

Sermon Preached at Church of the Savior, Ambridge, Pennsylvania 14 February (Last Epiphany)

Text: None – Annual Parish Meeting Address

When I think about 2020, I'm reminded of a comic strip episode – and if you know me you will not be surprised to learn that it is from Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes*! In the first panel Calvin is getting off the school bus with his head down, saying: "What a day. It feels like I've been run over by a train." In the second panel, you see (predictably) Hobbes come bolting out the front door and knocking Calvin to the ground. In the next panel, as Calvin attempts to collect his shoes, socks, and backpack, he says: "I mean, *now* it feels like that;" to which Hobbes in the final panel replies: "See? You should always save your hyperbole for when you really need it."

That was the problem with 2020. What a year! When I stood here to give my annual address, barely a year ago, on February 9, 2020, none of us, in our wildest imagination, could have conceived what was going to come in the balance of the year. We used up our hyperbole by the end of March, and there were still nine months to go. We don't need to review the macro-events of 2020 or the loss and disruption those events have caused, to know that the world, and the Church of the Savior, that existed last February 9, are gone; and they are not coming back. That is not hyperbole; but the sober truth.

For many if not most of us 2020 has been the most difficult year we have ever known. At the same time, we've seen God do amazing things for the good of Church of the Savior in 2020; as we've also seen the members of Church of the Savior respond with both grace and ingenuity to the losses caused by the pandemic. Some of these accomplishments you've already heard about; others you can read about in the report document.

This year's edition is slimmer than usual but, if anything, for us to know the contents is even more vital than ever. There was a reason God told the Israelites to take stones out of the Jordan when they crossed it dry-shod. They are for remembrance. In 2020, God has given us many stones of remembrance. Take the time to read about them. Thank Him for what He has done. I believe the record of God's faithfulness to Church of the Savior in 2020 will encourage you for our future, as it has me.

That is not to say that we do not face significant challenges as we move into 2021, hopefully into a post-pandemic world and a "new normal" that we still have little if any clue what it will look like. In the balance of my remarks this morning, I want to address two challenges we know Church of the Savior will face in 2021 and beyond, regardless of whatever the "new normal" may be.

The first challenge deals with this building, and it comes in two parts. Over the years, God has continually provided for the needs of this building. If we had time, we could retell the story of how the Lord provided the \$100,000 in cash in only a few months to make the original purchase – twenty years ago; or how on the hottest day of the summer fifteen years ago in 2006, we held the first worship service in this room, with no chairs, no electricity, no air-conditioning, and no idea how we would ever obtain the resources to occupy the space, but an expectancy that God would move to get us up here; how barely a year later we faced a looming mortgage payment with less than \$100 in the bank; or how in 2009 God provided over a quarter of a million dollars in just six months to enable us to install the elevator and move worship here permanently. Just a few moments ago you heard Allie Kennedy describe the truly astonishing way that God kept our capital campaign going in 2020 when we had to abandon it; and how vital

infrastructure work was completed, in several cases, years ahead of schedule, when by any human calculus we should have been unable to accomplish any of it.

We have seen God's incredible faithfulness over and over again with this building. At the same time, as you also heard, more remains to be done. When COTS undertook the initial rehab of this building, in the early 2000s, we took out a construction loan for over \$400,000. Now, twenty years later, nearly \$160,000 of that principal amount still remains unpaid. After we refinanced the mortgage three years ago – for the second time – the discharge date is now August 2028. That's nearly two decades after the loan was originally supposed to have been paid off. That's two decades during which resources that could have been used in missional ministry in places that desperately need Jesus have instead been consumed in debt service.

As our leaders and I have prayed we have heard God saying that the time has come to retire that debt. Again, we don't know what the future is going to bring – but as we have prayed, we have felt an increasing sense of urgency that if we want to position ourselves for a new season of harvest in a post-pandemic era, we need to be free from this encumbrance—and we need to start now.

Today your Vestry and I challenge the members of Church of the Savior, as well as our friends and supporters in other places to whom we will continue to reach out, to enter a new phase of our capital campaign: to retire the debt on this building in three years, by the end of 2023; so that after the Annual Meeting on February 11, 2024, we can adjourn to the parking lot and burn the mortgage!

This is an achievable goal. If we simply keep making regular monthly payments, in three years the mortgage principal would be reduced to \$115,000. Remember that even in the pandemic year of 2020, our building fund received over \$70,000 in cash contributions. If we were to continue receiving donations at that rate we conceivably could accomplish the goal in half the time.

This goal is achievable – but not by us alone, nor does God ever intend it that way. We will need the help of a wider community of friends and COTS “alumni”; and the way that wider community will become involved will be for them to be invited to partner with us. We had just started to seek collaboration of ministry partners when the pandemic hit; God willing, we will be able to resume that effort as 2021 progresses.

There is another part to the challenge of our building. We have always had limited storage space; and during my tenure that space has become filled with a lot of items for which we frankly no longer have any use. As debt inherited from the past has become a burden on future ministry, so increasingly it is the case with clutter inherited from the past.

As our leaders and I have prayed, we've sensed that at the same time as we work on discharging the mortgage, we also need to clean out the clutter. Beginning in the spring, after Easter, we will be scheduling a series of work days to sort, give away, throw out and, where items should be retained, store more efficiently. There will be a series of days because frankly one or two won't be enough. If you want to know more – and especially if you want to help – let Allie or me know. We will be more than happy to point you to one or more tasks you can help with.

This second area of need in our building dovetails with the Lord's second major challenge facing us in the coming season. After all, it is not for the sake of the building that we want to pay off the

mortgage, or to clean house. We are not here for a building. The building is here for us, to help us reach the community around us so that together we may grow in discipleship to Jesus, in walking in loving obedience to him and his commands in Ambridge and to the nations.

At the same time, the need for Church of the Savior to involve more people is increasingly obvious. When we reopened for public worship in July, between members in the sanctuary and online viewers our total attendance actually slightly increased from before the pandemic – and that is even after the relocation in the meantime of three seminary households.

But for those of us in the sanctuary, the empty spaces, exaggerated even more by social distancing, have underscored a long-term reality. In recent years Church of the Savior has experienced negative growth. As I've begun my own de-cluttering in my office, I've had to get rid of many resources simply because our membership base is no longer large enough to take advantage of them.

Even as we make such encouraging headway in caring for our building, these observations illustrate a stark reality: We need to grow. In all honesty, there's been a measure of denial about this over time – in myself, in our leadership, in our membership. I do understand that a major reason we haven't addressed the issue of growth is because we have not (yet) heard from the Lord how he would have us respond. At the same time, there can be reasons we don't hear from the Lord other than his sense of the right timing; and I would be less than honest if I did not share with you that our need for more members, and more workers, represents by far my greatest concern for the future of this parish.

The world in 2021 is a very scary place, but for you and me it is not a world without hope. Loving broken, hurting people – especially in challenging times – has been basic to the DNA of Church of the Savior from our very beginning. Much water has gone under the bridge since the Bible study group that would become Church of the Savior first met in the Vitunics' living room in the fall of 1984; but in some respects we have come full circle. In 1984, the devastation in Ambridge was caused by the collapse of the regional economy after the steel mills closed. In 2021, the devastation is the consequence of a worldwide pandemic. The distinction in cause does not change the underlying similarity in the effects we see everyday on the streets and in people's lives around us.

People who know us, clergy and lay leaders around our Diocese, even nationwide, tell me that they see Church of the Savior as a parish with the soul of a church plant. Our reputation over the years has been that we never really get established. At our best, we have never stopped reaching out. At our best, we have never stopped looking for the next person to love and witness to of the saving power of Jesus.

And above all we don't stop loving people on the margins, because we have always known that we ourselves are no different. The "margins" where God moves are not necessarily and certainly not exclusively defined on racial, political or socio-economic terms. You don't have to be materially poor to be on the margins. We who are here, or viewing, this morning know this. Not one of us is an "insider" to the Kingdom of God; at our best we all know we are "outsiders" whom God has graciously, unexpectedly, undeservedly rescued. We are here at all because God has redeemed the

destruction we had made of our lives – visible and blatant or silent and hidden – and he has brought us together to be a people to honor and glorify him. And God is best honored and glorified when we extend his love and the message of his Kingdom to those who remain outside.

God has preserved this building. He has kept providing for it, and repeatedly; more than once in seasons where we saw no possible means of provision. He has continued to speak words of challenge and encouragement to us – even, maybe especially, during a pandemic. But it is not for the sake of a building that God has kept us here. Church of the Savior exists today, as it always has, to pursue and proclaim the Kingdom of God in Ambridge and to the nations, and especially among people on the margins. Loving people on the margins is where we have been at our best over the years; loving people on the margins is where we are needed once again in 2021 and beyond; and I suspect that loving people on the margins as we rediscover our own brokenness and need will be the helpful first step we will take if we are to grow and flourish.

Be encouraged, friends!! We face a time of great need, even unprecedented need. But we love and serve a God who is greater than the need; a God who has made us to flourish precisely in adversity when perhaps others wouldn't. Paradoxical as it may seem, at no time during my tenure as Rector have I sensed more hope for the preferred future God has for Church of the Savior than I do today. Today none of us knows what post-pandemic life will look like but we can surely know that God has a creative way forward for us in it: a creative way that of all the congregations in Ambridge, of all the congregations in in the Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh, of all the congregations in the ACNA, only Church of the Savior could do. It is for such a time as this that God has called us!

You heard Pastor Dave's sermon two Sundays ago: "This congregation has a legacy of risky love, of loving in the margins where nobody else wanted to go. And we can do it again." Yes, we can - for the sake not of a building, but of broken, hurting people who, like us, need Jesus, who with us will meet him and worship him here and then go out with us to give away the message of his Gospel and His Kingdom. We can do it again! And God being our help, and the Holy Spirit leading and empowering us, in the name of Jesus and for the sake of his Kingdom in Ambridge and to the ends of the earth – we will.