

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
September 11, 2022



Message by Rev. Michael Burke

Dreaming God's Dream



Today, September 11th, the Sunday following Labor Day, is the traditional beginning of our fall and winter programmatic year. I am going to use this opportunity step aside from the usual dive into the Scriptures, step back, and take a long look at where we are. This is sort of an interim “state of the church” report.

Thirty one, that's the number of the day. **Thirty one.** Any guesses about the significance of “thirty-one?”

That's right. It's been thirty one months since March of 2020, when we first learned the words “COVID-19”, and “lockdown.”

Thirty one months of the most challenging time in many of our lives and in the life of our St. Mary's faith community.

Early on, we made a critical decision, based upon our traditional values of “do no harm” and “**care for the most vulnerable among us,**” and we moved our presence from on-campus to online. Our goal was not so much to stop anyone from getting COVID, but to protect the most vulnerable among us, ease the strain on hospitals, and to buy time for vaccines and the evolution to a less virulent strain,

And today, finally, we move to “masks recommended but not required.” Although COVID isn’t done with us yet, this is a turning point. Hospital admission rates and the lethality of COVID for most people has now evolved to being in the range of the seasonal flu. And the new Pfizer bivalent vaccine became available this past week for those 12 and older, at Walgreen’s and COSTCO in Anchorage.

Let me just say three things: Whew!, Thank You, and Congratulations. You, the faith community of St. Mary’s has done well. We had very few COVID deaths within our St. Mary’s family, and those unrelated to any gatherings among us.

I also want to celebrate the arrival a few weeks ago of our new Associate Rector, The Rev. Israel Portilla-Gomez, and his wife Linda and son Matthew. Welcome. Friday night we had a great welcoming potluck and Encanto movie sing-a-long, and we filled Waldron Hall with faces both new and familiar. It was really good to be back together again in old familiar ways.



And I want to thank you all for your patience during the almost twelve-month wait for Israel, Linda, and Matthew’s arrival, and for your prayers for the broken US Immigration system. Rev. Israel is our clergy support person for early childhood ministries, children’s ministries, youth ministries, and outreach and community engagement, and I know that all those ministry groups are giving thanks to God for the renewed support and assistance that Rev. Israel is bringing to us.

I also want to publicly acknowledge what you all know – that over the past twelve months Rev. Dawn and our staff have done the seemingly impossible while chronically short-staffed. With all that we do, both within the church and in the community, it is simply impossible to effectively operate St. Mary's on only two full time clergy. Throughout this past year, Dawn and our staff have gone above and beyond, often working impossible hours, to respond to the needs of the community and keep us going.

So here we are: what is ahead?

First, the disruption of these past thirty one months has been deep and unprecedented. Almost never in the life of a faith community do we get a huge "reset" like we are experiencing. In case you have any misconceptions that church life will return to "life as we knew it" pre-pandemic, let me disabuse you of the notion.

Only about a third of our ministry teams are at full strength. Our attendees are split being online via Facebook Live, Zoom, and remote viewing of our services at a later time on Vimeo and our website. Less than half of us are back on-campus Sunday mornings.

We are in a time of reshaping, reforming, and renewal. And therein lies a great opportunity. Perhaps even the opportunity of a generation.

Often, faith communities keep on doing the same thing they have always done, well... not necessarily because that meets the needs of the moment, but simply because "we have always done it that way," and well, change is hard. Friends, over these past thirty one months we have already sacrificed and paid the price of change. Almost everything about our usual patters have been disrupted and forced to change. Now is the time to look for the hidden gifts in this moment.

As we raise of programs that meet the needs of our people and our wider community, let us rebuild them wisely and from the bottom up. **Let us carefully discern what is most rewarding, fulfilling, and faithful.** Not what worked fifty years ago and we have always done, but what works in today's world that is still faithful to our own roots, traditions, theology, and deepest values. What forms of gathering and ministry best embody what it means to follow Jesus in our life and times right here, right now?

This process will not be completed in a few months. I am anticipating that the work we get to engage in together, that of reshaping, reforming, and renewing our faith community will take the NEXT thirty one months to do, and to do well. Thirty one months of COVID lock downs and physical distancing to disassemble what has been, and **thirty one months** to **re-connect, re-imagine, and re-new.** It won't be exactly the "same old St. Mary's because we are not exactly the "same old people." **This experience has changed us.** We did not ask for this opportunity, but we will not squander it, now that it has sought us out and found us.

You have already begun to see in the bulletin announcements and in the weekly St. Mary's newsletter, events and programs with a little **"re-connect"** icon. Let each and every one of us be very intentional about doing the work of reconnecting. You have often heard me say that "90% of success in life is showing

up,” and we will begin by intentionally paying attention to the ways in which we can “show up” (whether that is online or on-campus) and reconnect. Stay for the hour after the 10am worship service if you’ve never done so before. Join study and reflection groups like the new Sacred Ground series, or the new Second Saturdays dinner-in-homes program. Bring your kids and grandkids to Sunday School and youth events. Join a ministry team: Children’s Ministries, community building, adult formation, altar guild, flowers, our two music groups and choir, snow shoveling team, FISH volunteers, the Outreach team, men’s Bible study, women’s book group, The Bazaar Team, In a hundred ways, find ways of “showing up.”

Secondly, we are in the second year of a two year process of long range planning, called “Dreaming our Future. Every decade, we undertake a serious and in-depth discernment of where God is calling us to go, and what God is calling us to be.

We have a 19 acre campus, with more than ten acres completely undeveloped. In the newsletter this week, at a table out in the narthex, (or gathering area) and in a QR code in your bulletin, are all links to the Dreaming our Future survey that opened just three days ago. After multiple meetings, presentations, a Stories workbook mailed to every active member’s household, workshops, a catered dinner, etc., you the people of St. Mary’s have articulated and clarified your values through your own **Stories**, and have proposed a number of **Choices** for future ministry development. These range from various proposals for supported housing for those moving beyond situations of domestic violence, homelessness, addiction, and poverty, to proposals for a focus on programmatic development that serves the wider community without involving new physical infrastructure like roads or buildings. It is very important that we each take time this week, to go to our website, GodsView.org and follow the link for **Dreaming our Future**. There is an entire website that summarizes our work to date. (See: <https://www.godsview.org/dreaming-our-future/>)

And there is this **Dreaming our Future survey**, in which your input and insight will guide us in narrowing the number of choices before us and setting a direction for further study. We are a long way from any specific project, and every project has its own unique blend of funding mechanisms and sources, from foundation grants to public financing options, all of which can be considered at a later stage. For now, what direction do we want to move in; because we cannot effectively move in all directions at once. YOU will collectively set that direction. **Please participate. It is important.**

And finally, I am asking you to re-invest in your faith community in a major way.

Re-invest, with your time and your talents and your prayers. I know, you are already doing that in many ways. This past month, I need to note, St Mary’s has successfully re-housed three people who were homeless, and are making progress on re-housing two others. One of these people was diabetic, and had been in the hospital five separate times within thirty days because, being homeless and camping in a tent, he had no way to keep his life-saving insulin refrigerated. Another was a nineteen year old young woman who aged out of foster care with nowhere to go but the streets.



We are just this weekend working to rehouse another man, who is employed by St. Mary's full-time, and twice in the last weeks has had his tent, campsite, and belongings ravaged by a bear. We have supported families in need, helped delivery groceries for over 1900 meals to families facing food insecurity, made it possible for two young women in the South African nation of Malawi to pursue their education in order to benefit their communities, visited the sick, reached out to those who live alone, created community for 21 elders, hosted 26 separate self-help and addiction recovery support group meetings, welcomed 62 new 3 and 4 year-olds into their first experience of early childhood education through the Playschool, and worked with grieving families that have lost family members due to death and tragedy. We have a special team of St. Mary's members who faithfully show up at Anchorage Assembly meetings, and encourage civil conversation, mutual respect, and the work our civil servants are attempting to accomplish for the common good. There's more, but I don't have time to name it all.

Friends, we need you to re-invest anew into your faith community. If you have time, recommit to service in community. There are dozens of ways to be involved. Find one that feeds and sustains you.

If you have financial resources, give generously. Because times are hard for some folks, **St. Mary's fell \$16,508 behind our monthly budgeted income during August.** That is ground we will need to make up with only Three and a half months to go in the year. If you receive a large PFD this year, consider giving some or all of that back to the work of God through this community. And in just a few weeks, you will receive your 2023 pledge packet, asking for your ongoing financial support, and asking us all to walk by faith beyond a sense of scarcity and to live into the grace, gratitude, and generosity of God. The needs of this hurting world are many, but in faith, resources, and talent, God has already given us **MORE THAN ENOUGH**, to do all that we are called to do in Christ's name. **Let us believe that. Let us live that out.**

In all these things, we at St. Mary's stand on the shoulders of giants, those who have come before us in the life of faith. These days are OUR DAYS, our time, our generation, and our season to make a difference in this world.



We will face the division, uncertainty, and cynicism of our wider culture with small acts of grace and generosity, manifesting the power of God in our lives, and loving our neighbor as ourselves, not just in words alone, but in action.

In the end, the world will be saved through the Grace of God, and through a million small concrete actions such as these.

St. Mary's: Penny Cowan, our dear parishioner who pays attention to such things, tells me that this Sunday is the 22nd anniversary of my service amongst you as rector. Thank you for each and every moment of it all. I am humbled and learn from you anew each day. I am inspired by your witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Together, we live out God's dream for us in this place.

Delighting in this world. Working together for God's dream.

There is no other group of people *anywhere*, that I would rather be doing this with.

Thank you, friends. May our Gracious, Loving, and Almighty God bless us all.



I invite now, my brother in faith, Eric Backman, an elected member of our governing body, the vestry, with his brief reflections. This "Moment of Gratitude" is something we will be doing each week, from now until the end of October, featuring various voices of our St. Mary's. If you'd like to be a part, see Al Alvarez out in the gathering area at the Dreaming our Future Survey help table after the service. Eric?