

*1 Samuel 3: 1 - 10*

*Psalms 139: 1 - 6, 13 - 18*

Year B, Second Sunday after the Epiphany

*1 Corinthians 6: 12 - 20*

*John 1: 43 - 51*

January 18, 2009

### *Expectations*

I should begin this morning by clearly stating that this homily will also function as the State of the Parish address. Originally, I was going to give this address last Sunday. Considering our budget issues and the pending vote on our parish bylaws, I was not sure there would be enough time to adequately answer all of those questions and present a vision for the parish for 2009. From what I have heard of last week's meeting, I was right on at least that point.

St. Elisabeth's has had an interesting year. We have accomplished a great deal but almost none of the things we have done will get reported in the paper or announced to the diocese. In fact, a great number of the things your Vestry, Staff, and Rector have worked on and accomplished relate directly to the parish. We have certainly been involved in all manner of events outside these walls but so very much of what we have achieved deal intimately with the life and work of this place. There is nothing wrong with this, but I would not have thought of 2008 as a year of inward focus at last year's parish address. In fact, I am drawn to the words from today's psalm when I think of this past year. "For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb." Now, I willingly confess that this psalm has an added power for Jessie and me this year. Experiencing first-hand the miracles of pregnancy, I am moved deeply by the psalmist, "I will thank you because I am marvelously made; your works are wonderful, and I know it well. My body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb; all of them

were written in your book; they were fashioned day by day, when as yet there was none of them.” These poetic, profound words portray a God intimately caught up in our lives from the very beginning. While there are some external signs of pregnancy, the deepest and most profound transformations begin in away from human eyes. In the words of science, cells divide, a zygote develops into an embryo, and a billion different functions are directed by DNA and RNA. In the words of our faith, God knits us together, moment by moment in ways that we will never fully comprehend in this life. I greatly prefer the latter. I also think this past year has been one of pregnancy for this parish.

Think of the internal, important moments that have marked this past year, we have bought and rebuilt the computer system for the church; we have redesigned the church website; with help from Chancellor Brad Foster, we have completely over-hauled the bylaws of this community; we have hired a brilliant, gifted Director of Children and Family Ministries in Jennifer Smith; we have cleaned out and organized the storage unit; we have attempted to clean-out and organize the collected detritus in this building; we have renewed the process of educating all of our volunteers with youth according to the Diocesan policies on Sexual Misconduct; we have worked to revise and update the church bulletins and newsletter; we have tweaked the membership of the building committee and set them about the task of finding architects; and we have worked over and over again to include the parish in each and every one of these changes. Many of these events are incredibly un-exciting. Some of them might interest some of you but no one is fascinated by them all. However, each and every smaller, incremental change is needed to reach our larger goals. Let me tell you, keeping up with a growing and thriving parish is pretty hard when your computer shuts down every time you open up two different documents or no one can find the basic items in the storage unit like toilet

paper and cups. These events are things that take time, nurture, and work all in relative anonymity. In many ways, these items are just as un-seen and unknown as all that happens in the womb.

At the same time, we have moments and external events that demonstrate that do much more is happening in the life of a community gathered. We bought 40 acres adjacent to St. Columba, beginning an exciting conversation both for us and for the larger diocese about how to grow, flourish and nurture Christians. We continued to present ourselves to the Bartlett community in the Bartlett Festival and winning third place in the Bartlett Christmas Parade. We continue to work with the good people of St. Paul's. In our ministry and work, we continue to welcome newcomers to our space and life together. Our numbers increased pretty dramatically for the second year in a row. Last year, we jumped from an ASA (average Sunday attendance) of 130 to 145. We have revived our Vacation Bible School, strengthened our Sunday School programs, and even strengthened our EpiscoPals ministry. All of these things point to life and excitement bubbling up and over.

For me, 2008 was a year of pregnancy. A great deal of excitement and expectation mixed with some encouraging signs of life with so very much more to come. Things are moving and changing quickly, moving from strength to strength.

Much of my time in the last year and a half has been spent in the role of supportive and loving friend. My sermons have very intentionally focused on the grace that God pours out abundantly upon us. When I arrived, I saw a loving community that was worried and scared but full of life and hope. My job has been to nurture and support and encourage that community at every turn- and I have loved doing it. As a result, my sermons have focused over and over again on God's grace. I have sought to preach that God loves this

community, this people, this church, whether we always get it right or not. However, my role is gradually changing. I will always be one who encourages and supports and loves this place. However, we must begin a time of preparation. With any pregnancy, there comes a time of work and effort. For this community to bring forth the vision of God's kingdom that we hold, we must begin to dedicate ourselves to working for it. We are called to do so very much more than sit and enjoy God's grace. We must share it, teach it, and proclaim it. God's grace will not cease at any point on the way. We must begin the more difficult task of actively living into God's call to us.

In November, I preached at the Feast of Saint Elisabeth that I see this parish as one who welcomes the God-bearer, completely and radically. I see this year ahead as one of great expectations. As we move from a year marked by pregnancy, I pray that we will see 2009 as a year of new life, of birth, of expectation for the things we are about and hope to do. Therefore, I have three clear and basic goals for 2009 that I want this parish to dedicate itself to achieving in the 12 months ahead.

First of all, I want us to grow by 10-15 new members. Let me be clear about this goal. While we have grown in average Sunday attendance by 15 people in 2008, we have only broken even on the number of pledging units. Some of this could be accounted for by the economy and family transitions. However, I think it speaks a greater truth that I have heard from many newcomers in our midst. We do a magnificent job of welcoming people on their first few Sundays. We do not do a very good job of pulling people into the full-life of the parish very well. In other words, we tend to say, "Welcome to St. Elisabeth's! Now, find your own way around." We must rededicate ourselves to welcoming people on that first Sunday and then inviting them into our committees, our programs, our lives.

Our second goal is to create a building design for our new land that reflects this parish, from the external design to its internal functions. Now, this goal may sound tied to a specific committee and out of our hands. I would argue that some of the errors in our past designs are a result of this attitude from the parish. The Building Committee has been very clear about its desire to create a building that reflects this parish, in every shape, form and quirk. The committee can only succeed if each of you is willing to participate in each step of the process. We want you to be involved. We want you to take ownership of this new space. We want your heart and soul to be invested in the work of architect and committee. We will be asking for feedback and information. We can only be successful if everyone is clear about what we want, what we hope for, what we love about this place and how we want all of it set in concrete, brick and steel.

My third goal for this next year is to involve this parish in outreach. My brothers and sisters, we cannot claim to be a faithful part of the body of Christ and have no hands-on outreach. I have no requirements and expectations of what we do or how we do it. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the Bible speaks more about God's love for the poor, hurt, down-trodden, widows and orphans than anything or anyone else. Jesus calls us again and again to be about the work of caring for the least in our community. Thus far, St. Elisabeth's, as a parish, has ignored those words. We spent nothing on outreach last year. We spent only a handful of dollars the year before to assist St. Paul's. If we want to be a church, if we hope to be a place that welcomes the God-bearer, if we hope to be faithful followers of Jesus, then we must begin a serious outreach program. Please, help me find a ministry or work that we can do as a parish.

These three goals do not sum up all I want in 2009. I believe the year ahead is one of great expectations. I think we can achieve wonderful things together. Let's work together to bring 10-15 new members into the heart of this parish; let's pray, listen and involve ourselves in creating a design for our new church home; and let's reach out to those whom God loves and build an outreach program. 2009 can be a time of enormous numerical and spiritual growth. I believe together we can share these great expectations. Amen.