

Annual Address 2024

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 21, 2024

Readings: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20; Psalm 62:6-14

Sermon text: After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Mark 1:14-15

Some of the people believed, and answered his call to follow—and some not. As John the evangelist put it, some preferred the dark to the light, to live in fear rather than freedom, to fight over present scarcity rather than sow seeds for future abundance.

The church, carrying on the work of the apostles and evangelists in the centuries since, continues to proclaim that the kingdom of God is near and therefore repent and believe in the good news. You can say that Jesus summed up the good news in his statement found in John: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

The world obviously still needs the message of hope, faith and love, the light of Christ. But how is the kingdom already in the world—though not yet fully realized—and how can the church help its coming into fullness? I think in two ways.

One is what one of the great lay leaders of the twentieth century Episcopal Church called the dream of God.

God has a dream, Verna Dozier believed, and we are put on earth to be agents working for the realization of that dream. As she wrote in 1991 on the publication of *The Dream of God*, when she was already 75 years old: “The dream of God is that all creation will live together in peace and harmony and fulfillment. All parts of creation. And the dream of God is that the good creation that God created -- what the refrain says, 'and God saw that it was good' -- be restored,” Dozier said.

Who was Verna Dozier? she was an African-American born in 1907, a graduate of Howard University, earning both a BA and MA. At the age of 57, after 32 years of teaching English literature to high school students, Dozier began a new career teaching adults about the God of Scripture. She didn't know this was going to happen; she started off just giving a talk before a church women's assembly, but such was the calm yet passionate power of her words and presence, she became a speaker in great demand as a preacher, retreat director, and conference leader. Her faith journey had already taken her from a Baptist upbringing to a Quaker and Unitarian meetings to an interfaith study group which then sent members to join denominational churches to make a difference. A prophet disguised as a gentle retired school teacher, Dozier was a believer in critical and independent thought. She stated in a 1997 commencement address, "All learning begins not with the answers of the teacher, but with the questions of the learner." For Dozier, religious authority came with baptism and lies with laity; ministry was not just for the ordained. she died a peaceful death at the age of 99 in 2006.

Dozier understood the kingdom of God not as an approaching apocalyptic event but a call and vision already working in the world. God's kingdom is not above or beyond this world, it is in it, as yeast is in dough, working in God's time to prepare for the bread to be; it is the seed already planted that is growing into a great tree sheltering all life—but which we take now for steeple topped ornamental shrubbery spotted among the skyscraper trees of commerce. And working through all the people of God—through their questions and their kindness, through their faith and their love.

Sam Wells is another church leader who is thinking and writing about God's kingdom. Wells has been the Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, a thriving and innovative congregation, since 2012. He also spent 7 years in North Carolina, where he was Dean of Duke University Chapel. In addition to his parish work he is a Visiting Professor of Christian Ethics at King's College and a regular contributor to Thought for the Day on BBC radio. He has published 44 books, including works on Christian ethics, mission, ministry, scripture, liturgy, and preaching. Sam is married to Jo Wells, who is Bishop for Episcopal Ministry in the Anglican Communion.

Wells recently started a consortium of congregations called “Heartedge” whose mission is to seek the renewal of the church by catalyzing what he calls **kingdom communities**. This is an understanding of the kingdom of God as the world in which the church is embedded and with which it interacts, not as a mission-field to be conformed to the church’s image, but as an opportunity for churches to become lively and dynamic communities—kingdom communities—interacting on multiple levels with the world, rather than defensive and narrow congregations. As he writes, “A kingdom community is a community of hope, reimagining church and society through *commerce, culture, compassion and congregational life*.”

HeartEdge believes congregations grow as they engage with the kingdom, understood as the sphere of the Holy Spirit’s activity beyond the church. This engagement comes in three specific forms:

- Compassion: partnering with others in forming relationships that release the gifts of strangers.
- Culture: making the church an estuary where creative energies are expressed and celebrated.
- Commerce: finding income streams to achieve financial sustainability and grow flourishing programs.

So here is a second way of understanding the kingdom—not just as a dream and inspiring vision of the church, but as present in the world already through the Holy Spirit’s activity outside the church, which we as church are called to partner with.

I think we need both understandings: kingdom as vision of a just and peaceable world, and the kingdom as present opportunity to partner in community toward that vision. The question then is: How can we as Grace Church be a kingdom community, a fruitful agent of the dream of God?

We will have a Vestry Retreat in Feb to begin creating a three year strategic plan—and the diocese is working on a 5 year one, an exercise we will contribute to at our annual meeting. We will take a hard look at long term trends in church attendance and patterns of giving and think about improving our relationship with the wider community, to imagine the community as church, and the church

as community, to borrow a phrase from the author Michael Plekon. We will think about how we can partner with others in the community, meeting needs as we already do with the Preschool and outreach programs in immigrant services and food. But also how can bring the gifts of people not Sunday attenders into our community—as we are doing with the growing Spanish speaking congregation that meets monthly on first Wednesdays. How can we make the church a place where creative energies are expressed and celebrated—as we did with the Concert for the Meditative Soul and hosting First Night events. How can we find income streams to achieve financial sustainability, as we do through our rummage sale and Christmas bazaar. What ways can we maintain and improve our buildings and grounds to invite people in, to create welcoming spaces and meetings, to connect strangers and build friendships as we do with our Invite Welcome Connect program. What plans for our buildings and grounds, for decarbonization, potential solar, beautification—grounds as well as church interior—long awaited stained glass on the west wall, new ideas for behind the altar, master plan for the grounds—can we come up with?

As you can see, we already so many of these things—and the question is how can we do them better, build on our strengths, enhance our community, reduce our energy and carbon use, build on our centrality in the center of Millbrook and the surrounding region. We need both dynamic lay leaders in the mode of Verna Dozier and parish clergy and diocesan leaders with vision and energy—as we are getting in Bp Heyd.

In conclusion, for the people of Grace Church news of the kingdom of God is still good. We have an opportunity to build on our strengths in order to engage with the rapidly changing world as a kingdom community—working in our part of the kingdom to realize the dream of God.

In Christ's name, amen.

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