

State of the Parish 2014

Doing the unthinkable for that which is impossible: A journey of faith

Sermon delivered by The Rev. John Morris

March 16, 2014, St. John's Church, Lancaster, PA

Genesis 12:1 - The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, and your kindred, and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation.

This promise that God makes to Abraham can be summed up in just one word: impossible. What God asks Abraham to do and what God pledges in return is simply beyond belief. "Go from your country, and your kindred, and from your father's house." God tells Abraham, he must let go of everything he knows, everything he loves – his home, his family, all that give his life meaning, in exchange for something that can never be – making Abraham a father of a great nation.

Because Abraham is childless, his wife Sarah is barren, and Abraham himself is over one hundred years old. God asks Abraham to do that which is unthinkable for that which is impossible. And this becomes for us the definition of the journey of faith – doing the unthinkable for that which is impossible.

We at St. John's are embarked on just such a journey of faith. Three years ago, in 2011, our Property Committee surveyed you in the congregation about the needs of our facility, and you identified three primary concerns – repairing our courtyard, extending our columbarium, and making our buildings fully accessible to all.

Since then, I have learned that these are not new thoughts but have been debated and discussed for over 30 years. When asked why these things haven't

happened, what I heard was, "While everyone feels these are important, even necessary, they have been considered practically unthinkable and impossible for us to accomplish" – the very definition of a journey of faith.

Presently, your vestry is in an active process of discernment about making this faith journey. A courtyard committee has been formed and headed by Doug Brown. The scope of work has been determined. A first class architect has been selected and a design concept has been developed. The engineering of critical foundation work and storm water management is in the final phase. We are poised to move forward to address the next two basic questions of assessment and feasibility – what will it cost? and what can we afford to build?

This is the first of five mission imperatives identified by your vestry at our annual vestry retreat.

Improve our facility's handicap accessibility, sustainability, spirituality, and welcoming openness by:

Securing from our architects a building cost estimate,
Appointing a feasibility committee to assess our capacity for a capital drive,
Engaging banks in a discussion regarding a construction loan,
Inviting general contractors to bid on the project.

We are ready to take these next steps.

Our architects are preparing a preliminary cost estimate that can be used in our discussion with general contractors. The core of a feasibility committee has been formed to determine our need for a capital campaign consultant. And thanks to the diligent work of our finance committee headed by Sherry Qualls, our financial accounting will, for the first time, meet GAAP – generally accepted accounting

principles and practices making it possible for us to secure, if need be, a line of credit or commercial note.

While this in itself is significant, it is but one of our five mission imperatives for this year. A second is:

Develop clearer communications within our parish and with the world by:

Holding parish mini-meetings,

Creating a communications clearinghouse,

Establishing WiFi and webstreaming.

Already, Marylee Sauder, our vestry steward for communication, has put together a communication team including Drew Dorgan and Jill Gross to help us take full advantage of 21st century media. Just this past week, thanks to the leadership of our Property Manager, Bill Gross, we widened our WiFi bandwidth in preparation for webstreaming our Sunday worship services to our homebound parishioners.

Our third mission imperative is:

Work toward and achieve fair and equitable compensation for all parish staff by:

Directing the personnel committee to examine this concern and make necessary recommendations to the vestry.

St. John's is blessed with a very capable and dynamic staff. Many of our staff are both employees as well as parishioners. The benefit to us is that they are highly committed. But it also results in an overlap of what they do for us professionally and what they do as parishioner volunteers. Currently the personnel committee, chaired by Bob Lee, is reviewing all our staff letters of agreement to clearly delineate roles and responsibilities so we can appropriately

compensate them for their professional services and properly acknowledge their free gifts to us of time and talent.

Mission imperative four is:

Create a pastoral care team and lay leadership by:

Identifying lay leadership to support and coordinate parish volunteers with the pastoral needs of the congregation.

The pastoral ministry of our parish experienced a major change with the reassignment of our deacon, Priscilla Ginolfi to St. Paul's Church in Manheim. In her absence, we are greatly indebted to Phyllis Gbur for stepping up to coordinate the pastoral ministry of our Lay Eucharistic Visitors. Thanks to them, all our homebound parishioners continue to be very well served. There is, however, a feeling that we should and could be doing more to connect parishioners with needs with possible resources. Later this month Sue Heilman, vestry steward for pastoral care, is convening a meeting of our Eucharistic Visitors to hear from them how we can better support them in this vital pastoral ministry and explore possible new directions. I have also invited Linda Bruce to attend this meeting. Linda previously served on the staff of St. James Church as their lay pastoral associate and I have invited Linda to serve on our staff during my sabbatical leave this summer to assist Pastor Jennifer in providing pastoral care.

Our fifth mission imperative is an ongoing priority of our parish:

Commit our parish to becoming a completely safe place for all children by being fully compliant with Safeguarding God's Children, working to become a nationally certified safe church.

Pastor Jennifer has taken the lead in this by overseeing the documentation and training for Safeguarding God's Children. In addition, she is in conversation with the Samaritan Counseling Center about a more comprehensive program, Safe Church, which will make St. John's the first church in our diocese to achieve this "gold standard" of child safety and protection.

These are our five mission imperatives for 2014, to which we add the mission priorities of our particular areas of ministry: in finance to secure a back-up for our financial secretary; in stewardship – to conduct a parish survey of needed gifts we have to share; in outreach – to expand the resources of our food bank; in community – to nurture our small group ministries; in evangelism – to identify official greeters to welcome and engage visitors and newcomers in our parish hall; and in worship – to secure a piano suitable for use in our sanctuary.

Your vestry has charted for us an ambitious course of mission and ministry. As such it will not come without its challenges, just as Abraham's journey of faith was not a fait accompli. Before realizing God's promise, Abraham would almost lose his wife, Sarah, not just once but three times. He would be beset by enemies and adversaries. He would face the ultimate test of his faith by the near sacrifice of his promised son, Isaac. For the journey of faith is not for those of faint heart. The journey of faith is for the faithful.

That, I believe, is who we are at St. John's – a church which thinks the unthinkable, a church which does the impossible. For together we are on a journey of faith.