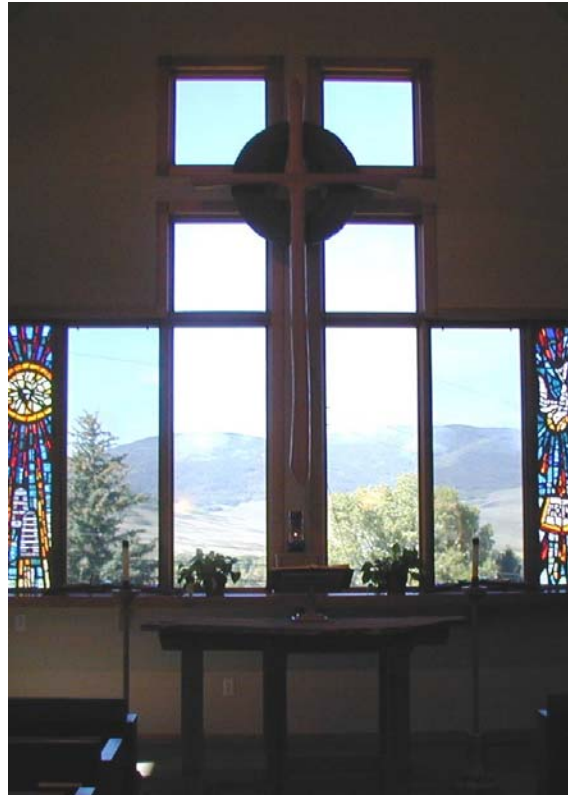


# A Voice in the Wilderness

## THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST



### JANUARY 2008

A Happy New Year to all St. John's members and friends. Having just come through a wonderful Advent and Christmas season (almost), with increased attendance and uplifting services, we look forward to a wonderful new year with lots of worship, fellowship, spiritual growth, and work.

The Feast of the Epiphany—the 6<sup>th</sup>—falls on a Sunday this year, so our annual decoration party on this the last day of the Christmas season will follow immediately after coffee hour.

Our annual winter Music Night will be held Saturday evening at 6PM on the 26<sup>th</sup> at the new home of John and Florice Lietzke. Call church for directions.

And to get started on all the work to be done in 2008, we will hold our Annual Meeting immediately following services of Sunday the 27<sup>th</sup>. Please make a special effort to attend.

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## A Word from the Rector

Have you ever tried the exercise—certainly sobering for most of us—of reviewing your New Year’s resolutions a year later? Most of us probably protect against this by making sure never to actually write them down. Memory protects us from facing the fact that we didn’t actually succeed in exercising more, eating or drinking less, reading more, spending more time with the kids, or more quiet time in prayer, etc. I have only vague memories and general ideas of what I might have been resolving to do a year ago.

But let’s try this exercise for St. John’s. A year ago in this space, I listed a number of priorities (I didn’t actually call them resolutions) for the year ahead. Of course, it should be recognized that I do not personally set goals for St. John’s. That is a work of partnership for all of vestry, so my listing of goals is really more of a rough draft for vestry to work with.

As you read through the following, I invite you to reflect on what you believe should be on a short list of goals for St. John’s over the next year. Perhaps you might see this exercise as a preparation for our annual meeting, scheduled for after services on Sunday, January 27<sup>th</sup>. At that meeting, you will have an opportunity to share with the incoming vestry your thoughts about future projects and directions for St. John’s. Here is what was on my mind a year ago.

1. Seeking a chairperson for the Art, Architecture and Landscape committee. (Bingo! Terry McFee agreed to serve as chair and oversaw an active year of accomplishments.)
2. Reformation and revitalization of the evangelism committee. (Alas, in the press of other priorities, this did not happen.)
3. Incorporating newer members into the life and work of the church. (Bingo! Several new members are now actively engaged in various ministries.)
4. Exploring ways forward for children and youth ministries. (Bingo! Jeanie Kemp and Marilyn Orr are actively exploring new programs, and children’s attendance is up.)
5. Improving methods of administration and financial management, and screening for children and youth ministers. (We have seen some improvements here, but much more needs to be done.)
6. Increasing opportunities for fellowship among our members. (This goal went on hold when our Junior Warden moved away in mid year.)
7. Finding a new chairperson for the Outreach Committee. (Bingo! Ann Wheeler is now settled in as Chair, and this committee’s work has been bolstered by the addition of Deacon Diane Bielski.)
8. Providing more assistance to the hearing-impaired during services. (Bingo! We now have individual audio receivers for those in need of them.)
9. Establishment of a parish website. (Almost bingo! With the help of Jeff Harper, we are just almost ready to go public with our own site.)

## Notes about Ministries

### **Have yourself a very merry (and blessed) Christmas**

And we certainly did at St. John's. Attendance at our Christmas services were up from the last couple of years and we had a lovely Lessons and Carols service with a full house despite the bitter cold. Especially noteworthy was our Advent 4 service and the children's pageant following. Old timers were astonished and delighted as we had eighteen children of various ages participating in the pageant. This included all our "regulars," plus some friends, newcomers, and visitors. Marilyn Orr's original script was performed for a full house in the parish hall. Fortunately we had Sheriff's Deputy Dan Zacek-Smith present in full uniform to help with crowd control! It was a wonderfully festive and joyous occasion, followed by our annual egg nog and decoration party to prepare the church for the Christmas season. Thanks to Marilyn and to Jeanie Kemp for their continued excellent work with the children's program.

### **The miracle of the multiplication of the hymnals at St. John's!**

Five minutes before the beginning of the Christmas Eve Lessons & Carols service, someone approached Fr. Spencer with the news that several pews had no hymnals in them. Somebody (whose name shall not be mentioned, but whose initials are Fr. Spencer!) had neglected to return to the church the 16 hymnals borrowed for the earlier Cranmer Chapel service. Fr. Spencer worried, "We are in a distant and lonely place. How are we to supply hymnals that all these people might sing? Even another ten hymnals would not be enough for each of them to be able to have some. We have some hymnals but what are they among so many?" And the answer came: Make the people sit down in their pews; give thanks for the hymnals we have, and distribute them among the people. And the people sang out with great joy. When the service was over, and Fr. Spencer inquired about people having enough to sing, the answer came back again, as it did on a hillside in Galilee almost two thousand years ago, there was plenty for all.

### **Once more with feeling!**

Please notice that our missing plaque signifying St. John's charter membership in the diocesan Legacy Society has been replaced and is now hanging in the narthex above the table with the name tags. Check it out. And consider whether it might be time for you to join the Society by making arrangements to include St. John's in your estate planning. There are many different and imaginative ways to make sure that your will reflects your values and your commitment to St. John's. See Don Hicks if you have any questions about this.

### **O sole mio!**

Fr. Spencer had a big month in the development of his solo career. On Advent 3, sometimes called "Mary Sunday," he sang Schubert's *Ave Maria*, accompanied by Kay Irvine, and on Thursday, Dec. 27, he performed *Comfort Ye* in the annual community Mountain Messiah sing-along, accompanied by Jan Sears. No, so far no talent scouts have come calling, so Spencer is hanging on to his day job.

### **Pledge drive update**

As of January 1 we have received 40 pledges for a total of \$114,000. We are still hopeful that we will at least match last year's figure of \$116,000. If you have not yet pledged to St. John's for the upcoming year, please try to do so. Call the office if you need a pledge card. A complete and final report on pledging will be available at the annual meeting.

### **An early heads-up**

Those of us who work with St. John's children have a wonderful opportunity this spring. Province VI of the Episcopal Church, consisting of the Diocese of Colorado and several other adjoining dioceses, is sponsoring the 2008 Faith Formation Summit conference at Snow Mountain Ranch. This is a golden opportunity to develop our ministry to children and youth. If you work with children or are just simply interested in supporting this ministry, please keep the dates May 1-3 open. Let's take full advantage of this opportunity. More information to come.

## Updates from the Church Family

### **For your prayer list**

Two occasional visitors/members to St. John's who have made a personal mark on the congregation and made many friends here are in need of your prayer support. Catherine Volland has been diagnosed with hepatitis A. Her prognosis is good, but she faces a long and difficult recovery. (If there are glitches in this edition of *A Voice*, it is because we are scrambling to cover the good work that Catherine usually does so efficiently.) And David Moen is hospitalized in Seattle, recovering from a series of strokes that has affected the right side of his body. Fran, and all of us, are so grateful that there are no cognitive deficits and that David is upbeat and in good humor. But he will be entering physical therapy soon, and he, too, faces a long recovery period. Pray for Catherine and David.

## Sermon of the Month

*Sermon preached on Sunday, December 30*

When I was a new preacher, it used to be nervous about having to preach a number of different sermons around the same topic. (Would I run out of things to say?) But a little to my surprise, I have come to really enjoy preaching during Christmas, even when I must deliver several essentially different sermons within a few days. I think it is because Christmas is the most fundamental expression of the Gospel. And that Gospel message, at root, is that we are not alone or abandoned. God is committed to the world. He is in it, he is active in it, and he is committed to the redemption of the world: and that means that he is committed to the redemption of each one of us. This is the essence of the Gospel. In fact, I would even say—and if any of you tell anyone I said this, I will deny it—I would even say that it is more fundamental, more powerful and more important than Easter is—Easter is just a matter of working out the details. Easter is about how things worked out in detail, but the die was cast with Christmas. In Christmas the triumph of God in the redemption of the world is made certain. This is really Good News, folks. So of course we celebrate, we sing for joy, we spread the good tidings.

Another reason why I like preaching at Christmas is that it affords the opportunity to re-read, to reflect on, and to share my reflections on today's Gospel reading, the prolog—or the overture—to the Gospel of John. For it is the most elevated, philosophically the deepest, and the most beautiful proclamation of this Good News. Have you ever considered that this is John's Christmas birth story? The story that Matthew and Luke tell with the manger scene, with shepherds, wise men and angels, John tells in the words "and the Word became flesh and lived among us." This is the same birth story, told, I grant you, from a much more cosmic level. John tells the story from a much higher

viewpoint and in a much greater context. His birth story begins as the Book of Genesis begins—with the creation. Actually, it even begins before Genesis; it refers back to before the Creation. It doesn't stage as well as Matthew or Luke, but theologically it resonates more powerfully.

It has occurred to me that one could preach whole sermons on virtually every line of this Gospel passage. Consider the line "all things came into being through [the Word], and without him not one thing came into being." Consider the implications of this. The Word. John refers to Jesus as 'the Word'. This was a brilliant appropriation of two powerful ideas. In the Hebrew tradition, the Word was God's activity, the power of God in this world. And in the Greek rationalist tradition, the word ('logos') was the underlying principle, the plan, the explanation the meaning of it all. John pulls these together when he calls Jesus the Word.

And when he says that all things come into being through this Word he imbues all things of this world with value. They are good, they are of God. This is a deliberate rejection of those Gnostic Jews and Christians who identified material things with evil and called only the spiritual 'good'. For them to be spiritually advanced was to reject the world as evil. Some early Christians fell under this spell and denied that Jesus could ever have really been in fleshly human form. They were called Docetists, from the Greek word 'to seem', meaning that Jesus, being God, only seemed to be in human form. It was all an illusion. And Docetism is of course a heresy.

To insist that the world is good, that it is "of God," is to liberate and inspire both science and art. Science becomes a search for the divine patterns underling creation. Art—by which I mean not just painting and sculpture,

but also drama, literature, dance, etc.— becomes an exploration of what it is to be human, what it is to be a reflection of the divine mind. Despite all the talk about the wars between science and Christianity, it is no accident that modern science has its birth in deeply Christian cultures.

John will have none of this separation of the divine and the natural. In fact, if there is just one big idea in John (“What’s the big idea, John?!), it is the interpenetration of the divine and the natural. If a sacrament is the outward and visible (natural) sign of an inward and spiritual grace, then for John all the world is a sacrament. It is all a visible sign of a spiritual reality. All throughout his Gospel, John tells a story (changing water to wine, multiplication of the loaves and fishes, the meeting with Nicodemus or the woman at the well, a healing, etc.), and then he goes on to spin from the story a theological or spiritual truth that the story reveals. It is all sacrament.

And we see this same pattern of the interpenetration of the divine and the natural in this very Prolog, the Gospel we just read. It begins with the cosmic and the divine at some point before Creation; it is all very theological and cosmic. Then what? “There was a man called John.” We are suddenly back to the natural world, back to a particular real man. And then the narrative switches back to the cosmic, before John the Baptist is again interjected into the story. John-the Evangelist, I mean, cannot help himself. He is so committed to the interpenetration of the divine and the natural that he just naturally expresses himself in this way.

And in the deepest sense Christmas is a sacrament. Jesus—the Word made flesh—is the sign that God is present to this world; that he acts in it, and is committed to its redemption . The world is completely interpenetrated with the divine.

Yes, all things came into being through him. And so, this world is good; life is good, science and art are good, which is to say that knowledge, insight, and beauty are good. And we came into being through him. And so God is in us, acts in us, and is committed to our redemption. And in Jesus we have all this validated. This is the Gospel. This is the good news. And so we celebrate.

Merry Christmas, indeed.

**: And a final comment from the preacher:  
Never let it be said that the Gospel is not preached in this church!**