

Sermon for 4 Epiphany A—Foolishness!  
St John's, Gloucester  
1-29-23, Annual Meeting  
M Lise Hildebrandt

Here we are on Annual Meeting day! What a year it has been! I want you to know just how amazing you all are. There was 2020, which turned everything on its head with the COVID pandemic. And then there was 2021, when your rector left on top of COVID. And far from being quiet and boring, there was EVEN MORE MAJOR CHANGE in St. John's in 2022. Some of it, like the retirement of music director Mark Nelson, was a surprise and not very welcome. Some of it, like choosing the Priest-in-Charge route and forming a Visioning Team and joining the BTS Center's "Fostering Imagination" program, you voluntarily chose. And you rose to the challenge. You not only made it through a rather wild ride of a year, you have done some really hard, faithful and fruitful work.

I want you to take a moment and breathe in how astonishing and wonderful this all is—how this community is. Not in a boasting full-of-yourself way, but a wondering, grateful, appreciative way. It was not easy; it was not without some blood, sweat and tears. But we're in a good place, on the brink of some exciting movement forward. God has been present, every step of the way, and God's Holy Spirit has been active in stirring you up to some divine foolishness.

What I mean is: you haven't followed the easy path or the expected route. Look at you—most of you are in your 60's, 70's, 80's, even 90's. Conventional wisdom says--this is the time in life that you rest, you put your feet up, you only worry about your comfort and your health. You sit on your laurels and let other people take over. Or, if there aren't other people to take over, you just shrug and let things collapse. This is what the vestry and search committee wrestled with in April—what is next for this church? Keep going in hospice mode until the end, until the last person left shuts the door? That is a reasonable, even rational option. And I am grateful to the one person who said, "I don't have the energy to do something else; seems like the best option to me." That is honest! It's important to be in touch with our own energy and spiritual needs. But person after person came up with a foolish reaction: "We're not dead yet! We want to try to reconfigure and do something new!"

And you engaged in other foolishness. The vestry wrestled with the question of—IF we want to redevelop and we want a priest to accompany us in this exploration, would it make sense to search for a full-time priest, even knowing that isn't not "reasonable" in terms of our budget? And the answer that surfaced was, "Let's go all in. Let's invest in St. John's future . . . because if we don't, we will die."

At the same time, we felt that we needed a dedicated team to look into new areas of connection and ministry for St. John's, so we developed a Visioning Team. Specifically to explore new ways to be church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And we learned about the BTS Center program with about 1 week to make our application—the Holy Spirit was certainly at work there! And we were accepted into the program, and were able to walk with 5 other small churches through a process of experimentation, imagination, creativity. Foolishness, really. That resulted in the Beach picnic and evening worship. And what if Sunday. And re-opening

the church doors during the week. Little experiments that have had a big effect. We can do new things! We can be successful. We can risk failure and still survive, even thrive.

The Thrift Shop and Regal Rummage have been experimenting with hiring a part-time staff person. There have been some bumps along the way, but they now have Michele Del Vecchio as a thrift store assistant, and she is doing a wonderful job. But it's still an experiment, to see if investing in her time makes sense in terms of the income and reach into the community from the Thrift Shop and Rummage. Last Spring, St. John's also held a successful food drive for the Open Door.

We weren't sure as a community that we could survive the leaving of Mark Nelson, who not only directed the choir and played the organ, but also did the bulletins, was on flower guild, serviced the organ, and a ton of other things here. So some crazy new things emerged—I asked for help picking the hymns and asking for input on worship. The choir self-organized, providing anthems and leading psalms before Joe started as music director. The flower guild has gotten creative—I loved having the crèche under the altar at Christmas! Instead of doing an Advent Lessons and Carols service—too soon after Joe arrived—we collaborated on a service of grief and hope with St. Paul Lutheran Church, which included songs, a music video, visuals, and rituals with candles and rocks. A beautiful piece of foolishness! And two people—Sarah and Rick—worked with Joe to put together and lead our Epiphany service. Wonderful!

Often the change or challenge is unwanted, but that's life. Marge, Ellen and I became involved in supporting an unhoused man in his quest for housing. This was a long and often frustrating process, and there was some concern from the congregation about him being here. It certainly is not what any of us had skills in. But here we are. Ben moved into his apartment, with help from Sue Lupo, this weekend. There is now one fewer unhoused person in Gloucester.

What I am saying is, faced with change and challenges in the church, you have not been sitting back in resignation. You have not been reading the indicators and saying, "Well, it's been a nice run at St. John's, but now it is over," a completely reasonable conclusion. NO. You have been drawing on some kind of mysterious godly wisdom that says, "Go for it! Step up! Try new things! Be a little audacious, even some foolish!" And you have stepped up in surprising ways. Because the way of God is not the well-worn path or the easy out. But it is richly rewarding.

In the Gospel, we heard Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, also called the "Beatitudes," since each phrase starts with "Blessed are the." The word "blessèd" or "blessed" means "fortunate." In our world, we consider the fortunate ones the rich, the powerful, the famous, the successful, those who don't have a care in the world. Jesus says that in God's world, the fortunate are those who spiritual famished, those who are grieving; the fortunate are the humble, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who desire justice, those who are persecuted in doing right. I would say that God's world is about the exact opposite of the world we live in day-to-day and looks and seem like terrible foolishness. The reason God's Fortunate Ones are so foolish-looking is because they do not rely on their own power, but look to God to supply everything they need.

And that would be utter foolishness, utter folly, except that over and over again we can affirm, God is present; God guides us; God supplies what we need, even when WE don't know what that is.

I do not know what 2023 will bring, except certainly this: it will bring more change! You will likely be calling a new priest here, maybe rather soon. I will likely be leaving you, maybe rather soon. There will be other things that we haven't anticipated. Yes, more change.

And now, I want you to stop again for a moment and take a deep breath. Or three. Breathe in; change is coming; breathe out; it will be OK. Change is coming; it will be OK, maybe even wonderful. Change is coming; God is with us.

You are wonderful. You are St. John's. You are merciful, humble, hunger after justice; many of you are grieving, many hungry for God. You are creative, caring, thoughtful, passionate. Whatever is coming down the pike, whatever God is calling you to do, you can do it! IF you rely on God, if you aren't afraid to keep engaging in divine foolishness, if you are able to risk failing, risk creating, risk collaborating and risk joy!

I will end with the prayer from Neil Paynter's book Going Home Another Way, which I quoted to close my annual report:

God, older than we can imagine, yet ever new;  
God, whose Spirit is the heartbeat of a changing creation,  
help us to face change.  
To make transitions without fear,  
having confidence that you journey with us.  
Give us the courage to build community wherever we are,  
valuing the vision and wisdom of whomever we encounter.  
Open us to hear you speaking  
through unexpected people  
in unexpected places  
at unexpected times,  
even those we have written off.  
And enable us to embrace the unknown with joy,  
seeing the possibilities of your bright New World.

Amen.