

Christ Church + Washington Parish
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
Joshua 5:9-12; Last Sunday as Rector of Christ Church
March 31, 2019

This is the day. Forty years of wandering behind them, the Israelites have arrived in the promised land. They have followed their new leader Joshua across the Jordan River just as they had once followed Moses across the Red Sea. Just inside the promised land, Joshua has them stop to do a few things. He has them build a pile of 12 stones signifying the 12 tribes of Israel and all those who they had lost in their 40 years in the desert. The people celebrated the Passover. It is only the third documented Passover up until now. The first was in Egypt, the second in their first year in the desert wilderness, and then again not until now, but it would happen every year after. Finally, Joshua has all those who were born in the wilderness - 40 years worth of men - be circumcised, 600,000 boys and men. The Scripture passage says they left a “hill of foreskins” in their wake.

What a way to mark a major transition in the life of a community. You can rest assured that we will not be doing anything of the sorts today. Now I don't want us to over relate to the Scripture narrative today. Christ Church has not arrived in the promised land, and we have not been in the wilderness. But today does mark a transition in this community's life and to varying degrees, in our individual lives. Important life transitions are marked with ritual - a wedding, a funeral, a graduation, or the departure of a rector - these events punctuate our lives, sometimes welcomed and sometimes not. The ritual honors our past and turns us to the future when things will inevitably be different. The Scripture text says that on this day in the life of the Israelites, the manna ceased. The food that sustained the Israelites in the wilderness is not what will feed them in the promised land. Starting now, they will eat the crops of the new land. After 40 years,

they are different people, quite literally, ready for this new venture, but they are still God's people and much of them is the same.

One of the questions that has come up over the past few weeks with some of you who were here ten years ago - is how much has this church changed? The question isn't about the numbers which certainly have changed, but about the character of the church. As I read the 2009 profile, I laughed because I had actually described the church similarly to someone the previous week. The church takes its work - liturgy, theology, ministry - seriously, but it has perspective on itself. People are comfortable with experimenting, but not too much. The value of history, food-focused fellowship, and community all still hold true. While I do think some things have changed, I'm not sure if they were changes or things I came to experience more deeply over my time here but were here all the time. Regardless, it is you who will explore this question - not necessarily what has changed, but what is true of who you are now, what crops in the land you are in nourish you so to speak, and what does that mean for where God is calling you.

In preparation for this sermon, I pulled out the sermon I preached on my installation on a Saturday morning in September. I'd like to think I have changed and grown a lot in nine years, but the themes of my sermon were pretty reminiscent of the general themes. The gospel - the good news of Christ - will sometimes be challenging, sometimes comforting, and sometimes confusing, but it is always something that seeks to draw us into conversation. Prayer is a significant part of that conversation, and it is core to this whole God thing we do together. We bring our gifts to this community, and they are knit together to be part of what God is doing in the world - sometimes we are aware of it, and sometimes we are not.

In that sermon, I told you not to forget this one thing, though since I haven't repeated it that much in words so you may have forgotten it even if you were there that day; that one thing is "the local church is the hope of the world." Each faith community has the potential to be a place of transformation, and Christ Church is one of them. I may not have repeated it much over the years, but the concept of that has always been in the back of mind. Most of the ministry of the church takes place in the lives you each live outside of here - in the relationships with your family, in your work, your community activities, the issues you are active on, the way you shop; the church is a place that opens space to reflect, connects your life to the greater story of faith, and cultivates your hearts and mind to hear the ways God is speaking to you. There may be only 180 of you here on Sundays but thousands of people's lives across the city are touched by you each week, and what you can do is the way the world will be transformed to be more like the one God imagined – a place of justice, mercy, and love for all people.

Christ Church has been a place for transformation. It was before I came here. It will be after I leave. But I want to share with you what I have seen while I have been here. Dozens of people found their first church home as an adult here at Christ Church; they ranged in age from 22 to 70. They found a community they could come to a deeper understanding of God and themselves in. You welcomed them here and walked with them, even when you didn't know it. Dozens of people experienced cancer, a terminal diagnosis, the loss of a loved one, struggles with fertility, job loss, depression and so much more - you shared with them the good news - that they are not alone in what they are going through and that they are more than their struggle, even when you didn't know that's what you were doing when you were making conversation at coffee hour. More than a hundred children have been found their place in the communion circle, the

welcome of the cookies and orange juice in the parish hall; they have been infused with the stories of Scripture and the weekly reminders that God is love and there will always be a place for them in that love. Knowing the stories in your family tree is one important part of helping people become more resilient. You have become more resilient in your faith by listening and sharing the stories of your faith with one another. Some did it as part of our “This I believe” small groups series, some of you were here when Serena as a seminarian interviewed congregants about their faith in life during Sunday worship, our lay preacher program has allowed it to happen in the sanctuary, and over 50 of you have participated in small groups in the last two years in which you heard the stories of life and the thread of faith that runs through it. It is easy to identify the visible transformation we have gone through - the increased membership, budget, the new organ, the parish hall; but it is the invisible transformation in each of you that are lived out in each day of your life, sometimes with your knowledge, sometimes without, and that is how Christ Church is part of the hope of the world.

This church has been a place of transformation for me. As one congregant reminded me, “you were a baby priest when you came here,” and another chimed in, “but you sure didn’t act like it.” Yeah, I’ve never lacked the ability to exude confidence. I relied on intuition and a little prayer in those early days and a congregation that gave me a lot of latitude and kept their skepticism to a low gurgle. Today I rely a lot more on prayer and a trust in you, my partners in ministry. I’ve learned to trust your participation, your constructive feedback, your perspective, and your openness that God may be up to something and may not be, so to hold things lightly. I’ve learned to live with disappointing people and being disappointed by people, knowing that’s just a part of living in community over the long haul and that God finds a way to heal those

disappointments at this altar. My comfort here has given me the room to experiment and to go deeper spiritually in so many ways, and you have journeyed with me. Over the past few weeks, I have been overwhelmed by your notes and words of the impact my ministry here has had on you. They have been touching each on their own, but as a whole, they have left me in awe of this call to ministry and humbled by what God can do when you say yes. You have met my hope of what a church could be, and it has been one of the highlights of my life to be your priest.

Next week the Rev. Canon Paula Clark will be here from the diocese to map out for you what is next. Those of you have never been through a rector search may be shocked at the length of the process; some Fortune 500 companies have shorter search processes than the Episcopal Church. What I want you to think about though is the Israelites following Joshua this morning. Imagine asking them how it possibly could have taken them 40 years to make what really amounts to an 11 day journey from Egypt to the promised land. What they just might tell you is that a lot needed to happen before they were ready. They didn't know at the time but God did. They needed to be able to go from eating manna, which was awesome in the wilderness when they were hungry, to eating the fruit of the new land, which tasted different but nourished them in so many ways. It won't take 40 years, but it'll take the time it takes; God is in the transformation business and it'll happen just as it has before. In the meantime, the local church, this place, is still the hope of the world. May God bless you as you live it.