**4 Epiphany**

**January 31, 2016**

**Annual Report**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

If you will remember, last week Jesus stood up in the synagogue of his hometown Nazareth and read a portion of the Book of the prophet Isaiah.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*

*because he has anointed me*

*to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*

*and recovery of sight to the blind,*

*to let the oppressed go free,*

*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)*

And then the Gospel reading last week ended with the two verses that began our reading this morning … well almost. Last week they left off the question, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

Our best estimate is that Jesus had left Nazareth when he was in his early thirties. This is the town he had grown up in … everyone knew Jesus, son of Joseph, didn’t they? But this Jesus was a changed man when he returned home. Jesus had left Nazareth, gone to the Jordan to hang out with John the Baptist, was baptized, had the Holy Spirit descend upon him like a dove, and then had wandered in the wilderness … tempted by the devil … for forty days. When he left the wilderness he had returned to Galilee … and finally to his home town. Everyone outside of Nazareth knew Jesus as this amazing spirit person who was doing great things … healing the sick, exorcizing demons, giving sight to the blind, preaching with a phenomenal wisdom. However, when he returned to his home town, he was just Jesus, son of Joseph … “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

So, although his hometown congregation was at first “amazed” at his words, they soon became enraged when they were accused of being somewhat thick-headed. They were so enraged that they took him to the edge of a cliff to throw him off it.

Now, today is the occasion of our annual meeting, and I usually use this time in the pulpit to give my annual report … the State of St. Cyprian’s Address if you will. I really can’t figure how to integrate the Gospel reading into the report, but the story from last week was incomplete without today’s reading, so I had to at least say something about the consequences of Jesus’s short sermon in his hometown synagogue. Since my hometown of St. Andrew’s in Morehead City, North Carolina left the Episcopal Church almost 30 years ago, I would imagine that if I were to preach there today the congregation might try to do the same to me.

Anyhow, this is my Annual Report of St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church. To cut to the chase … St. Cyprian’s is probably in the best shape it has been in its 123 year history as a congregation. In 2015 we once again grew in numbers, ministry and spirit, and we face 2016 with the wonderful resources of a highly committed congregation.

For those who are relatively new to St. Cyprian’s I’ll provide a quick history. The first record of our congregation in the archives of the Diocese of Florida appear in 1893 when a small group of people of color were worshipping in a storefront on Washington Street. This church building was built in 1899 and dedicated by Bishop Edwin Gardner Weed in 1900. The first fulltime pastor of St. Cyprian’s was Peter Williams Cassey who served from 1901 until his death in 1917.

St. Cyprian’s has always been financially subsidized by the Diocese of Florida, or Trinity Parish, or both … that is until just a few years ago when we became financially self-sufficient. However, during most of the decades of the early twentieth century worship services were well attended, the congregation consisted a number of professional people such as doctors, dentists, lawyers and educators, and the church was a cornerstone in this Lincolnville neighborhood.

During the civil rights era the people of St. Cyprian’s stayed out of the fray … at least visibly. After the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. left St. Augustine life became difficult for many blacks, as we heard from Twila Fleming Hudson just a few weeks ago at our Martin Luther King Vespers. Many of those who grew up here in Lincolnville moved away to find jobs and opportunity, and the neighborhood suffered. By the early 1990s St. Cyprian’s congregation had dwindled to a small handful of elderly black women. Without a fulltime pastor at St. Cyprian’s Trinity Parish began sending assistant clergy over to lead services … that is how Pastor Deena was first introduced to St. Cyprian’s. Another of the assistant clergy from Trinity Parish who led services at St. Cyprian’s was Fr. David Allert who eventually was serving the congregation fulltime. But in 2006 Fr. David led many in in this community to leave the Episcopal Church over the issue of gays and lesbians and their role in the larger Church and its leadership.

There were only a few people remaining in the congregation after this schism. Dr. Dorothy Headley Israel was one of them, John Miller was another. The Bishop called Pastor Deena and asked if she might take charge of St. Cyprian’s and provide crisis management during this difficult time. Later in 2007 another priest came to fill in for a year or so, and then the Bishop called me out of retirement to serve as your Vicar in 2008 … supposedly part time and just for a few years. I think he thought St. Cyprian’s was on its deathbed and that it would close.

Not only did we not close, but we have grown beyond any expectation. In 2008 our average Sunday attendance was just 31. Our operating budget was supported by a meager $25,000 in pledges from the congregation, and $36,000 from the Diocese of Florida. Much has changed in the eight years since then. Our average Sunday attendance last year was 82, and in 2016 our annual operating budget will be $158,000 supported by $125,000 in financial pledges from the congregation. Not only do we no longer receive support from the Diocese of Florida, but in 2015 we contributed over $12,000 towards their Common Ministry Budget.

In 2015 the people of this congregation also supported Dining With Dignity with over 600 volunteer hours and fed at least 1,000 homeless men, women, and children. You opened your cupboard doors and contributed to the Ecumenical Food Pantry well over a ton of food, and we funded the purchase of pigs, goats, and chickens for the Episcopal Relief and Development work in impoverished areas of the world. We assisted students in both traditional four-year college studies, as well as alternative vocational education. We were the site of eighteen weddings, and we lent out space in our church and Mission House for 12-step group meetings, piano recitals, meetings on prison and criminal justice reform, the showing of films that make a difference, a respite day for homeless women providing health care and other resources in a safe environment, and many other neighborhood and community activities.

This past fall we built the Prayer Wall on the Commons with the hands of people in the congregation. And on Sundays we worshipped in this space with music from a choir that is growing in numbers, talent and sophistication. Our Lay Ministry team has also grown, and our Jazz Vespers series now includes Concerts on the Commons, and special occasion services with focuses on Martin Luther King, Black History, Earth Day, International Day of Peace, and Lessons & Carols at Christmas time. This past year saw the re-organization of the Daughters of the King, a special ministry of the women of St. Cyprian’s, and over 20 showed up at the first meeting. And in June Bishop Dorsey Henderson visited St. Cyprian’s and confirmed eight persons in this congregation.

This is all an indication of the continued growth of spirit in this place. A spirit grounded in taking seriously what Jesus took seriously … of treating our neighbors as our self … of doing to others what we would want done to us, and not doing to others that which we would not like done to us. That spirit is one of welcome to the stranger … no matter who different they may seem. A spirit of curiosity and a spirit that provides a safe place to ask questions and live in uncertainty. A spirit that includes those who have often felt like they were not included elsewhere.

In 2016 our plans are to complete some projects, and to break ground on some new ones. As joyous as it is for me to hear the voices … and sometimes cries … of young people in our worship, it is always a reminder that we have no formal program to address children and youth at St. Cyprian’s. That will change in 2016. We will creatively address how we can provide meaningful education and care for the children of this congregation, and allow their parents to worship fully with the rest of us. Our commitment to our youth here and in our greater community will expand with the reorganized Scholarship Committee, and we look forward to supporting additional students in both traditional and alternative studies.

We plan to add space to the Mission House by tearing out the wall between the large room and my old office adding almost 200 square feet. And we hope to add new access to the Commons from the Mission House by installing French Doors and a small deck. We want to add lighting to the Commons and all our walkways, and a pergola/arbor over the entrance to the Commons from MLK Avenue. And our parking lot on Lovett Street will receive a makeover so that it will serve efficiently to park as many cars as possible.

Finally, many of the leaders in the congregation have been offering their services for a very long time, so we hope to involve those who are relatively new to the congregation opportunities in additional leadership roles.

That is basically my report as your Vicar. As I said at the outset, St. Cyprian’s is probably in the best shape it has been in its 123 year history as a congregation. However, there is an additional issue to discuss … our relationship with the Diocese of Florida, and our Bishop John Howard. A year ago, at our Annual Meeting, I said that in 2015 St. Cyprian’s was going to apply for status as a full parish in the Diocese of Florida. That did not happen. There are several reasons.

First of all there were those in the congregation who after hearing the announcement asked if in gaining full parish status we would lose some of our autonomy. The technical answer to that question is “No.” But that question raised another one, “What would functionally change for us if we became a parish?” The answer to that second question is “basically nothing.” So, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!”

Secondly, our greatest advocate for becoming a parish was the Very Rev. Bob Griffiths, Archdeacon of the Diocese. Well, Bob retired in June.

Thirdly, the issue of authorizing a liturgy for same-sex weddings was on the agenda of General Convention of the Episcopal Church that met last summer. Several weeks before the General Convention had a chance to even consider the resolution, the Rt. Rev. John Howard, Bishop of the Diocese of Florida, issued a pastoral letter saying that even if the General Convention authorized this liturgy he would not allow it in this Diocese. As a progressive Christian community who openly welcomes gays and lesbians … some who were married in an Episcopal Church where it was allowed … this blanket prohibition sets us at odds with our Bishop. These three events contributed to a feeling that now was not the right time to affirm the Diocese of Florida by seeking full parish status.

I have said it before … and you will hear it again … my time of serving St. Cyprian’s as your priest and Vicar has been, and continues to be, the most rewarding ministry I have known in my 40+ years of ordained ministry. St. Cyprian’s is once again a cornerstone in this Lincolnville neighborhood and a beacon in St. Augustine for what a little ol’ church can do and be. This isn’t about me … it is about us … and what we do together. God is alive in each of us just as God was alive in Jesus. Together we are making a difference in our community. Together we are providing a spiritual home where people grow in their faith, find comfort in their troubles, and grow in the spirit of God’s love.

Once more, St. Cyprian’s is probably in the best shape it has been in its 123 year history as a congregation. And it is a joy to be a part of our life together. I close with a quote from Paul’s letter to the Christian in Ephesus that is read at the close of each Mission Board meeting:

*Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.*

Amen