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St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Owings Mills MD
January 1, 2023

The Feast of the Holy Name
Numbers 6:22-27
Psalm 8
Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 2:15-21

"All In"

Happy New Year!

And Merry Christmas!

Thanks to the hard work of lots of dedicated people, and despite bitterly cold temperatures and power outages – man, it was so cold – we had a wonderfully joyful Christmas Eve and Christmas Day here at St. Thomas'.

Christmas was great but, like a lot of us, I bet, I appreciate the slower and quieter days after the holiday, when there might be a little time to catch our breath and maybe even some moments of reflection as an old year draws to a close and a new year is about to begin.

So, after the Christmas excitement of last weekend quieted down, and after warming temperatures finally thawed us out, I spent some time looking back at what God has been up to here at St. Thomas' during the past year.

As I reflected on our busy year of renewal, I couldn't help but think of the name we gave to our stewardship campaign: "More than Enough."

That name riffs on one of Jesus' greatest miracles: the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Despite the uncertainty and even doubt of the disciples – they're convinced that there is nowhere near enough bread and fish to feed the large crowd

of people – despite a real sense of scarcity – Jesus’ friends and all those hungry people who had gathered in the field that day learned that when Jesus is around there is abundance – there are leftovers - there is more than enough.

So, looking back on last year, I think about how so many people have returned to our church after being away for one reason or another, and how newcomers have continued to walk through our doors, with some of them getting involved practically from the start.

I think about the rehabilitation of our churchyard and the unveiling of our fabulous new website, and how our amazing preschool is pretty much at capacity.

I think about the Pentecost Picnic and all those Thanksgiving bags and the return of the Christmas Extravaganza.

I think about our bold step of welcoming our new friends from Afghanistan, and all the many ways that our parishioners have given of themselves to Hizbullah and Abdul: driving lessons, resume editing, navigating government bureaucracy, dinner invitations and fun times at the driving range and the bowling alley.

I think about the ongoing renewal of our programs for children and youth: Sunday School classes in our beautiful new classroom, and the truly remarkable rebirth of our youth acolyte program, led by the patient and generous John Lang. There have been some services where we’ve had so many acolytes that we needed overflow seating!

I mean, who would have thought it, right?

I think of the Christmas wreath sale – especially so many wreaths placed on the graves of people no longer remembered by anyone alive – and Roz’ Christmas quilt fundraiser, and on and on.

And, yes, I think of our stewardship campaign – giving thanks for the people who give generously year after year, the people who haven’t pledged for a while but are now back, and the new people who have said, yes, we want to support our new spiritual home.

When Jesus is around there is abundance – there is more than enough.

So, I really like the theme “More Than Enough,” but, actually, it’s not my all-time favorite stewardship slogan.

That would be the one that we used a few years ago at my parish in Jersey City, when we aimed for everyone to get involved, hoped for everyone make a pledge, when we insisted that in our church there should be no bystanders. We called that campaign:

“All In.”

I like that one best because going “all in” is God’s way.

God loves us so much that God goes “all in” with and for us.

Christmas is about God going “all in.”

Our whole faith is about God going “all in.”

You know, in the early church, there were lots of heated debates about the nature – or natures – of Jesus. Some thought that Jesus was really, really, holy – even the holiest person who ever lived – but not quite God. And others thought that Jesus just *seemed* to be human. That he was, in fact, all God.

But, in the end, the church held fast to the most challenging and, frankly, hardest to believe, position: that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, like us in every way except sin.

So, Christmas is the story of God going “all in” with us, coming among us as a completely helpless child, born to a couple of “nobodies” in the humblest circumstances, a child dependent on other people for absolutely everything, a child who no doubt could be frustrated and cranky and who needed lots of sleep, a child who, like all other Jewish boys, will be circumcised on the eighth day, a child who will be named like we are all named.

The story of Christmas – and the entire life and death of Jesus – is the story of God going “all in” with and for us – holding nothing back – hunted from the start by Herod and the other powers that be who will eventually catch him and kill him.

In and through Jesus, God goes “all in” to the cross and the tomb and, finally, to that first shockingly joyous Easter morning.

And so, as Paul wrote long ago to the church in Philippi, probably quoting an even earlier Christian hymn:

“...at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

And what does our “all in” God ask of us in return?

That we go “all in” with and for God.

That we go “all in” with and for God’s people.

And, when I look back at the past year at St. Thomas', that's exactly what I see happening all the time, all over the place.

We are living out those baptismal promises that I talked about all year.

More and more of us are going "all in" – sharing and studying and stretching and serving – and, most of all, loving – loving the people we've known for years, loving the people we only just met, loving people we'll never know and who will never be able to thank us for our love, and loving two young guys from far away who turned to us for safety and a new start.

So, my new year's prayer is a prayer of gratitude.

Thank you, God, for the loving and generous people of St. Thomas' Church.

Thank you for giving us "more than enough."

Thank you for going "all in" with and for us, for coming among us in and through Jesus, in whose holy name we pray. Amen.

And, P.S., during the year ahead, help us to go "all in."

Happy New Year!