

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany/February 7, 2016

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

Today we celebrate 10 years together, 10 years gathering before the altar of Saint Paul's, 10 years surrounded by angels carved of stone and wood, made of flesh and blood, and the whisper of wings about us – all angels guiding and protecting. 10 years together, not alone, not going our separate ways; 10 years together, lifting one another up, supportive, resilient. 10 years together.

The scriptures today talk about vision, what shines and dazzles, and transformation. Moses had a vision on Mount Sinai. He became so radiant he had to cover his face; and he brought down commandments that were transformative. The Apostle Paul declares that the vision of the glory of the Lord is given to all who are then transformed from one degree of glory to another. Finally Peter, James and John can barely keep their eyes open but they too witness a vision. Jesus becomes dazzling, and the disciples hear the transforming words: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him."

My very first worship at Saint Paul's revealed our church's vision. Vision is not something that is plucked from without, but is listened for and found in people's hearts. When we listen to our hearts we find God's Chosen. So here is the story of my first worship and Saint Paul's vision.

Our Bishop then was something of a micro-manager. While at my last church he asked me who I wanted to preach for my first service at Saint Paul's. I named a stewardship leader in Philadelphia who had consulted with us in Massachusetts. No, the bishop said, that person is too radical. My second choice was a friend. Unfortunately he had competed with the bishop in the 1996 election. So no, my second choice would not do. Then I said, "Alright Bishop, who would you recommend?" He suggested Frank Allen who is currently a candidate for bishop, and Bill Wood whom I had known for over

30 years. Bill was my choice. Now it so happened, that Bill was also President of the Standing Committee. The Bishop had been immersed in quite a bit of conflict during his tenure. A week before my first worship here, Bill asked the Bishop to resign. So here is Bill in the pulpit and the Bishop at the altar, and hardly a week gone by since that heated confrontation. At a vestry meeting sometime after that, Wilson Brown suggested that maybe Saint Paul's is a place where people who disagree can stand together in the peace of Christ at our altar. And there was our vision. That was what was on people's hearts. The peace of the Lord is where people of individuality and even great difference are lovingly held.

We have caught this vision from the beginning. Our rector wrote to Saint Paul's Sunday School in 1863 and asked them to be concerned for Dakota children in Minnesota. Formerly Union and Confederate clergy stood together at the altar of Saint Paul's in 1865. People of great difference are held at Saint Paul's in the peace of Christ. A memorial was made in 1962 to Dag Hammarskjöld who died while seeking peace between warring parties. In 2009, Jo Busser organized the Tree of Life conference here with Mishkan Shalom synagogue calling it: "Building Peace in the Holy Land: Opening Hearts, Opening Minds." That Conference gave birth to the group Christian-Jewish Allies that still meets at Saint Paul's. A peace labyrinth was created in 2013, through the generosity of Edith Dixon, and with peace haiku donated from Poet Sonia Sanchez. Throughout our life as a church we have cast the vision of Christ's peace to all. When we say, "The peace of the Lord be always with you," we are casting our vision. It is not wishing someone well. Rather it is a statement of fact. Peace is with you as we turn – each to the other – in Christ.

Within this vision there is something dazzling going on. Moses before the vision of God became radiant. Jesus dazzled his disciples. Paul says we all shine with the glory of God. A couple of weeks ago I asked our vestry what is unique about Saint Paul's. What is dazzling here? So many bigger organizations compete for our time and resources, private schools and universities, foundations and cultural organizations all of which make claims

on us. The Vestry offered seven things about Saint Paul's that are dazzling beyond the others. These are what make us radiant, in no particular order.

Saint Paul's is open to a wide bandwidth of spiritual expression. We are the only place in the State of Pennsylvania where you will find an indoor medieval style stone labyrinth. James and Arabella Pope invited the highly regarded Welsh, spiritual writer Esther de Waal to come to Saint Paul's. After addresses by Irish mystic Lorna Byrne and neurosurgeon Eben Alexander, Ken Class, Joe Irwin and I created the Center for Contemporary Mysticism. From that developed our 5 o'clock Sunday Mindful Worship. At the same time we are thoroughly Anglican in all we do. We value our tradition.

Music has been a dependable strength at Saint Paul's for nearly a century. It is one of the ways we reach for God. Our choir has sung at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, been in residence at the National Cathedral, and performed at the Kimmel center. *We* get to hear them every Sunday lead us into the presence of God!

We find stability when we are in God's presence. In a world that is sometimes disordered, we find in God an openness in which each of us may stand securely. The Vestry observed that this stability extended here to leadership and financial management.

The vestry saw that one of the most important things we do is to pass on the faith to our children. Mark Duckett oversaw the entire renovation of our church school wing, and Marti Bondelid furnished it, so that there is no better place for children to learn. The Godly Play Montessori curriculum, led now by our Assistant Rector Manny, in my opinion is the best there is. Our education is life-long and enhances life's meaning with outstanding programs for adults. No generation is left out.

We are dazzled by diversity. At one staff meeting Manny looked around and said, "We are the most diverse staff in the Diocese." Leah Desiderio brought her University of Alabama-Birmingham choir here to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail. If not the first we were certainly one of the first parishes in the diocese to solemnize same-gendered marriage.

In 2006 before City Council I claimed that we are a gateway for mission. That has only become truer. The vestry saw our civic-mindedness as a model for others. Remember in 2006 when Jake Roak drove a truck filled with supplies to New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina? Nick Coste brought the Bishop of Mississippi to us that year to tell of the dire needs and the church's response. Bright Judson arranged for Saint Paul's to send a shelter box to Haiti after the earthquake in 2010. Bob Busser travelled there and created a housing design whereby Haitian carpenters would build 2000 homes. We compiled a 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary reminiscence in 2011 of the three teams from Saint Paul's who went to Ground Zero after 9/11 to serve the responders on the pile. And of course what would our mission be without the Rummage Sale that brings 1000 people to Saint Paul's and raises over \$40,000 for the homeless and hungry.

Lastly, the vestry mentioned the dazzling architecture and craftsmanship of our church. The grand scale and verticality of the architecture encourage the viewer, whether a church member or not, to give up the illusion of self-sufficiency. The design suggests the value of higher purpose and the reconciling strength of community. Now, Peter in the Gospel was all about the building. *We're* all about the vision of peace that is cast forth from the building, resounds within our building, and is encouraged by our building.

This is the edge we have as a parish. It is what drives our vision. This is what God dreams for us. It is that for which he gives us the Spirit. We are transformed, as Paul said, from one degree of glory to another. In our parish history I was quoted saying, "The challenge is in charting the future, and I think we can be helped by what we know from our past." These past ten years guide us to the next ten years.

As we chart the future there are at least three transformative paths that lie before us. The vestry has just hired Edward F. Swenson & Associates to undertake a feasibility study this spring for a future capital campaign. I was talking last month with Jim Ransom who was Assistant Rector here in the late seventies. The same time I was Vicar of a mission church in Kensington. We hadn't seen each other in over 30 years. He mentioned to me that Malcolm Peabody, the rector who built this church, didn't believe in endowments. That

is one reason our endowment is much smaller than our neighbors. The positive in this is that we rely on one another more than most. The transformative opportunity is to increase the capital that makes us stronger in the qualities that differentiate us and further our vision.

A second transformative opportunity is the invitation to our choir to be in residence at St. Paul's Cathedral, London in 2017. Very few choirs are of the caliber to do this. Ours is. As I said music is one of the ways we reach for God. Our presence at St. Paul's in London will be transformative for the whole congregation.

The third transformation is the opportunity to resettle refugees. The civil war in Syria and the emergence of Isis has devastated the Middle East sending many families fleeing for their lives. In the next years we will be making a difference in one family's life. It will be transformative.

I feel such gratitude for Amy's and my 10 years together with you all, for the angels about us, and the vision within us. God has a sense of humor. Who knew that the preacher at my first service here was going to ask the Bishop to resign? But there is something about Saint Paul's wherein all find a place in the peace of Christ. I have been dazzled by what goes on here, and privileged to be a part of it. Christ is surely shining. And we, we are being transformed – in some ways that we can tell and in others we have yet to see. What an exciting adventure!

*Amen.*