

Sermon for The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
Christ Episcopal Church, Middletown, New Jersey
January 13th and 14th, 2018
The Rev. Dr. William Carl Thomas

O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.
Amen.

My hope is that you are aware that I will retire from active ministry towards the end of this year. I stand before you in the pulpit to read a letter I have written to your next Priest-in-Charge: the priest God has been preparing to love, laugh, and serve with you.

Dear person whose name I do not know (but God knows),

If you are the priest with the qualities I know you will bring to Christ Church Middletown when you start your ministry on December 1st of this year, just in time for the First Sunday of Advent, and I might add, the Parish Spaghetti Supper (what a great way to love, laugh, and serve together on your first Sunday!), If you are that priest, then I know you have looked deeply at the lections for this Sunday, the Second Sunday after the Epiphany.

You may have been struck by the first verse of Psalm 139: *Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.* This verse may have triggered a memory of what it was for you to feel the first tingling of your call to ordained ministry that led to ordination to the priesthood. You probably took a deep breath and looked around at the setting of your current ministry.

Could God be asking you to leave a place where you are settled and happy? You might remember how that tingle of calling led you to make your first announcement of total trust in God when you went before committees, priests, your bishop, and your friends to explain why you desired to live a life of obedience to God. Perhaps at some point you discovered that the Latin root for obedience is *obaudire* which means “to listen thoroughly.”

As you confronted the scripture for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany you probably made the connection between your need to listen to God and that of the very young but called to be a prophet Samuel. Did you laugh at the comedy of Samuel hearing God but thinking it was the voice of Eli? Not once, not twice, but three times Samuel awoke to the call of God but could not discern that call. Each time he disturbed Eli until Eli had had enough. Eli, for all his faults, could sense God reaching out to Samuel and said to him, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

Dear priest who I have not met but know is the person God is calling to succeed me as the priest of Christ Church, I, too, have been listening to God. In June of 2016 I was consumed with anxiety as I approached the age of 64, that my last great opportunity as priest might pass me by. I’m sure you know the pull of career as opposed to the satisfaction of vocation. I could only envision the next and last job on my horizon. After all, that is how I have been trained to think. But in quiet prayer, and with the affirmation of friends that yes, while I would

be a good bishop, perhaps God was calling me to retirement and a whole new set of opportunities and relationships such as caring for my aging mother Dorothy, my newly divorced daughter Melinda, and her son, my grandson, Cole. Learning that I had the financial resources as part of my vocation (someday, dear priest, you will come to appreciate the Church Pension Fund as much as I do!), I could now clearly see that my work at Christ Church would only be finished when, with God's help, I guided a process that provides you with whatever you need to make you willing to see where God now yearns for you to be. A place for your own personal Shalom. A place where you will find the richness and fullness of all that God has to offer you.

You know that life is filled with highs and lows. As a pastor you walk with those people God has placed in your care with steadfastness, knowing that you are God's representative, especially when called to do your real job: making the love of God you and I have both found in Jesus Christ real and present when fears and tears threaten to overwhelm even the strongest among us. Compassion is bound up in the ability to listen. As Samuel finally says when he recognizes the voice of God, "Speak, Lord, for you servant is listening."

My hope is that the holy nudge, which, as I'm sure you know, is a technical theological term, that you felt when you encountered verse one of Psalm 139, is beginning to open you to listening to the story of Christ Church Middletown. And, more importantly, why God would have you exhibit once again your total and complete trust in God

expressed in the words, “Yes Lord, anything you want me to do, I will do. Anyplace you want me to go, I will go.”

Let me tell you just a few things about Christ Church Middletown. First, over the past three years this parish has overcome adversity and recovered their great sense of community to become once again, what our Bishop Chip Stokes calls, “a jewel of the diocese.” Once you experience the Peace during worship and stay for Coffee Hour, you’ll understand at a deeper level just why you want to share the vibrant spirit and ministries that make Christ Church Christ Church. On the most recent First Sunday of Advent, The Rt. Rev. Stacy Sauls, the retired Bishop of Lexington Kentucky, visited on behalf of Bishop Stokes. Five adults were confirmed and five adults received. Bishop Sauls then invited anyone who wanted to come forward to reaffirm their faith to do so. Over thirty people placed themselves under the hands of his prayer. He told me later that he developed a method to test congregational health when he visited parishes. He listened to how the people sang the hymns. He said the people of Christ Church put their heart into their singing which reinforced the healthy spirit he encountered.

While I do not know you, you are becoming a dear friend, for if God has prepared you to come to this place then I know you will love these people as I have loved them. And, take this as my testimony, you will be loved by them.

Now I have done what I can to help you build relationships first grounded in that love. Be ready to experience a people aware of what it

means to listen in the power of the Holy Spirit as we have a number of groups that have studied the Rule of St. Benedict. How would you view your place in a parish that claims “We belong to one another. Together, with God’s help, we can make one another stronger.” If that brings a smile to your lips and a twinkle to your eye, I have more good news for you.

Much of the grounds and buildings have been updated or restored. People have painted, donated money for new carpeting (wait until you see the sanctuary and nave of the Main Church!), and soon the Undercroft will be a beautiful parish center with new flooring and lighting. How would you guide Christ Church to use such a space in the daytime? It’s already used at night for twelve-step groups and, on a regular basis, what will soon be known as Ellwood Hall serves meals to families who stay the night over a week as they move out of homelessness in a program called Family Promise.

Oh, there’s so much more to tell you about Christ Church. Two Education for Ministry groups, children who come for Sunday School which includes Godly Play, a choir and music program that makes worship soar, as well as outreach that goes off campus to feed the hungry.

You’ve probably figured that this letter is written in the context of my Sunday Sermon. In order to keep my joy for this parish within twelve minutes, let me hint at the work we will be doing to get ready for meeting you called *Listening in Lent*. In the spirit of Appreciative Inquiry,

we will look at our strengths and our new priest's strengths, what God has prepared for you to experience in Christ Church, through a guided process of questions and conversation. A Succession Committee will soon form. Note the word "succession." While I will I train the committee in the art of discernment and the practice of search, I will not be party to the actual selection process. This is the work of the Succession Committee, our Bishop, and the Vestry, all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, as you live into the legacy of obedience demonstrated by the Prophet Samuel, Christ Church is committed to join you in a process wherein we all say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Or, as I have written to the parish, the best is yet to come! You will be part of that best, for God is with you and Christ Church.

Faithfully,

The Current and truly blessed by the congregation that is Christ Church Priest-in -Charge.

All these words I offer in the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen