

**The Church of the Incarnation
Great Falls, Montana**

Annual Parish Meeting

Rector's Report 25 January 2009

*"Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!'
And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'"*

1 Samuel 3:10

Last Sunday, we heard the wonderful story of Samuel, the young boy who strained to hear the Lord. With his very being - with his very essence - Samuel stood before God, willing to do whatever it was that God asked of him.

"Speak, for your servant is listening."

Listening - it always starts with listening, doesn't it?

We must be able to listen - to really hear - what God is asking us to do if we are serious about our individual and community ministries. We must be able to listen - to really hear - what God is telling us about ourselves, no matter how awkward, how painful, or even how wonderful that is.

This past year, I marveled how this parish could come together to listen to God - and not only listen, but then act upon the words given to us by the Divine. In listening - and in responding to what was heard - this parish took the initiative and made an incredible difference in the life of our community, our city, and our state. Families found the clothes they desperately needed through our listening and through our acting. Through this parish's efforts, food was provided - and funds were made available to the local community food bank - to those who would go hungry otherwise. A local elementary school was touched by the generosity of the Church of the Incarnation and its students benefited from us straining to hear the voice of the Lord - just as Samuel did.

But this can only be the beginning.

We continued to face challenges as a faithful community; in typical fashion, there were times this past year when we refused to listen to one

another, when we refused to see past our own prejudices and/or our own preconceived notions of “right” and “wrong.” We pointed fingers. We turned stubborn. We blocked out the voice of God from our consciousness by our own righteous indignation or inability to believe that God can actually speak through others. We turned our hurt into anger, and we railed against one another, forgetting the fact that we all sin, that we all make mistakes, that we are all dependent upon our Lord to help us along the very bumpy path of our professed faith.

We are no different than any other faith community. We are human.

Yet, despite our frailties, despite letting each other down during this past year, despite our triumphs (which we must attribute to our ability to listen and to respond to God), I saw something that I have never seen before in my fifteen years of parish ministry - I saw God prompting us toward a new unity, a new way of relating to one another, a new way of responding not only to ourselves, but to God as well.

I was reminded yet again that, despite our human frailties, we are not inconsequential before God; just the opposite, our worth is beyond compare, but only if we allow ourselves to change our minds about who we are, where we are going, and how we are supposed to get there.

While this is not easy to do, we must do it if we are serious about our roles as ministers.

As part of this annual report, I have attached the sermon ([click here](#)) that I preached on Sunday, November 9, of last year - in that sermon, I felt the need to talk openly and honestly with each of you regarding our mutual ministry together. I will continue to refer to that sermon this year, and I will continue to insist that we listen to God, one another, and ourselves in the following ways:

- 1) The Vestry - in conjunction with advice from our Bishop - approved guidelines that will be used to help us - as a parish - to communicate more effectively with one another. All Vestry members will be required to sign off on those guidelines, and all Vestry members will be required to use those guidelines in the coming months and years, while encouraging the rest of our community to do the same. These guidelines are non-negotiable and are also attached.
- 2) I will be insisting that this parish continue to go from a “maintenance” to a “ministry” perspective; that means that, instead of worrying about how we are going to fill the pews on Sunday morning, we worry more about how God is speaking to us and how

we can discern God's voice. Again, this will not be easy - but it can no longer take a back burner to personal agendas.

- 3) We must continue to recognize our own human frailties and the need each and every one of us has for each other, this parish community, and the Church as a whole. This can only come about when we recognize our absolute dependence on God through Jesus Christ, and our willingness to accept the need to live with ambiguity at times. We must also recognize that, through our human frailties, God works through us, enabling us to do those things that spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

God bless you all; I cannot express to you in words what you mean to me and how you minister to me as well. Thank you.

In Christ,

Tim+