

Last Sunday after the Epiphany ~ February 26, 2017 ~ Annual Meeting
Bilingual Service ~ Rev. Daniel Vélez-Rivera, Preacher and Celebrant
Readings: Exodus 24:12-18, Salmo 99, 2 Pedro 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.” — Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there.” There are two words from that Exodus reading that I kept seeing and hearing ever since our last annual meeting. “Wait there.”

The last parish meeting took place in October, 2015; an uncommon time in the tradition of St. Gabriel’s for its annual meeting; four months before the usual timeframe. That decision was made because we needed time to go to the mountain, to climb it together, to discern and pray, and to explore creative ways to walk up and back down that mountain together.

There was financial uncertainty ahead of us, but in the fifteen-month period between that meeting and December 2016, there was transformation, I’ll call it transfiguration. So, we climbed the mountain together, we waited, we heard the voice of God, and we started moving forward again. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus said, “Get up, do not be afraid.” Fear is part of most people’s lives, but with God’s help we can overcome the fear of scarcity.

Today there is a Spirit of hope and possibility in the air. We’ve come down the mountain after pondering, listening, praying, and witnessing changes that are allowing us to continue doing the work that Jesus called calling us to do as an authentically inclusive faith community. Today, we are witnesses of our authentic inclusivity as we celebrate the transfiguration of our Lord and the 2016 Annual Meeting with representatives of our English and Spanish speaking congregation.

Many of you know that financial uncertainty is a terrible stressor; one of the worst an individual or organization can experience aside from death, relocation, or any kind of separation. In our time upon the mountaintop, the vestry and I sought counsel and guidance from various wise people who listened and counseled us. I personally turned to my spiritual director who

patiently listened, intently prayed, and at one point told me to stop pressing God for answers and to be still, let God act. You know that I'm not the most patient person in the world, but I followed her wise advice. The time between October, 2015 and roughly April of 2016 were my "forty days" with God on the mountaintop. I had said enough, it was time to be still and listen.

Perhaps you went up the mountain to press God for an answer or two in the past year or so regarding our congregational uncertainty or something else in your life. I would love to hear the stories that took you to the mountaintop during today's Annual Meeting. As you reflect on our church community, I invite you to share what concerns you may have had or continue having regarding St. Gabriel's. The annual meeting is not only about the business of the church, it is about the lives of the people in the church. If you reflect, and want to share some thoughts about your mountaintop journey, I invite you to do so.

After several months of waiting, the clouds on the mountaintop began to disperse and the Spirit started to change things here. Let's look at a few things that took place in 2016: at least 26 new people began calling St. Gabriel's their church home, ten children were baptized, one person was confirmed, three people were received, two saints were buried including our beloved Fr. Bill. Approximately 160 people attended the first Virgen de Guadalupe service in 2015 and about 175 attended in 2016, and finally, as of last Sunday, about 50 people continue coming to our 3pm service at St. James! Using the Christmas attendance at both services as a measure, there was a 12% increase from 2015 to 2016 in the English language Christmas Eve service, and a 245% increase in that same time in the Spanish language Christmas Day service.

What other changes transformed Saint Gabriel's in 2016? Deacon Holly was assigned to minister among us, Kurt offered to help the vestry and me with his wisdom, he subsequently volunteers as our Lay Pastoral Associate with a focus on adult faith formation, and Darren joined St. Gabriel's to learn about pastoral ministry in our context as God speaks to him about ways that God needs him in service to the world.

There is a beautiful Spirit in the air here. While we experienced uncertainty, we turned to God to bring us out of the valley up to the mountaintop, and there I at least witnessed the dazzling clothes of Christ, the Spirit of Christ is alive in us. We may become afraid at times, like Christ's disciples were in today's gospel, but we can go up the mountain again and again, we can be transfigured as we become still and quiet, listening for God's assurances and being transformed. The road ahead may become uncertain again, that's part of living in this kingdom, but let's not forget Christ's words, "Get up and do not be afraid". We will make it through the next hurdles – together as the one body of Christ. With God, all things are possible. Amen