

The Last Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 29—Year C  
Rector's Annual Address  
Jeremiah 23:1-6  
Canticle 16: The Song of Zechariah—Luke 1:68-79  
Colossians 1:11-20  
Luke 23:33-43

I have so many thoughts about where we are and where I think we are going, but I want to start with a big shout out for where we have been this past year. The *A Year in the Life of St. Luke's* video we shared in September shows a community who is growing and stretching in all kinds of ways—lots of creativity, lots of fellowship, lots of rolling up sleeves and serving in all kinds of ways.

- The **Memorial Garden Planting Project** that had been dreamed of during COVID HAPPENED, and it will bless us for years to come.
- The **Women's Group** just keeps finding ways to grow in their faith and have fun and enjoy one another, launching lots of fellowship opportunities both here and off-site—a great entry place for women new to the community.
- Though ecumenical in nature and way bigger than St. Luke's, it was people of this community who dreamed the **Queer Spirituality Group** into being.
- Feeding ministries remain at the heart of who we are, whether it's **Bread of Life** or the **Summer Feeding Program** or all the feeding and care that happens on multiple levels through the **Mary Boyer Garden**.
- And so many efforts that happen when the call goes out—**coats and blankets for Hospitality House, Christmas gifts for those in need, workdays at Habitat for Humanity houses**. Serving remains at the heart of who we are.
- People get sick or have surgery or have a baby, and **Meal Train** starts rolling.
- **Someone dies**, and we celebrate them with good **ritual** and a **reception** that holds the family so tenderly.
- People go through hard stuff and you all **write cards** and **make phone calls**.
- There are all the ministries that make our **worship life** go—**arranging flowers** with such beauty, **setting up and taking down the altar, cleaning linens, baking bread, singing in the choir, running tech, reading, leading Compline and Noonday Prayer**.
- We keep **forming ourselves in the way of Jesus** our whole lives long from **Godly Play and Children's Events** to **College Ministry** to **Tapestry** to **Reframing Aging**; going deep in the **Friday Book Study**; exploring in the **Claiming Jesus and His Way Class**.
- And as the world calls us to stand up and embody the love of Jesus that knows no bounds, we **hit the streets and join others in the wider community to witness for justice**.
- So many of you have put yourselves forward as **Conveners** for areas of ministry or as **Point People** in specific ministries. We don't call you leaders, because St. Luke's just hates that word, but I'll just say you shepherd all these ministries so very well.
- Our **Vestry** has guided us so well through these bizarre times—continually keeping their eye on the 20,000-foot level.
- Our **Medical Team** has given solid and wise counsel as we live into this call we never asked for known as public health.
- People have eagerly participated in the larger church through the life of the **Diocese**—serving on committees and as delegates—go Jacque Dunbar elected last weekend as a General Convention Deputy!
- The **Finance Committee, Audit Team, and faithful Counters** rock!

- We continue to cherish our building and grounds, **mowing grass**, coming together on **workdays** (like yesterday!). And the **Kitchen and Great Hall Adjoining Spaces Renovation Committee** has picked back up their work in earnest.

**We've had a heck of year!** You remain the most **fearless community** I know. You **keep engaging and stretching and finding ways to be community** in times and circumstances when that is **no easy thing to do**.

+++

And **supporting our common life is the most amazing staff ever**. It's been a year of change and challenge and transition.

- **Music**
  - We saw **Suzi Mills** face into cancer, weaving between treatments and her work here, with incredible bravery and tenacity.
  - We bid goodbye to **Marc Longlois**, and continue to say “hello” to him as our go-to supply organist.
  - **Jim Lodin** stepped in right before Holy Week—nothing like jumping right into the deep end—bringing skill and incredible sensitivity to his musical craft, and more recently, stepping up to direct the choir while Suzi recovers.
  - **Caleb Austry** remains steadfast as our Choir Intern.
  - And **Choir**, you all have been rock solid throughout it all.
  - I happen to believe that we have the most creative, lifegiving music program of any church I know, and we cover a breadth of music that few can pull off.
  - *And*, I am pleased to announce that we are bringing on **Josh White** as our new Worship Tech Support. Josh is eager to continue and enhance the excellence of our Zoom worship experience.
- **Administrative**
  - More change, **Susan Musilli** retired in June having truly taken our office operations to the next level.
  - I asked **Elizabeth White** if she'd like to expand her role, and she was up for the adventure. Elizabeth has brought her golden touch as our Parish Engagement Facilitator to the whole task of parish administration, and the streamlined communication is benefitting the whole system.
  - **Ellen Lewis** helps us account for all the financial resources you entrust to this community with her eye for detail and steady calm.
  - **Lisa Houser** ensures our building is clean and ready for use.
  - *And*, after a year of anticipating this position, I am pleased to announce that we are bringing on **David Curry** as our new part-time Building and Grounds Supervisor.
- **Nursery**
  - This year, we got to reopen our **Nursery**: a shout out to **Mattie Banks, Lily Wilson, Julia Mawhinny, and Piper Saunders** who care for our youngest St. Luker's and double as Godly Play doorpeople. And Nursery subs, **Ariail Lewis** and **Lyndsey Whitehead-Price**.
- **Then there is our clergy team—the two best clergy colleagues ever.**
  - **Greg Erickson**, who has the biggest heart I know, and who is the face of servant leadership and care of the most vulnerable.
  - And **Anna Shine**, passionate prophet and preacher, wise and sensitive pastor, lover of creation, and shepherd of students.

**This staff is extraordinary!** They pull together with and for one another, always willing to step in and do what needs doing. They support one another with such care. And they extend that support toward all of you. They see their work as ministry, and they love this community. *When you see them, please thank them.*

+++

Church in these times feels like **one of those pictures with all the dots** that when you **look at it one way, you see one picture**, but if your **eyes focus another way, you see something completely different**.

We can walk in the space on Sunday morning and think, *“This feels half full,”* AND *“There are 50 people here and it feels packed!”* We can think **nothing much is going on** because it feels so different and the **space sits empty** during the week because our Undercroft can’t yet welcome back in all the groups that used to meet here, AND then we **step back and let our focus recalibrate, and we see all that’s pulsing with life**.

*And side note, the HVAC ventilation fix will be installed in December, allowing us to welcome back in all the community groups that used to meet here.*

**Church is changing, there is no doubt about it.** But this is way bigger than COVID. **From 2011-2020, the Episcopal Church Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) decreased by 30.8%; attendance in our Diocese decreased by 20.7%; attendance at St. Luke’s decreased by 15.7%.<sup>i</sup>** And all these decreases *don’t take into account* the impact from COVID; those stats aren’t out yet for the Diocese or the Episcopal Church, but **here at St. Luke’s, our attendance decreased 8.8% from 2020 to 2022.** Anecdotally, clergy are reporting **that their attendance is down anywhere from 30-70% since COVID.**

I read an article this fall by **Diana Butler Bass<sup>ii</sup>** that I can’t get out of my head. She was writing on the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of **Phyllis Tickle’s** death. Phyllis wrote *The Great Emergence* and was known as the “Evangelist of the Future”—she was the prophet of the reformation we are living through, and we had her here to speak at St. Luke’s years ago. Bass recalls when she and Tickle addressed the Episcopal House of Bishops in 2010 about the “emerging church.” Afterwards, they got in the car. Bass thought it went well, but Phyllis responded, *“I hope they listened. I’m not sure they realize how little time they have left...If you really look at the numbers, mainline churches don’t have much more than twelve to fifteen years left.”*

Which, by the way, is right about NOW.

Tickle continued, *“The Episcopal Church is doing some things well. Maybe they’ve got a little longer. There’s not much time to change the future.”*

In this article, Bass goes on to speak of the **Pew Research report** released this past September which **models possible futures for American Christianity.** Here is their conclusion, **by 2070, Christianity in the United States, in all its forms (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, all racial and ethnic Christian communities), will be a minority faith in a nation with a majority of “nones”—those who proclaim no religious affiliation whatsoever.**

**The Rev. Stephanie Spellers** wrote a book *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for the Beloved Community.*<sup>iii</sup> Stephanie is the Presiding Bishop’s Canon for Evangelism,

Reconciliation, and Creation. She keynoted our Diocesan Convention in 2019. One of you gave me this book this summer. It is a stunning and hard read.

In addition to the **trajectory of decline** and the **impact of the pandemic**, she **adds the racial reckoning** that shook the foundations in 2020 after the **death of George Floyd**, and walks us through all the threads of **white supremacy and empire** that have been **woven into the Episcopal Church from the beginning of our existence**. It's a tough history, and not a pretty one. She argues powerfully about how **all of these events are cracking the church open**, and offers the image of the **woman who breaks open the alabaster jar so that the oil can freely flow blessing Jesus abundantly**. She wonders if the **church isn't a jar being broken open so that blessing can freely flow blessing the world**.

*As I talk with my colleagues, the wall we saw coming about 10-15 years out has been brought right in front of our face. It is **HERE**.*

Our **Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry**, told us last weekend, **the 50's aren't coming back**. He said it several times, the 50's aren't coming back. For many, that was the **golden age of the church**, and there is **nostalgia for that time**.

*I don't think it's the 50's for St. Luke's, but what is the golden age for this community? What is that period for which we are nostalgic? (pause)* And here is the thing, nostalgia is deadly. Remember, when the Israelites were in their wilderness, they grew nostalgic for Egypt, even though that was a place that has enslaved them. Bass calls nostalgia "a dangerous choice." She also notes that "denial is a terrible strategy" and "letting the future take its own course is a kind of surrender of responsibility."

**So, what does all this mean for St. Luke's?** It means that we need to be **asking the questions that matter and focusing on the essential things**. The question is no longer, "**Why St. Luke's?**" but the question has become "**Why church at all?**" These are the **conversations that we have started in Vestry**. These are **conversations** that I hope **our whole community will have, in our own prayer lives and with one another** when we gather. *What is essential about church? How would you answer that question? (pause)*

I'm telling you, as an **ordained leader**, **these are scary times to be leading**. It is easy to give into anxiety, especially if anxiety is your thing, as it is for me. *I do think the institution is crumbling, and I actually think this is true of a lot of institutions right now*. They are suspect, and often not responsive to the needs of people who are hurting.

**But God is good and Jesus is present, and he's been whispering a few things in my ear this fall**. At the end of Clergy Conference, I was sitting by the lake at Lake Logan, and **Jesus said, "Cyndi, I want you to drop the word institution; you're not called to serve an institution; you're called to serve my body."** Oh, that shifts something if we think of **St. Luke's as the body of Christ**, where **all the members are essential and valued and where no one can say to another, "I have no need of you"; a body that needs every part working together for the common good**. This whole body is Christ, **and Christ is its head**. This is a whole different way to share power and to remember from whom we all draw our strength and wisdom. And then, when we understand **Christ' body as the world...As Colossians today says so clearly, "in Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created...in him all things together"**—*this is much more enlivening than thinking about church as an institution*.

Yes, I've come to believe that **the church, as we know it, is dying, and that's hard; that's painful; there is real grief involved, but that's only half the dance**. We follow a crucified and risen Lord!

This is another one of those things **Jesus** whispered in my ear recently, *“Yes, it’s always dying, and that’s hard, AND it’s always rising, and if you only focus on what is dying”—on what is no more (that’s the nostalgia piece)—“then you’ll miss what is being born right before your eyes.”*

**I do not despair. I actually think this is the moment Jesus has been waiting for; I think he has been longing for us to shed our institutional trappings and be the movement, be the people of the Way, that he has called us to be from the beginning. I think Jesus is EXCITED about these times. The only thing that will prevent us from joining him on this adventure is clinging for dear life to what we’ve always known.** This is the **wilderness**, these are the **uncharted waters**, we are living through; this is the **call of our time—to let die what must and to be a part of what God is laboring to birth, holding fast to Jesus as we lose our life and find it.**

*And, I still think church matters.* What all of this means here at St. Luke’s will partly depend on how we answer the **“what is essential about this container we call church”** question. When the Presiding Bishop was asked, **“How do we have hope in these times?”** he responded, *“We’ve got to go deep, and that is about our practices.”*

- So, how do we keep encouraging one another, helping one another **go deep, straight to the Source, to the Wellspring of Life**, which is way bigger than any container?
- How do our **rituals** feed us and shape us and ground us and help us make meaning out of these chaotic times? How do they help us bear the burdens we must, anchor us in hope, and remind us, as Paul would say, *“to rejoice always”*?
- How do we keep **weaving the threads of community** that make this body of Christ strong?
- How do we keep **seeking the common good** in this broken and divided world?
- In faithfulness to our **baptismal vows**, how do we **“renounce the evil powers of this world”** and keep **working to dismantle all the systems that hurt and destroy the creatures of God**?
- And while nostalgia is deadly, **memory is essential.** Memory brought forward can be transformative—that’s what Jesus does in the eucharist, as in *“Do this to remember me...”* So, capturing the **wisdom of our elders**, and then blessing them, as we will do in the coming year, is so very important.

*Wrestling with these questions and living into the answers we discern, this is both our inner work and our outer call.*

I am **28 ½ years into a 30-year active ministry.** As your **Priest, Pastor, and Rector**, in the time I have left, **these questions about the essentials are the ones I will keep asking** as we meet, squarely, *these big realities that are here.* I will keep **tending this body of Christ**, especially working to **make sure that all the parts of the body are working as well as possible**, both individually and together, so that this body is as healthy as it can be.

**John the Baptist** is my spirit guide these days—*“He must increase, but I must decrease,”* John says. First, I hope I am **always pointing to Jesus**, and second, **I am working to decrease my footprint so that yours grows more and more.**

To this end, I have worked with our Sr. Warden, Bishop José, and our Vestry to **structure my remaining sabbatical in a more creative way.** Using sabbatical time, plus vacation time, beginning in January, I will be taking off one week a month, with one longer stretch next August. At this point in my life, I need the breaks to be shorter but more frequent, rather than 3 or 4 months off together.

You will be served by **the Revs. Anna Shine, Rick Lawler, and Kathryn Costas** the weeks I am gone.

In addition to hearing other voices in the preaching and celebration of the Eucharist, this pattern will have the **added benefit of showing us where the gaps are**—what information does the staff and Vestry need to know from me that will allow this community to move into the future with confidence when it comes time for me to step aside?

**No doubt, I'm in an interesting season of life and vocation**—I know a lot of you have lived through these transitions in your life and work. And **my beloved partner, spouse, and companion in life, Jim**, he's in transition, as well. This year has seen Jim **step down after 10 years of leading the Friday Book Study**, and with the hiring our Worship Tech Support position, he **will be stepping down from leading our Tech Ministry**. The community Jim helped to form in the **Friday Book Study** is one of those places where St. Luke's parishioners have gone deep. And Jim, *without your vision*, we simply would not have been able to create the **participatory, high quality, zoom worship experience** that we now enjoy and which has become an essential ministry for us. **It's one of the reasons that our Sunday attendance is only down 8% when other communities are down 30-70%.**

And beyond all of that, **thank you for your support and love of me**. I just couldn't do it without you walking with me. So, thank you for what you have given to St. Luke's and for what you give to me. I love you, and blessings as you continue to explore a multitude of new creative endeavors.

And thank you, **Mattie**, who's down working in the Nursery. You remain one of my best teachers, and you keep my social justice ears sharp for what is not right in this world.

This feels like **one of the weirder Annual Addresses** I've ever given, but when these things get laid on my heart, I have to speak them. And hear me clearly, **I believe this community absolutely has what it takes to meet these times**. The world is too hard, and life is too short, to stay on the surface or play around the edges. The Presiding Bishop is right, **we've got to keep going deep, and you have always been about going deep.**

Not long ago, my sister Kathy reflected back to me that she had **never known a community of people who lived their values the way that the people of St. Luke's do**. She's right—you are **serious about Jesus and his way and serious about loving God, one another, and your neighbor like no Christian community I've ever known**.

I know that **I am most blessed to live and love and serve among you**. I am excited about the journey **ahead of us and how we will answer these questions that matter and live as the body of Christ who is vital, comfortable with dying, always rising, and excited to be born anew**.

Thank you for **letting me be along for the ride, for the sacred trust of being your Priest, and for growing me in love every step of the way**. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC  
November 20, 2022

---

<sup>i</sup> These statistics come from [Parochial Report Average Sunday Attendance by Province and Diocese--2011-2020](#).

<sup>ii</sup> [The Future of Faith: Prophet or probability? There's not much difference now--Diana Butler Bass--September 22, 2022](#).

<sup>iii</sup> [The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community](#) by Stephanie Spellers. Church Publishing Incorporated ©2020. Another resource may be found at [www.churchcrackedopen.com](http://www.churchcrackedopen.com).