

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40-1-12
1 Corinthians 1:1-19
JOHN 1:29-42

Sermon – January 20, 2008

“God’s Plans for Us?”

“Great things are they that you have done, O Lord my God! How great your wonders and your plans for us.” Amen.

What a wonderful Psalm to read on the day of our Parish Annual Meeting! The verse starts with an affirmation of the great things that God *has done*, continues to speak in the present tense about God’s wonders, and then concludes with an affirmation of how great are the *plans God has for us*.

For **us**? As is, you, me and everyone else who calls themselves a part of St. Barnabas?

I don’t know about you, but when some parents say to their child or children, “I got plans for you,” they may be anxious and they do listen! Well, after reflecting in today’s Scriptures, on the year just past for St. Barnabas and peeking at the year ahead, I have the temerity to state that I believe God does have plans for us, and I even believe I know what at least *some* of the plans may be. And these plans involve both **affirmation and challenges** for us.

John the Baptist figures prominently in today’s Gospel – as he has, counting today, for five of the last seven Sundays! We ought to pay close attention to someone that important. In today’s Gospel passage, he sees his ministry as two-fold: *to point to Christ and to invite people to become disciples of Christ*.

Both of those are ministries **we** can do too – as individuals and as a church community.

Let us note, too, that when two of John’s disciples came to Jesus, Jesus said to them, “What are you looking for?” Both the Greek the New Testament was originally written in and the Aramaic language Jesus spoke offers multiple meanings to the words translated into English in this way, that Andrew and the other disciple both “wanted” and were “searching for or seeking” something – or someone.

The late, great biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown spoke of “the basic need of man that causes him to turn to God...man wishes to stay with God; he is constantly seeking to escape temporality, change and death, seeking to find something that is lasting. Jesus answers with the all-embracing challenge to faith: ‘Come and see.’”

We participate in this church community or have simply shown up this morning because we share with the universal human need Raymond E. Brown identifies – to be close to God – whether or not that is the reason we told ourselves we were going to show up today or any other day. When I was in college, I went to church partly because I had friends who went to church, and maybe I encouraged them as well; but we were all responding to our need and to God’s magnetic pull.

Once we enter a church community, there is a necessary period of “checking it out” before making a commitment, but let’s be clear about the ultimate purpose of participation in a

church community. *We are not called to be spectators; we are just as much as were the people* St. Paul wrote to in today's Epistle, "*called to be saints*", "called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ Our Lord."

And this call into Christ's fellowship as part of abiding with the eternal God is *not only* for our own personal sanctification – growth in holiness – and salvation – experiencing the fullness of eternal life in God's presence, although that is part of the point. For the high calling God gave to the Servant of God in today's reading for the Hebrew Scriptures God also offers to us: "*I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*"

That is the package. Let's be clear: this far surpasses, in awesomeness, being a member of the team that wins the Super Bowl or the World Cup. And being on *this* team, **God's team**, is open to anyone from anywhere no matter what they have previously been told about their aptitude or abilities in any area, because all people are made in the image of God, are priceless in God's sight, and have unlimited spiritual potential.

Each of us stands on a mountaintop and can hear a voice from the cloud about us say "whom shall I send?", and each of us can say, "Here I am, Lord, send me."

And then we walk down from the mountaintop to our first team practice and look around in church and say to ourselves, "*This* is the team God has recruited to do this great work? *We* are going to be "a light to the nations"? And God chuckles and says, "That's right – you and a few other people. You can do it, and you cannot do it alone."

So here we are, in our weekly "team huddle," reflecting on 2007 and ready to start developing a plan for 2008.

Let's start by talking about some, just some, of our strengths. In 2007, we had more youth involved in the life of this congregation doing more things than at any time in the 23 years I have been here. WOW! Bad news about youth makes the news. You want to hear good news, come here, look and listen.

In 2007, we had more people involved in more mission and outreach ministries, as far as history relates, than *ever before in the 135 year history of this congregation*. Read the Annual Report: the Outreach/Mission report is almost three pages long, and after I wrote it I realized I missed some stuff. Scores and scores of people have been and are involved in dozens of ways, including but *not* limited to work on our **four mission priorities**: the struggles against addiction, against domestic violence, against hunger and homelessness, and against racism.

And if anyone asks you what this has to do with Christianity, you can reference the passage in Matthew 25 in which Jesus says "As you did it or did it not to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it or did it not to me." So one place we can **meet Jesus** is in the people who suffer oppression, of whatever sort. If we "seek" to be closer to God, let us feed, care for, empower and seek justice for those who are oppressed.

All this counts as **affirmation**. Since we lift up "love your neighbor as yourself" as one of our foundational biblical passages, these activities serve as part of how we "walk the walk, not just talk the talk."

Let me offer some more affirmation for those activities we help make possible which people here may be less aware of. Our parish makes a financial pledge to our Diocese of New Jersey, which in turn makes a financial pledge to the Episcopal Church, which in turn spends

millions of dollars in ministry partnerships with our Anglican sisters and brothers in ministry around the world.

Let me highlight a few items:

- These *regular diocesan pledges* help to cover the essential oversight, administrative, coordination and communication work of the permanent staff of **Episcopal Relief and Development**, so that when individuals or parishes answer appeals for specific development projects or relief for specific disasters – like relief after the tsunami of two years ago or anti-malarial nets last spring – all those monies go to programs, not to overhead.
- “Episcopal migration ministries successfully resettled 8,000 **refugees** from all over the world through its network of 28 diocesan affiliates in 38 locations through the United States” in 2004-2006.
- Peace and Justice ministries included establishing summer camps for the children of people who are in prison, so those children can experience the love of God and guidance and direction at a critical and vulnerable time in their lives.
- I once looked at a map of the United States which listed the largest single religious affiliation by county. “Episcopalian” was in the color key. I said to myself, “Where in this country are we the biggest?” Anybody know? Western South Dakota. Anybody know who lives there? Those are Sioux Indian reservations – which are also some of the economically poorest counties in the United States. Our pledges to St. Barnabas support our Diocese’s pledge to the Episcopal Church which supports half the budget of the Diocese of South Dakota, because they are our brothers and sisters in Christ and they need the resources of the church.

So, the Episcopal Church’s mission is financed by voluntary pledges from Dioceses, each of which is asked to make pledges on a sliding scale based on income.

Now let me share a few of the ministries our pledge to our Diocese is helping to make possible right here in New Jersey, from Elizabeth to Cape May.

Of course, our pledge supports the salaries, benefits and expenses of our bishops, plural, and the diocesan staff, which form the “Human Resources” Department, the “Emergency Room,” the “Research and Development” Department, the leadership training department and the pastoral oversight for 160 congregations, among other things.

Our pledge also supports a bunch of ministries, including certain congregations in places the Church needs to be but which are far poorer economically than South Brunswick, including neighborhoods in Camden, Trenton, New Brunswick and Elizabeth. Carolyn Hales serves on the Board of Missions, helping to oversee these and other “mission” congregations.

Our pledge supports diocesan ministries which are right in line with some of our own parish’s mission priorities, including Anti-Racism ministry, the Hunger Task Force, Recovery Ministries (as in recovery from addiction), ministry to migrant workers, and a chaplaincy to the largest detention center for *non*-criminal people in “immigration limbo” anywhere in the United States – which is in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Our pledge supports helping other churches to become accessible to people with disabilities – as ours is. Our pledge supports youth ministry and events for Middle School and High School students, some of which we have participated in, and supports salaries for summer college student interns like Henry DeSarno, who was here last year. Our pledge supports priestly formation people like Brent Bates, who was our Parish Ministry intern here last year at no cost to us. Our pledge supports seminary scholarships for two students from El Salvador to go to seminary in the Dominican Republic. And closer to home, starting this year, our pledge will support a chaplain to students at Rider University – because not everyone goes to Rutgers or Princeton.

How many people knew our pledge to our Diocese did all that?

Now, that's **affirmation**: we're doing more good than we realized. Here's the **challenge**: when our vestry made our pledge to our Diocese to support all this and more, we did not have enough pledges from members of St. Barnabas to fully fund the budget of which that pledge to our diocese is a part. Our vestry "went out on a limb" a little bit in *faith* that the members of the St. Barnabas community who are not yet pledging to St. Barnabas might do so when the vision, the opportunity and the specific challenge was issued.

Because, frankly, this church is possible because of the commitments of about half of our households. That, folks, is pretty weak. If you are in acute financial distress, don't worry about it. If you are not in acute financial distress, if you have not yet made a pledge, if you are inspired by any or all of the ministries pledging makes possible, or if you just like to worship in a warm church on a cold day, I invite you to sign a pledge card and put it in the marked box in the welcoming area. Because **stewardship** is an opportunity and a challenge for us as a community this year and every year.

This church also exists because God has invited us to be close to God and to one another to grow in God's Spirit – and *God invites us to invite others as well*. It's not as hard as you may think. Pray and ask God if there are people you know, even slightly, who are not currently committed, contented members of a local church who might be open to being invited by you to check this community out. **Evangelism** – sharing the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ and inviting people to "Come and See" him in the Bible, in the sacraments, in the face of those in need *and within the gathered community of faith* – is simply doing what John the Baptist and Andrew did: inviting people, who can then make up their own minds.

"What do you seek?" That's the question Jesus asks us. If we seek a deeper relationship with God, that requires commitment on our part. "Come and See." Those are words of our Lord Jesus that we can use as we invite others to explore this community of faith. It's all part of "being called to be saints," to be "a light to the nations."

(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Monmouth Junction, NJ