

4th Sunday of Advent, December 21, 2008, Liturgical Year "B"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr.+ Rector

AN AMAZING TRANSFORMATION

Wow, amazing, can you believe it? How the Lord has taken us to this place? We are finally here, in our new church home. Talk about a journey. And talk about seeing the Lord's hand at work. I hope that as we end the season of Advent and enjoy the season of Christmas, you will try to take in the significance of this incredible transition, and that your faith is rekindled. Truly, to see what the Lord God has done and how He has provided for us is an awesome thing.

In many respects, this is a new beginning. And we have laid a firm foundation, haven't we? We talked about that last week – fifty-three years of proclaiming the truth and love of Jesus Christ at 1064 Brighton Road and now we continue that mission here at 2368 Eggert Road.

The eyes of the WNY community have been upon us as our situation has been written about in the papers and in the news. And certainly the eyes of the Christian community have been upon us, as well. It is truly a unique situation – to move from our old church location with over 95% of our congregation and to do it in what was once a Jewish synagogue; incredible. And to stand up for what we believe and be willing to leave our former church facilities.

WELCOME TO YOUR NEW HOME

We received this card this past week from one of our neighbors. It was a "Welcome to Your New Home" card. This is what they wrote – *"Dear St. Bart's congregation: We live across the street from the former Temple Beth El, now owned by your church. When we heard the facility was for sale, we were concerned about what would replace "the temple." We have a nice neighborhood, no one wanted to see the beautiful building torn down, and an office building, strip mall, or medical facility take its place. We're Christians, so we started praying that God would use this facility for His Glory! Praise the Lord for answered prayer. We're delighted St. Bart's will be our "new neighbor!" and we're sure God will bless our neighborhood and your congregation – in your new home. We commend you for taking a stand for truth, for believing the Bible is God's Word and that it is for all time, even if our current society wants to adjust its doctrines to reflect the culture and be more politically correct. We know God is pleased by your decision to take this stand!" Wishing You Much Happiness, Peace! Mike and Brenda Wisz.*

What an encouragement. Just the other day one of our parishioners was in a beauty salon. Her beautician is Greek Orthodox and she has been interested in what has been happening at St. Bart's and she has been praying for us. As they were talking about the new building and how we were going to have our first services, two ladies sitting nearby said enthusiastically, "Oh, you're from that church? We have been following your story and praying for you!" It turns out that one of the ladies was a Presbyterian and the other a Lutheran. So you can see how so many in the Christian community have been watching and praying for us.

A BIG THANK YOU!

But what has really been so satisfying is seeing so many of our congregation come together to do the Lord's work in transforming this place into a Christian house of worship. You know I thanked my staff last week and our wardens and vestry, but today I would like to thank those who have been here day in and day out doing the work on the ground so to speak: people like Jim Wheaton, who has overseen the whole project and Gino Forte who filled in for Jim when he was not available; or Rich Heer and brothers, Jim and Richard Hubbard, they were here day in and day out for the last six weeks. As a result of their hard work, we have new pew kneelers.

I also would like to thank Tom Bell and Jim Campbell for doing woodwork and repairs, and Tom Houston and Bob Clontz for not just overseeing the painting of our church's interior, but doing much of the painting themselves. And then there is Steve Toth who donated his painting crew to paint the halls and ceilings. As well as, Ken Johnson, who made numerous plumbing repairs. Who can forget the kitchen crew led by Kathleen Campbell? They along with David and Judy Curtis, Louis and Carolyn Callari, and Connie Prohaska made sure there was food for all the workers and volunteers. In fact, there were some days when we had over 100 people helping out, and yet everyone was fed.

Of course, this building had to be cleaned, too. The reason why it seems so clean and fresh is due to the hard work of Debbie Calabrese and Karen Heer, Elaine DiMarchi, Elaine and Chuck DiMaria and countless others. Ed Koerner spent the entire last week helping get the sanctuary ready, along with Will Ruhland who did plaster work and stained many of our wooden doors and closets. Our altar looks new because it was refinished by Carl Waley. It actually was the originally wooden altar used at our former church. Carl's wife, Jenny was instrumental in getting our computer system running and her son, Tony Driscoll, was always on hand to help out with odds and ends. Last, but not least, Rocco and Shelie Brindisi, along with Karen Zuefle, organized and kept track to all the dozens of old keys needed to the various rooms and offices in the building. Clearly, everyone mentioned above among many others made this transition a smooth one.

OUR LOVE FOR CHRIST

Now we can talk about how we did this for our community and that it reflects our love for one another, but the truth is we have done this because of our love for the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the reason for this transformation. It is through Christ that God makes all things new. On the night before He died, Jesus said, ***"This is my blood of the new covenant. Jesus said, A new commandment I give to you that you love one another as I have loved you. St. Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."*** And when St. John sees the new heavens and the earth He hears the Lord say, ***"Behold I am making all things new!" (Rev. 21:5).*** Jesus is in the making new business. And He has done it with our church!

THE CROSS

Notice the cross behind me. This beautiful work was done by our fellow member Joe Albrecht. Why are all things made new? Because of the cross. How do we know that Jesus loves us? Because of the cross. That cross represents God's love because it represents the death of His Son, it represents His sacrifice for sin, it represents the way God has made for mankind, for all people past, present, and future. And it is at the foot of the cross that we find peace and purpose.

That's why Jesus said that we are to take up the cross daily – dying to self and living for God – following Christ's example of love and mercy. That is how you will have victory over sin. It also represents Christ's victory over death. That cross is empty, isn't it? Why is it empty? Jesus is no longer on the cross, Jesus is no longer in the grave. He has risen again and when He returns He will rule over heaven and earth for all eternity.

THE SECOND CHRISTMAS – CHRIST'S RETURN

We heard about the promise the God gave to lessons reflect upon this morning. That's what we celebrate this season of Advent. That's what we look forward at Christmas – Christ's return.

Look for a moment at the readings on the back of our bulletin. Do you know what they are talking about? – the Davidic covenant: that there will be a descendant of King David whose throne will be eternal.

Now the only One who can have an eternal throne is God. The only One who has taken upon himself human flesh is God the Son. And He, my friends, is the King eternal. But before He can reign he had to die to show us the way, to show the world that the way of the cross is the way to eternal life. To show us that before He returns we need to die to self and live for God. And as we await His return, we are to make sure He is King of our lives. The simple truth is this: when we make Jesus the King of our lives, He makes all things new.

A CLOSING PRAYER

I would like to close with a card sent by one of our members that I think encapsulates why and what has happened in our midst. It is a prayer which prays – *"Dear Jesus, You said to follow and here we are before you in our new home. We just want to tell you how much we adore you; the way you lead us. Our family worked so hard to clean up this new home. We laughed and we cried as we worked to please you. It was hard to leave our old home for a new one, but we know you will guide us and love us as we worship in your temple. We thank you, we love you and we will work hard to do our best to please you. So please bless all of us this special day. Take care of us and lead us as you do best."* Love always, the Congregation of St. Bart's.

AMEN!