

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2008, Liturgical Year B

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY 14120**

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

***"A Faithful Lord, a Good Ship, and a Bright Future"***

**WHO WOULD HAVE EVER THOUGHT?**

Wow, amazing, unbelievable, who would have ever thought? These are some of the words that come to mind as we gather together this morning for the last time at the place known as 1064 Brighton Road. Yes, the building was called St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, but it was more than just a building and it was more than just a name. It represented the work God was doing in the Town of Tonawanda and in the Episcopal Diocese of WNY. And it represented a church family.

The roots had been laid during the 1920's, when then Episcopal Bishop Charles Brent had a vision for this area. At that time, what is now the northern suburbs of Buffalo, consisted mainly of woods and forest. But Bishop Brent believed, on faith, that one day a parish could prosper in that part of "the woods." So he purchased land in the name of the Diocese in what is now the corner of Brighton and Fries Roads. Then in 1955, Bishop Lauriston Scaife agreed to let two dozen members of Advent Episcopal Church in Kenmore (some of whom are here this morning) to step out in faith to plant a new mission here in the Town of Tonawanda on the same land the Diocese had bought decades earlier. It still was the countryside in those days, but many subdivisions were being built and it seemed the appropriate time to plant a church. It is why we have the stained glass windows in the narthex with the names of Bishop Brent and Bishop Scaife.

The new mission was given the name St. Bartholomew's and it grew during the next ten years. But it remained a mission, still not strong enough to be a self-sustaining parish. What St. Bartholomew's needed was a priest who would be able to take it to the next level. Bishop Scaife knew of a young priest by the name of Fr. Russell Amend originally from Queens, NY, who had done a good work at Redeemer Church in Niagara Falls. So the bishop asked him to be the new vicar in 1965. By the following year, due to Fr. Amend's leadership and guidance, St. Bartholomew's became a self-sustaining parish. And it continued to grow during the next three decades of his ministry despite the eventual decline of every single parish in the Episcopal Diocese of Western New York.

**A FAITHFUL LORD**

What was the reason for this growth? Certainly it was the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit of God has to have something to work with if God's will is to be accomplished in the life of His people. I believe it was due to three key reasons – the message that was preached, the leadership that was demonstrated, and the people who became faithful members.

My friends we stand on that foundation. The message that was preached: it is the same message that Abraham heard. It is the same message Moses and the people of Israel heeded, that the King David sought to follow, that the prophets proclaimed and that Jesus fulfilled and now calls us to proclaim. That yes, God is real, He loves us and desires to have a

personal relationship with each one of us. And to make this known He sent His one and only Son, Jesus Christ to reveal God to us, to make a way when there seemed to be no other way out of this mess we made of planet earth. And the key to receiving what God has for us is by faith. **Genesis 15:6** reminds us that ***“Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”*** In **Mark 10:13**, Jesus said, ***“Unless you have receive the kingdom of God like a little child, you will not enter it.”*** And St. Paul tells us in **Eph. 2:8-9**: ***“By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God that no one should boast.”***

This message is one grounded in the word of God - the word of truth - the word of Christ, Himself. It is a message is to be shared with everyone and it is a message that is to be lived out. We gather every Sunday not only to worship the King of kings and Lord of lords but to be reminded what the Lord requires of us. There are standards to live by, there are laws to keep, even though we walk by grace and by faith.

The leadership here still adheres to such a message. And it is why so many have come. It is why so many lives have been changed. But leadership also means standing up for what is right. Leadership means not compromising the core principles of our faith. Leadership means remaining faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ and His word.

So when the Church that we sought to serve and represent, the Episcopal Church, turned its back on the Word of God and on the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we had a decision to make. What were we to do? We prayed. We were patient. We met with those who shared our same concerns and we met and prayed with those with whom we disagreed. But when it was clear that the Episcopal Church was not going to change course, we had to make a decision. We had to make a choice. And that choice was to walk away. ***“To shake the dust off our feet and to move on.”***

And the Lord God has honored that decision in so many ways. You see the Lord we serve is a faithful God. If you stand for Him He is going to make a way. And He has done just that. He has moved in our hearts, He has unified us, and He has shown us the way out. He has provided us a new place and He has provided a new Anglican province for worship and ministry.

## **A GOOD SHIP**

Now as we look back at the last 53 years, we can be thankful for the good ship God has given us here at 1064 Brighton. We surely remember all the wonderful things He has done in our midst on this . We remember the baptisms and confirmations, the weddings and funerals, the outreaches and special events, the bible studies and the church school classes, Good Friday and Tenebrae services, Christmas and Easter services. These are good memories, they are godly memories and we hold on to them.

But the truth is while God has given us a good ship, we don't gather together because of the ship. We gather together because of who God is and what He has called us to do. And God has called us to be the light of the world and salt of the earth. And in order to be that salt and light, sometimes God calls us out of our comfort zone and He calls us to do something different, and not just something different but something more. We made the

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decision to move, and God showed us the way, and now we must follow the way God has shown us.

You see while we have been blessed these last 53 years, the Bible also teaches, **“to much is given much is required.”** God has called us out of this present building to go and get on another ship. It’s the same crew with the same members, but it is a different ship. And this ship is a bigger and stronger ship, and I believe a more effective one from which to do ministry. It will position us to do much good, to build God’s Kingdom, and it will have a new name. It will still be St. Bartholomew’s but it will now be St. Bartholomew’s Anglican Church. And it will enable us to be the light and salt of the earth unlike we have in the past.

Yes, it is crystal clear it is where the Lord God wants us to be. How else do you explain how a Jewish Synagogue comes up for sale the same year we decide to leave, a place that is less than a mile away and provides all that we need and more? How else do you explain that we were able to purchase it for only 65% of its asking price? And that God has enabled us to turn it into a Christian house of worship in less than two months! My friends, God is doing something new in our midst and in our church family.

### **A BRIGHT FUTURE**

And so as we come to the end of a chapter here at 1064 Brighton, yes, there is still sadness. Like the close of any chapter in life, we have somber hearts. But with that sadness there is also the joy of a bright future. Just ask anyone who graduates from high school or college. They have fond memories and have to say their good-byes but they know they must move on to a new chapter in life, and hopefully a better one.

My brothers and sisters of St. Bartholomew’s, we have a bright future because of the One whom we serve. He is faithful, and He will continue to provide and show us the way as we remain faithful to Him. And let me just say that it is because of your faithfulness, because of your willingness to follow the vision God has given your leadership, your willingness to stand up for what is right, your willingness to give of your time and resources, that we are able to do what we are doing. And I want to thank everyone here for staying the course, for being patient, for not giving up. I want to thank my colleagues in ministry – Fr. Commins, Fr. Molison, Deacons Ed and John, the rest of my staff, our wardens and vestry, and all of you - the members of my church family. Truly, it makes it all worthwhile. And it is a privilege to be with you on this journey. Amazingly, we are one of the only Episcopal Churches in the country that is leaving with more than 95% of its membership, and moving into a building we can call our own, that is less than a mile away.

For those who may be staying, may our Lord bless you on your journey. You certainly are welcome to visit or join us at 2368 Eggert Road at any time. Do know, however, that while those of us who are leaving will still be known as St. Bartholomew’s, this present church will not. The Diocese has decided to call what was once St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church, *the Episcopal Church of the Holy Apostles*. I believe it is fitting that this place be given another name. For I believe there is only one true St. Bartholomew’s in Western New York, and we will continue its legacy.

## **TWO LETTERS**

I close with two letters. The first is from St. Amelia's Roman Catholic Church and its pastor, the Rev. Msgr. Thomas Maloney. In his letter he writes *"Dear Father Ward: I want to let you know that you and your parishioners are in the thoughts and prayers of the members of St. Amelia Parish as you step out in faith to begin a new chapter in your parochial life. Please know that we understand and support your commitment to remain faithful to the mind of Jesus Christ. May your congregation be blessed with abundant life in the Spirit at your new location."*

The second is from the Archbishop Gregory Venables, Primate of the Province of the Southern Cone. His letter welcomes us into his diocese, the Diocese of Argentina and provides the canonical license for our clergy to engage in Christian ministry. The Diocese of Argentina will be our temporary ecclesial home until we transition into the new Anglican Province of North America later during the coming year. The new North American Anglican Province will bring together hundreds of Anglican and former Episcopal churches into one body of Anglican believers that are Christ centered and Bible believing.

I will be signing this letter today to be under the authority of Archbishop Venables as will my ordained colleagues, and as we sign it, we know that by doing so we have remained faithful to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to God's Holy Word, and to our consciences. And so as I end the last sermon I will ever give in this place we once called St. Bartholomew's, all I can say is *"Thank you, Lord, for you are faithful. Thank you, Lord, for the good ship you have provided, both this one and the one we move on to, and thank you Lord, for the promise of a bright future."* In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!