



Dear St. John's,

For the last six years, we have journeyed together as God's beloved through some incredible trials and many profound joys. We navigated a pandemic, laid numerous saints to rest, celebrated weddings, baptisms, and new ministries, all the while continuing to build our community founded on love and grace. It has been an amazing six years and, frankly, I can't wait to see what the next six years bring!

Something I have always wrestled with since my ministry began in the early 2000's, is rest. I consider myself a "doer" who often struggles with intentional down time and sabbath taking. And yet, I know the importance of sabbath keeping. God rested on the seventh day, Jesus retreated on more than one occasion during his ministry, and the disciples often found themselves on retreat throughout their travels. Our diocese recognizes the need for sabbath and so has encouraged clergy to take a sabbatical following a number of years of service. To practice what I preach, and to nurture my own spirit and relationships, I will be embarking on a three-month sabbatical beginning on June 1st. Through Celtic Spirituality and pilgrimage to thin places, I seek this intentional time apart to rest, reflect, and renew my spirit. My sabbatical is broken down into 3 areas, all of which focus on thin places where I have found sabbath rest, holy encounters with the divine, and nourishment for my soul.

During the month of June, my family will be embarking on pilgrimage to Costa Rica. As many of you know, in 2010, I suffered a massive heart attack. In the weeks following that life changing event, my husband and I were told we would never have children – my heart wouldn't be able to handle a pregnancy and birth. We were crushed. For a year, we mourned the loss of what we thought our family would look like. In February of 2011, during my yearly cardiology checkup, John and I were told that by some miracle my heart had completely healed and that we could have children. That same night, John and I booked a trip to Costa Rica to celebrate the new life this healing offered. As a young married couple, our trip to Costa Rica was balm for our souls. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of that country, the kindness of the people we met, and the adventure Costa Rica offered. Now 14 years later, John and I will be traveling to that special thin place with our 2 kids to show them how beautiful, vast, and powerful this world truly is.

In July, my two sisters, my mom, and I will be journeying to Ireland, the place of my ancestors and a place where my spirit sings. Taking this pilgrimage with my mom and sisters has long been my heart's desire. After losing my father unexpectedly, when I was 11, my mom found herself struggling to keep a roof over our heads, food on the table, and heat in our home. We became a close-knit unit – taking care of each other and navigating life without my dad. My mom single handedly raised three young daughters and did so with an abundance of grace. Going on pilgrimage together is a way of saying thank you to my mom and is an opportunity for me to reconnect to the family who raised me.

GROW IN GOD, ACT IN SERVICE, WITNESS IN LOVE

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During August, I will be revisiting local thin places that brought me peace, comfort, and clarity during the pandemic. I began my ministry at St. John's in July of 2019. A mere 7 months later, I was closing the parish to public worship and navigating a new community of faith during a very uncertain and trying time. During that first year, I retreated to places like Kelly's Run, Overlook Park, and the Appalachian Trail to discern and connect to my creator. It was in those places that I found strength for the journey, peace for my soul, and discernment on how to lead during the pandemic. Now, with the pandemic a not-so-distant memory, I look to return to those thin places for continual sabbath and to discern how best to lead St. John's into this new season of our life together.

My entire three months away is centered on connection, community, and Celtic spirituality through the gift of creation. My heart sings in the outdoors – it's where I connect to the divine and where I often hear the still, small voice of my creator. I know in the depths of my being that all of creation is intimately tied together and I can only hope that this pilgrimage nurtures my spirit in ways I can't even imagine. I look forward to returning to St. John's in September rested, renewed, and ready to begin the next journey of our pilgrimage together!

During my time away, the Rt. Rev. Robert Gepert has graciously offered to officiate Sunday and Wednesday worship services. +Bob has been a gift to me as a priest and a trusted companion. I am grateful for his willingness to lead services and offer his voice in the pulpit. In addition to +Bob, our new Assistant Rector, Joe Pritchett, will be assisting in worship services and pastoral care visits. The Rev. Barbara Seras and The Rev. Philip Snyder have also offered to assist with pastoral care needs. Our office volunteers, headed by Roy Keeler, will continue handling communication needs and office help. And of course, your capable and gifted vestry will be present throughout the summer to continue the ministries of our beautiful parish and handle any issues that require immediate attention.

One of the ways I hope to stay connected throughout this time is to share in the reading of the book, *"Braving the Thin Places: Celtic Wisdom to create a space for grace"* by Julianne Stanz. I will be reading this while on my journey and invite you to share in reading it as a parish. You can order it at any of our local bookstores. In the weeks ahead, the vestry will be sharing opportunities to gather in small groups to discuss the book. Consider, too, the thin places in your life – places where the veil between heaven and earth is removed for just a moment and you catch a glimpse of the divine. St. John's you are a holy and vibrant parish – one unlike any other I've had the privilege of serving, and I can't begin to thank you for your support as I disconnect and rest during these holy months that await.

God's peace,

Amanda R. Knouse +

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