Peter's in Pasadena, Texas as they recover from the devastating hurricanes which struck the Texan coast in 2017. As our St. Peter's was aided during our struggle and recovery from Irene, so

also we remember and give aid to sister parishes who have found themselves in the path of storms and upheaval.

While we serve and meet the needs of others, though, we also remember to connect to each other as we serve and celebrate our common life together. From work days to support the buildings, grounds and an arboretum renewal plan, we put our hands to work on making our spaces safe, sustainable, beautiful and welcoming. Our Dine to Donate gatherings, the Laetare Sunday Supper, the Easter Egg Hunt on Holy Saturday and our Pig Roast have become standing traditions of celebration, with our gatherings showing forth not only the light of Christ, but also the joy of the Body gathered in honor of the Holy Spirit. This past year, we also added the notorious “Yam Fest” and the observance of St. Andrew’s Day with a Scottish Ceilidh. We serve alongside each other...and we also dance, laugh and celebrate alongside each other! God be praised!

That praising of God must, after all I have noted before, be noted as the very foundation and ground of our being as the Body of Christ here in Spotswood. Sunday worship heals us and nourishes us to be Christ’s witness throughout the week. Weekday offices, midweek Eucharists and Pastoral visits sustain us on a day to day basis. The Holy Week “Pilgrimage in Place” continues to grow and expand the lives of those who undertake a closer walk with Jesus. When we remember each other in prayer, and are remembered in prayer, then all of what was noted before becomes an “of course” and is celebrated as our blessed routine. We are ordinary Christians, doing the extra-ordinary because of God in Christ, working through us.

That power of God, working in us always more than we could ever ask or imagine, is the very thing that is enabling St. Peter’s ability to allow me a sabbatical leave this coming year. From the Feast of Pentecost through the Sunday after Labor Day, I will walk apart from my role as rector and priest to our community in order to rest, restore and renew my priesthood and my person. The projects ahead for my time away will look at how we as Churches and households go about “Finding our Daily Bread.” My father and I will also be working on a project that we hope will help parishes and Church leaders manage and resolve intense conflict. Supply clergy will support you pastorally, with Deacon Bill being there for crises and the day to day pastoral needs of our membership. The Wardens and Vestry will work with our staff and lay leadership, ensuring that all vital ministries, services and functions continue in my absence. We will continue to be supported by Canon Droste, and the Diocese during this season of mutual renewal and discovery.

For now, we continue with our 40 Days to a Closer Walk with God preparation. From Advent to Epiphanytide, we are deepening our awareness of God’s self-revelation to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Lent will explore our common calling to become disciples and followers of Jesus, and to be mindful of the transformations that continue in our day to day lives when we say “yes” to that summons. Easter, as we draw near to the sabbatical leave, will see us taking time together in small groups. We will meet in house-church gatherings, hosted in our neighborhoods at which you all and I will make Eucharist, share our hearts and lift our praises to the resurrected Jesus in our midst.

All this effort and reflection is to ensure that upon my return to the parish in the Autumn, we will be ready to go out into the harvest that God has set before us. This harvest is a welcome extended to those around us to join in the long-term growth and evolution in God’s love of our parish. We have work to accomplish together

as we share our faith and practices with friends and neighbors. We have work to do with our sister parishes in our region. We have a growing role to play as leaders in our common life as members of the Northern Convocation of Churches and as members of the Convention of the Diocese of New Jersey. That expanding role is going to be mirrored in our growing role as a leader of service and witness to Christ in this town and its environs. Our work together with our partner churches here in Spotswood, our local and state government, to help all who are in need of comfort, hope, shelter and fellowship will continue, and it will continue to grow. I am so hopeful for the future of our parish, because I know its present health and have been trusted with its storied past.

What stands head and shoulders above all else is the faith we share in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All of this grace and promise we see in the life here at St. Peter's gives me a deep and powerful hope for the coming year. We have done much, and now much more is expected of us when it comes to building up the vitality, life and witness to Christ. My prayer of thanksgiving is also one of challenge: that all of us find in the life of Christ here at St. Peter's the resources and inspiration we need to more effectively and faithfully proclaim with word and deed the Good News of God in Christ.

May Christ the Son of God continue to be made manifest in us, that our lives may be a light to the Gospel and to the ongoing work of the kingdom here at St. Peter's. May God bless, preserve and keep us in grace, peace and fruitful work to the Glory of Christ and the Holy Spirit!

Father Marshall+

XXXVI Rector, St. Peter's

Dean, Northern Convocation-DioNJ