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Newsletter March 2016

From Bulb to Brightness: Wait, Germinate, and Grow this Lent

Right now, as cold and snow grip our world, plant growers are prepping lily, hyacinth, daffodil, and tulip bulbs for planting for Easter. Thanks to their hard work and expert timing, our altar should feature a few dozen stunning lilies when we gather to celebrate the Sunday of the Resurrection on March 27. However, I do remember the year that an unexpected cold stretch resulted in tightly budded tulips in our Easter array-- tulips that looked great by Easter 3. And another year, the baby daffodils for the children were way past their prime by Easter morning. But still, as I try to keep myself warm in single digit temperatures, I dream of new life bursting from bulb to brightness as Easter comes.

My first year at St. Stephen's, I gave a narcissus bulb in a baggy to everyone who came to worship on Ash Wednesday. The bulb included a sheet explaining that, although the bulb appeared dried up and dead, it really would grow if placed in a bowl with small stones and water. While I fear that many of the bulbs ended up in the garbage, my hope and prayer was that they would be in fragrant bloom for Easter.

Like the bulbs, we wait, and germinate, and grow in darkness during Lent. The forty days of Lent invite us to go deep with God. Lent is a quiet season in the life of the church. We give up the organ and our rowdie Alleluias. We turn from brass to wood and cover our crosses. Rich purple hangings enfold us.

We give up and we take on practices designed to draw us closer to God. We pray; we read; we serve; we sing. Every week our calendar overflows with options for living a holy Lent. From Sabbath Sundays, to weekly Church School, to Sunday Lunch & Learns, to Tuesday with the Monks, to Wednesday Soup & Study, to Thursday Healing Eucharist, to Tea & Talk about Faith, to Friday Stations of the Cross, to Saturday Choir practice, to joining ECCO's work for racial justice & immigrant rights, to serving at My Brother's Table on Easter, to visiting a homebound member, to filling quarter cards & offering boxes for Episcopal Relief and Development... the possibilities tumble off the page.

The question is not how can I do it all but how is God inviting me more deeply into relationship? Quiet your mind and open your heart; listen for God. Where and how is God speaking to you? What will you do this Lent to prepare yourself for Easter and the new life God imagines for you?

God wants and needs each one of us to blossom into a fragrant flower but growth takes time and space. Sometimes we may feel that we are too dried up and tattered to bring forth new life. We may think that no amount of nurturing will coax growth from us. Or we may just be so busy that we don't even try to root and grow something new. Just as our Easter flowers will need this month to become ready to decorate our altar on March 27th so each of us will need this month to open ourselves to God's transforming love. Wait, germinate, and grow this Lent that you might spring forth in glorious flower.

Jane⁺

Dear Friends,

We began our Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday with an invitation from the clergy: *"I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent"* (BCP 265). The key word in this sentence is "invite." Lent is an invitation to go on a journey, to explore how God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are active in our lives and how that knowledge will lead us to a new way of living. It's an invitation because God's gift of free will gives us the choice, God can't force us. So Lent, is an invitation that we can accept or refuse.

Despite our response to the invitation, our church calendar keeps pace with time so that Lent continues with the cycle of months and years. Yes we can refuse to observe Lent but there is a cost. When we say no to Lent, to a time of coming closer to God, we say no to the natural longing for the divine. We try to deny that we need God in our lives and instead place our faith in materials, relationships, and abusive ideologies.

The climax of Lent is the *Triduum* of Holy Week: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Each day tells a distinct part of the pre-Easter story. On Maundy Thursday we re-enact Jesus washing his disciples' feet and then sharing the Last Supper of bread and wine. At the end of the service the altar is ceremonially stripped. On Good Friday, with the church bare, we offer solemn prayers for the church and the world in remembrance of the Crucifixion. Communion is given from bread and wine that was blessed the previous day. Lastly, on Holy Saturday, the day Jesus was in the tomb, we gather for prayer as we await the Easter Vigil that evening. This is the holiest time of the year.

Yet the services for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Holy Saturday are often the least attended. This is true for many reasons from schedule conflicts to lack of interest but I think the underlying reason is that we are afraid to accept the invitation. This second invitation of Lent is to face our own pain, both past and present, as we live through the events leading up to Easter. It's an invitation to walk with Jesus from the upper room to the cross and finally to the grave.

This is not an easy invitation to accept. It means looking, poking even prodding at those places where we feel pain, where the world feels pain. For some the pain is too large or scary to face. Not many of us are willing or able to do this so we decline the invitation. Again, there's a cost. By declining this invitation we deny that God sees and knows our pain. We choose to believe that we suffer alone which only increases our suffering.

The wisdom of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday is that God can't be separated from our pain and suffering. God walked with Jesus on his path to the cross just as God walks with us on our paths. And so I re-invite you to observe a holy Lent through prayer, fasting almsgiving and most of all to saying yes to God's invitation to Holy Week.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah". The script is cursive and fluid, with a long, sweeping tail on the letter 'h'.

A View from Beyond the Pew

As I looked at the 2016 budget I realized how much people care about St. Stephens and what happens here. Your pledges established a beginning to build the budget. Our stewardship for the building and programs is very evident.

Over the last few years another form of stewardship –caring for St. Stephens came forward. Yvonne Wing left in her estate a large amount of money to be given to St Stephens. This money was put into the restoration fund for the Altar area and the present work on the cupola area.

As administrator of the Isabella Clark estate I followed Bella's wishes and divided the estate giving a portion to St. Stephens's church. This money will be used to help refurbish the kitchen downstairs.

Recently Jane received a call from a member of a St. Stephens family who wanted to finance a project at St Stephens that would be a legacy for her father. Sending her two options that might be her father's legacy she chose to restore the two clerestory windows in the chancel and the eight small windows in back of the altar. The windows will be restored by Serpentino the company that restored the St. Stephens window.

Many give and have given as shown in our endowment funds. Some of these funds were given for a particular purpose others are not restricted.

There are many ways people give financial support to the church and other way is to include St Stephens in your estate.

The church is fortunate that you and others continue to nurture and strengthen its life.



Senior Warden

BEING GOOD STEWARDS OF RESOURCES

ANNUAL MEETING DRAWS A CROWD. With no Super Bowl to distract us, we packed the dining room on February 7 for the 172nd Annual Meeting. Mission presentations included Dorothy Post reflecting on the congregation's role in supporting candidates for Holy Orders, Dr. Caroline Kamau celebrating the ministry of our Kiswahili congregation, Neil O'Donnell talking about the importance of our 12 Step ministries, and Paulina Villarroel Cruz presenting the work of the Oasis Film Institute. Treasurer Heather Collis Puro encouraged people to read her reports and thanked the volunteers whose dedicated service keeps the Treasurer's Office afloat. She pointed out that we finished 2015 with a minimal surplus despite significant snow-related overages. She praised the Vestry for its budget oversight, thanked members of the extended St. Stephen's family who made special gifts, and encouraged the congregation to continue to strive for full pledge payment. Highlights of the 2016 budget include provision for 3% raises for the staff, sufficient funding for a "bad" winter, full support of the Diocesan assessment, and lower repair/maintenance due to on-going capital repair/ restoration projects and lower fuel due to lower costs. Election results: Sr. Warden Virginia Fuller, Jr. Warden Irene Axelrod, Treasurer Heather Collis Puro, and Clerk Carolyn Hoy. Vestry 3 year: Martin Kimita, J. Timothy Potter, and Robert Whitney. Diocesan Convention delegates: Pam Alleyne & Beth Graham, and alternate Joyce Wallace. Deanery Representatives: Pam Alleyne, Robert Dixon, Beth Graham, Helen Patmon, and Joyce Wallace with Chris Trahan as alternate. We thanked outgoing Vestry members Bob Dixon, Conrad Squires, and Joyce Wallace.

VESTRY SUMMARY. February 11, the new Vestry gathered for relationship building and orientation. After a potluck, small group conversations, and Bible Study on gifts for leadership, the Officers of the Vestry highlighted the responsibilities of Vestry members: spiritual leaders of the congregation, guardians of the mission of the organization, active participants in and supporters of the congregation, financial and physical oversight. The Vestry then discussed "community norms" and expectations.

NURTURING THE CONGREGATION

LUNCH AND LEARN ON SUNDAY, MARCH 13 IN PREPARATION FOR HOLY WEEK. In March the *Lunch and Learn* session will center on the stories and rituals of Holy Week which begins on Palm Sunday and ends at the Easter Vigil. All children, youth and adults are invited to lunch in the Graham Suite following the 10am service. After lunch children and youth will create Holy Week Passports while adults will explore different methods of participating in Holy Week. The two groups will join together for reflections and closing prayers. Come for lunch or come to learn or even better come for both!

LOOKING FOR A FEW MORE MEDITATIONS. Many have already written a reflection for our daily Lenten Meditations series but we still have a few of the forty days unclaimed. The clergy and other eager editors will encourage, collect, edit, scribe... whatever it takes to encourage you to offer a short meditation that describes what it means for you to walk with Jesus.

LENTEN TUESDAYS WITH THE MONKS. Every Tuesday in Lent, we will join the SSJE Brothers for worship and supper at the Monastery in Cambridge. Sign up is required but everyone is encouraged to join us. Cars leave St. Stephen's at 4:15 and return about 8:00.

WEDNESDAY EVENING LENTEN SOUP & STUDY. Join Bible Study: The Seven Last Words from the Cross, or Walking with Jesus. Every Wednesday in March, get to know your pew mates over homemade soup and salad served at 6:00pm. At 6:45, we will offer two study options. **Bible Study** is reading Jesus' utterances from the cross and contemplating their meaning for us. **Walking with Jesus** invites participants to reflect on how Episcopalians understand the importance of scripture, sacraments, worship, creeds, prayer, service, and community as we live as Christians. All adults and young people curious about Confirmation or Reception in the Episcopal Church should come Walk with Jesus on Wednesdays this Lent.

THURSDAY TEA AND TALK. A lively group gathers for Tea & Talk about Faith every Thursday after the Noon Healing Service. During Lent, our conversation starters are Kate Moorehead's meditations in [Organic God](#).

NEW THIS LENT: FRIDAY STATIONS OF THE CROSS. Every Friday at 1:00, Patrick Lafortune and Amy Inez are leading Stations of the Cross. Stations of the Cross is an offering of prayer focused on places in the city of Jerusalem traditionally associated with our Lord's passion and death. Please consider taking some time out of your busy day to join us in these powerful meditations.

PASTORAL CARE & HEALING PRAYER TEAMS GATHER MARCH 3. The PCT & HPT will meet on Thursday, March 3 for check in and discussion of chapters 9&10 of [Lay Pastoral Care Giving](#).

BELOVED COMMUNITY TEAM ORGANIZING COMMUNITY FORUM. Our St. Stephen's Beloved Community Team is working with St. Andrew's Marblehead to organize a community forum for building relationships across dividing lines of race and class. If God is nudging you to get involved and help build community in our fractured world, here's your chance. **Join us on Thursdays, March 3 and 17 at 6:30 for conversation and planning.**

HOLY WEEK MARCH 20-27

Sunday, March 20—Palm Sunday

8:00 & 10:00 Procession with Palms, Reading of the Passion, & Eucharist

Tuesday, March 22—Tuesday in Holy Week

10:00 Reaffirmation of Ordination Vows & Blessing of Oils at the Cathedral

2:30 Holy Communion at St. Stephen's Towers

Wednesday, March 23—Wednesday in Holy Week

7:45 Eucharist in the Chapel

Thursday, March 24—Maundy Thursday

Noon Commemoration of the Last Supper

7:00 Commemoration of the Last Supper and Foot Washing

Until 11:00 Silent Vigil in darkened church

Friday, March 25—Good Friday

Noon-3:00 Last Words at Washington Street Baptist

7:00 Solemn Collects, Veneration of the Cross, & Communion from Reserve Sacrament

Saturday, March 26—Holy Saturday/ Easter Eve

9:00 Prayers for Holy Saturday in the Chapel

7:00 Lighting the First Fire of Easter with St. Mary's on the Lynn Common

7:30 Easter Vigil with Story of Salvation History, Baptism, & Communion

Sunday, March 27—Easter

8:00 & 10:00 Festival Holy Communion with Choir

DIOCESAN LEARNING EVENT ON MARCH 5. Join the Diocese on Saturday, March 5 from 9:00 to 4:00 for "Real Church/ Real Mission: Holy Practices for Vibrant Churches" with Rev. Molly Phinney Baskette. The Vestry will attend the Learning Day as their March Vestry Meeting and others are invited to join them. Pre-registration is required. Cars will leave St. Stephen's at 7:45.

ST. STEPHEN'S LDI TEAM PREPARING TO ENGAGE RACE & PRIVILEGE. During February, our Leadership Development Team gathered twice for training on how to share public narratives and how to facilitate intentional conversations. Our time together along with our new skills have fired us up for the next step! During March and April, we plan to host a series of small group conversations about race and privilege. We'll begin the conversations with Sunday Lunch & Learns, and within the groups of St. Stephen's (choir, Knit Club, YA's etc.). We look forward to being with you all as we listen and tell our stories.

FORMING CHILDREN, YOUTH, & YOUNG ADULTS

OASIS KEEPING BUSY WITH RETREATS, SUMMER PLANS AND GOOD FRIDAY

BREAKFAST. Last month, member of our OASIS Community Youth Group spent a weekend at Barbara C. Harris camp with over 150 teens from across our Diocese. Led by the Diocesan Youth Council, the teens engaged in games, activities, prayer, Bible Study and reflection all around the theme of "QUEST." Many of our RAW youth are ready to sign up for summer camp! In March, **OASIS will meet on Friday, March 11** to discuss options for a summer mission trip to New York during the second week in August. The fourth Friday of the month is **Good Friday so we will meet for breakfast at 10:00am.** Join us for fresh pancakes, conversation and the story of Jesus speaking truth to power.

COME TO BCH CAMP NIGHT AT ST. STEPHEN'S MARCH 3 AT 6:00. Each year summer camp slots fill up earlier and earlier, so now is the time to start thinking about registering. In order to make registering easier the BCH Camp Director Alessia Doss will be us on Thursday, March 3 to present the new online registration, provide information on programs and answer any questions. Attendance at this evening workshop is **REQUIRED** for all families who are planning to or are interested in sending their child or youth to camp. If you can't attend please let Rev. Sarah know before March 3. Dinner will be provided!

CHURCH SCHOOL HAPPENINGS. The best Lenten spiritual practice for families would be to come to church every Sunday by 9:45 so that young people get the full benefit of Church School and adults the full benefit of church. Our Gordon Students continue to assist our dedicated teachers: Kendra, Keri, Paul, Patrick and Neil. As we move into Lent, a group of teachers and parents will be meeting to discern how God is calling us to continue to renew and strengthen our Church School program. This is a conversation that is happening in most churches of all denominations due to changes in Sunday worship attendance and increased mistrust of the institutional church. At St. Stephen's we are blessed with a long history of strong Church School program so our challenge is to use that gift as we find the solution that will be best for our community. As part of this work **ALL parishioners** are strongly encouraged to visit the Church School for one Sunday. Come and see how we live out our mission of making difference in lives of all our children and youth. If you have any question or would like to know more about possible conversations please see Rev. Sarah.

BECOME PART OF THE KIC COMMUNITY! We always have extra food and company at Community Dinners, and would love to share it with parish families as well as KIC families. Food and activities are both child- and adult-friendly. The next dinner will be Wednesday, March 2, from 6:00-7:00 pm in the dining room. We would love to have you!

WORK AT KIC THIS SUMMER! Applications for teen mentor jobs and young adult program assistants will be available in the office and Galahad area beginning on March 1. Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis until Friday, April 15, so apply early! Mentor applicants must currently be in 9th grade or above and are usually responsible, caring, energetic youth who are interested in working with children. Program assistants have completed some college and/or equivalent work experience, and will also have some leadership experience. If you ARE a young person who would be a good fit for these positions, or know one who might be, please pick up an application!

PRE-CONFIRMATION RETREAT AT BCH APRIL 8-9. Teen Confirmands will join young people from across the Diocese for a Pre-Confirmation Retreat at which they will explore the promise and challenge of Christian Discipleship. The retreat focuses on the Baptismal Covenant and is led by members of the Diocesan Youth Council. Bishop Harris, who will be our confirming Bishop on September 24, will join us for a time of story-telling and reflection. Attendance is required for all students in our Teen Confirmation Class. Please see Rev. Sarah to sign up.

BE YOU LGBTQ YOUTH PLANNING LYNN YOUTH PRIDE EVENT ON JUNE 4. Last month BE YOU youth group began planning to host the first Lynn Youth Pride Event. Inspired by the joy and community of Boston Youth Pride Day, our youth committed to bringing this type of event to the city of Lynn as way of sharing gifts and resources. They are currently working on soliciting for financial donations and community partnerships. If you have a time, a talent, or treasure that you are able to share with this amazing group of young people please speak to Jason Cruz, Shanel Anderson, or Rev. Sarah.

YOUNG ADULT DINNER TUESDAY MARCH 8 AT 6:30. Young adults gather monthly for support, guidance, and encouragement in living adult lives. We eat good food, laugh a lot, and discuss “real stuff” like dealing with difficult work situations, relationship and family expectations, making healthy and unhealthy choices, staying on track with school, holding on to dreams, living within a budget, and turning life around. All young adults are encouraged to attend.

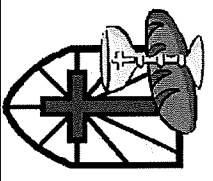
DEEPENING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

WELCOME HAPPY MORNING AT THE TABLE. If your Easter celebration permits, please join our Table Team serving lunch on Easter-- Sunday, March 27 from 1:00 until 4:00. MBT is recruiting extra hands but it would be wonderful to share the joy of Easter with people who don't have an Easter Feast waiting for them. Also, special desserts would be especially appreciated.

TAKE ON THE FOOD PANTRY FOR LENT. Our Ash Wednesday readings mentioned feeding those who are hungry and caring for those who are homeless. Among the many caring, sharing Lenten disciplines available to us is serving people in need at the Food Pantry on Friday afternoons. Please consider coming down and seeing the Pantry Team in action surrounded by people, cans, boxes, grocery bags, and books. Our mission is to provide a hospitable space in which people can pick up free groceries for a couple of days. Thanks to Lynn Literacy volunteers Jan Plourde and Rachel Schwartz, and Joanne Droppers and Helen Patmon, we also offer books. Literacy hour is great with children, parents, grandparents, friends, and all pantry people selecting free new books to take home and keep. If Friday afternoons don't work for you, you might bring a bag of food on Sunday, drop off a bag at the office during the week, or help with the community emergency pantry at St. Mary's on Saturday, March 5, 7:00-11:00am. If you have any questions, please ask Sally Gosselin, Neil O'Donnell, or Harry Jackson.

VOLUNTEER AT KIC AFTER SCHOOL! KIC Music is seeking volunteer homework helpers for our elementary-aged students. Homework helpers sit one-on-one with a child as they complete their work, answer questions as needed, and often just offer encouragement to keep working. Homework volunteers can be either teens or adults, and able to commit to coming once a week (either Monday or Wednesday), from 5:15-6:00 pm. If you're interested, please contact KIC Director Audrey Gutfreund at 617-435-3325. Please consider helping out. You will be much appreciated by staff, and much loved by kids!

ECCO FOCUSING WORK ON RACIAL JUSTICE AND IMMIGRATION. With Alexandra settling into her Executive Director role and Rabbi Margie back from maternity leave, ECCO has had a busy winter. A large group including the Rector attended Momentum Training in January to bring new energy and tactics to our organizing. The training brought focus and collegial support from other organizations to ECCO's February 17 Action at ICE Headquarters in Burlington. As Pope Francis celebrated mass at the US-Mexico border, more than 100 leaders gathered at ICE to pray, to sing, to hear powerful testimonies from clergy, undocumented immigrants, and US citizen children of undocumented residents, and to ask that ICE stop deportations that separate families. In addition, ECCO's Beloved Community Team held a large meeting at St. Stephen's on February 15 to identify our "asks" when we next meet with Lynn Chief of Police Kevin Coppinger. ECCO's goal is to increase trust between the police and the people of Lynn. If you would like more information or want to get involved with St. Stephen's ECCO Team, talk with Rev. Jane and watch the bulletin for dates and times of upcoming planning meetings and Actions.

March 2016						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
SUNDAYS 8 & 10am Worship in English 10am Worship in Kiswahili	1 3:30-5:30pm Be You 4:15pm Tuesday with the Monks 6:30pm Knitters' Club 7pm NA	2 2-6pm KIC Music 6pm Community Family Dinner 6:00pm Soup & Study: Bible Study & Walking with Jesus	3 10:30am Pastoral Care & Healing Prayer Teams Mtg. Noon Eucharist & Healing Prayers 1pm Tea & Talk 6-8pm BCH Camp Sign Up Night 6:45-8pm Beloved Community Team Meeting	4 1pm Stations of the Cross	5 7-11am Community Food Pantry at St. Mary's 9-4pm Diocesan Learning Day: Holy Practices for Vibrant Churches 9-10:30am Sewing Club 10am Choir Rehearsal	
6 10am Living Word Worship 11:45 Lunch and Learn	7 2-6pm KIC Music 8pm AA	8 3:30-5:30pm Be You 4:15pm Tuesday with the Monks 6:30pm Knitters' Club 6:30pm Young Adults 7pm NA	9 2-6pm KIC Music 6:00pm Soup & Study: Bible Study & Walking with Jesus	10 Noon Eucharist & Healing Prayers 1pm Tea & Talk	11 1pm Stations of the Cross 3-4pm Food Pantry 6:30-9pm OASIS	12 9-10:30am Sewing Club 9-4pm LDI Training
13 10am Living Word Worship 11:45 Lunch and Learn	14 2-6pm KIC Music 8pm AA	15 3:30-5:30pm Be You 4:15pm Tuesday with the Monks 6:30pm Knitters' Club 7pm NA	16 2-6pm KIC Music 6:00pm Soup & Study: Bible Study & Walking with Jesus	17 Noon Eucharist & Healing Prayers 1pm Tea & Talk	18 1pm Stations of the Cross 3-4pm Food Pantry	19 9-10:30am Sewing Club 10am Choir Rehearsal
20 PALM SUNDAY 10am Outdoor Procession	21 2-6pm KIC Music 8pm AA	22 10am Blessing of the Oils at the Cathedral 2:30pm Communion at St. Stephen's Towers 3:30-5:30pm Be You 6:30pm Knitters' Club 6:30pm Baptism Preparation 7pm NA	23 2-6pm KIC Music 6:00pm Soup & Study: Bible Study & Walking with Jesus 7:45pm Eucharist	24 MAUNDY THURSDAY Noon Commemoration of Eucharist 1pm Tea & Talk 7pm Foot Washing & Commemoration of Eucharist Silent Vigil until 11pm	25 GOOD FRIDAY 10am OASIS Breakfast Noon-3pm Last Words at Washington Street Baptist 3-4pm Food Pantry 7pm Veneration of the Cross with Communion	26 HOLY SATURDAY 9am Prayers for Holy Saturday 9:30am Church Decorating 10am Choir Rehearsal 7pm Easter Vigil with Baptism
27 EASTER 8 & 10am Festival Eucharist with Choir 1-4pm My Brother's Table	28 2-6pm KIC Music 8pm AA	29 3:30-5:30pm Be You 6:30pm Knitters' Club 7pm NA	30 2-6pm KIC Music 6:30pm Bible Study	31 Noon Eucharist & Healing Prayers 1pm Tea & Talk		OFFICE HOURS Monday – Friday 8:45am – 2:45pm



EASTER DECORATIONS IN MEMORY OR THANKSGIVING FOR THOSE YOU LOVE

It is time once again to remember your loved ones with an Easter decorations. Please use this form to list the name(s) to be printed in our Easter Celebration of Life. Please print clearly! We request a donation of \$25 to support our Easter flowers and candles. Your names must be submitted no later than March 17, 2016.

In memory of:

In thanksgiving for:

Given by:

Address:

Phone:

The flowers and candles donated by members of the parish decorate the altar gloriously for our Easter services. After services, we deliver lilies to our homebound members. We need volunteers with a little time and a lot of Easter joy to deliver them during the week of Sunday, March 27. Flower delivery isn't hard and won't take too long but it will make a real difference in another person's life.

All you have to do is take a flower and an addressed card, and then deliver the lily to your fellow parishioner. Receiving the lilies and an Easter Alleluia from you will make their day! Please call the church office at 781-599-4220 if you can help.

Please return this sheet to the parish office with your donation.

Jane Soyster Gould

February 7, 2016 at St. Stephen's, Lynn

Report of the Rector

Last Epiphany C: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

A few weeks ago I read an essay by the Rev. Rob Voyle suggesting that faith communities possess an “essential charism” or spiritual gift that defines them. Writing during the week following the Anglican Primates’ vote to exclude the Episcopal Church from committees of the Communion, he contended that the “essential charism” of the Anglican Communion since Queen Elizabeth I has been “common prayer.” Living through the costly religious orthodoxy of the reigns of her brother and sister, Elizabeth I insisted that the Church of England would no longer have oaths of conformity but would be known by our commitment to “common prayer”-- hence our *Book of Common Prayer*. Voyle wondered how the gathering of the Primates might have been different had the Bishops, instead of debating and legislating about conformity of doctrine and discipline, had shared the stories of their lives and ministries, and invited prayer.

In a subsequent article, Voyle suggested that each congregation has its own “essential charism.” Intrigued by his notion as I read and edited our Annual Report, I wondered what is our “essential charism?” What is the spiritual gift God has given St. Stephen’s that makes us who we distinctly are? As I read, thought, and prayed, the answer came to me quickly and clearly: HOSPITALITY.

We do all kinds of stuff—pages and pages of it are detailed in our stunning Annual Report; but hospitality is the heart of St. Stephen’s. Hospitality is expressed in all four of our mission goals:

- Being good stewards of our resources: physical, financial and human
- Deepening community connections
- Forming children, youth, and young adults, and
- Nurturing the congregation.

As our pledge campaign illustrated through weekly reflections and images, our building and our people are “vessels of God’s love and care.” This building welcomes people in through church doors, handicapped doors, Anderson Building doors, Blossom Street doors, kitchen doors, Pantry doors, basement doors, old doors, new doors; through an abundance of doors, we welcome people for Sunday and midweek worship, for KIC summer camp and after-school programs, for the food pantry and 12-step meetings, for ECCO trainings and community Actions, for choir practice and Bible Study, for knitting or sewing groups and tea & talk, for the fabulous Fair and Soul Celebration fund raisers, for youth groups and Young Adult dinners, for Vestry meetings and Beloved Community Team gatherings, for pastoral counseling and private prayer.

This building is essential to our hospitality. And, we have committed significant human and financial resources this year to upgrading systems including computers, locks, doors, and alarms; to repairing weather related damage to the roof, the floors in the sacristy and hall,

our fences, and the parking lot; to cleaning up and clearing out spaces; and to continuing work on chancel restoration. Our building is both a peerless historic and artistic monument, and a place of active ministry and formation offering hospitality to those who thirst in a barren land.

But the hospitality of St. Stephen's is not just the hospitality our buildings provide. Ours is also a hospitality of attitude. Each Sunday, when we gather for Holy Communion, the invitation is "This is the Lord's Table, and all are welcome here." Every day in the Office, Linda answers the phone and door welcoming people from every sort and condition of humanity. Successive generations of immigrants have populated our city and church. People from around the Anglican Communion have filled the pews of St. Stephen's giving us a rich diversity of races, languages, accents, cultures, and church backgrounds. The majority of the children attending KIC summer camp come from Spanish-speaking families, and we worship in both English and Kiswahili on Sunday mornings knowing the unity of the body of Christ into which God calls us.

This year, our mission goal of Hospitality to children, youth, and young adults brought significant new programs and people into our embrace. In the midst of February snowstorms, we launched KIC Music, an after-school expansion of our summer camp Kids in Community. We now have 20 students with us on Monday and Wednesday afternoons enjoying games, doing homework, and learning music theory and drumming. Both our Soul Celebration and the Fair were enhanced by special performances by the KIC Music drummers. In April, we opened our doors to gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and queer teens in Be You—a youth group for GLBTQ teens and their allies. Knowing the high suicide and homelessness rates of these teens, we wanted to provide a safe space for them. While it took time for them to trust that a church would welcome and not judge them, Tuesday afternoon Be You gatherings provide not only a circle of support but also a chance for teens to make a difference in the community. In June, hearing that the Lynn Public Schools had eliminated summer school for elementary-age children, Micheal Brown called me and asked, "What are we going to do?" For her, our hospitality was a given—we just needed to figure out exactly how we'd live into this moment of community need. For five weeks, Micheal, four college-age mentors, and a group of committed volunteers provided tutoring in literacy and math so that our youngest and most vulnerable students would not lose grade levels during the summer. And this September, we welcomed to our church and Church School community, six Gordon College students seeking an open and affirming Christian community in which to worship and serve. As one student expressed, "I knew I was in the right place when I saw the rainbow house outside and then heard a sermon on social justice."

Our mission goal of deepening community connection also led us into more significant hospitality this year. Last January, the day after Rev. Sarah's ordination as a priest, Esmeralda joined us as we welcomed our donkey-loving new Bishop Alan Gates to St. Stephen's. And in April, Episcopal Relief and Development representative Tinka Perry preached when Esmeralda returned to collect our Lenten Outreach Offerings. Rather than collecting the usual coins, she raised enough to fund a donkey and cart for a farming family in Ghana. Closer to home, our Food Pantry stepped up expanding our hospitality at our

Pantry and in the neighborhood. Beyond food and Christmas gifts, our Pantry now provides a reading corner and free books for children thanks to St. John's Beverly Farms member Jan Plourde and the faithfulness of Joanne Droppers and Helen Patmon. In addition, Sally Gosselin and Harry Jackson have worked with the Lynn Hunger Network to build capacity at our pantry and to support the monthly Saturday morning emergency pantry in response to the closing of the St. Mary's and Lynn City Mission pantries this summer.

In the story of the transfiguration that we heard this morning, Jesus, Peter, James, and John get away from the crowds and crush of the world; they go to a mountaintop so that they can be alone with each other and God; they go away to pray. In that sacred place, they see Jesus transfigured before them, and his clothes become dazzling white. On the mountaintop they glimpse God's glory; they hear God's voice claiming Jesus as his beloved. Perhaps it's not surprising that Peter hoped maybe they could stay; maybe he could construct three tents so that they could all abide in that holy place forever with God very near.

In the 4th century, St. Augustine of Hippo preached: "Peter sees God's glory radiating from Jesus, and as a man savoring the things of men says, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." He had been wearied with the multitude. He had now found the mountain's solitude; there he had Christ the Bread of the soul. What — should he depart once again to labor and suffering now that he had a holy love for God and a holy way of life? He wished well for himself. But Jesus says to him: "Come down, to labor on the earth; on the earth to serve, to be despised, and crucified on the earth."

In fact, Luke's Gospel could not be clearer about the real world challenges awaiting Jesus and the disciples. As soon as they come down, a great crowd and an epileptic boy thrown into convulsions, rolling on the ground and foaming at the mouth, meet them. Their vision of God's glory was not a gift in itself or some sacred talisman; it did not spare them sadness and struggle; rather, it prepared them to engage the world as it is and to seek to transform it. Their mountain top experience not only gave them a glimpse of glory but a reminder of how they were to live into God's grace and glory: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

LISTEN TO AND FOR JESUS. Here's the challenge for the people of St. Stephen's who often seem to be human do-ings rather than human be-ings. We understand our charism of hospitality and live into it magnificently. Yet, we often go the way of Martha feeling beset by responsibilities and tasks that need doing, and resentful that others aren't doing enough or that credit is going to the wrong people. We sometimes sit back and let others do the work feeling that we don't have anything of value to offer or we aren't really needed anyway. We don't always trust in the abundance of God to provide the time, space, resources, and people we need to do the work God would have us do; and upon occasion we ask new people to fill old wine skins, which may not work for them or make sense to them. We sometimes fear change as new people sit in our pews or come to our programs; and we worry that all the activity in our space will wear out the buildings and us. Often, we forget to be like Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus... listening to him.

Living into the charism of hospitality is not easy. Can we embrace elders seeking solace and sacred beauty as well as children and youth, who run about, make noise, create messes, and lack consistency? Can we hold together both those who think, "Criminals get what they deserve" and those who believe that people of color are disproportionately arrested and killed by police? Can we respond to the needs of those who want to worship in the historic tradition of the Episcopal Church and those who long for livelier liturgies? Can we continue to build God's beloved community "crossing lines of color, class, culture, and generation?"

The Apostle Paul reminds us: "Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." My hope and prayer for us this year is that we will find new ways to listen to and for Jesus in worship, study and prayer, and in our relationships with one another and our community. Where and how is God calling each one of us individually and all of us together as the people of St. Stephen's to reflect God's glory?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu preached, "We are all agents of transfiguration," who are challenged by Christ "to transfigure our relationships, our communities, and our world, so that they become hospitable to joy, to justice, to freedom, and to peace."

Listening to Jesus, how might we become more "hospitable to joy, to justice, to freedom, and to peace?" Amen.