

If you've ever seen or watched the musical *Rent*, you may remember a catchy tune that starts the second act. It asks the question, "How do you measure a year?" Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes.... well, that's one way. The song offers some other ways of measuring and remembering that are a lot more significant – not minutes, but moments, times when people's lives have changed. That's what I'd like to ask you to think about as we move from one year to another in the life of the parish of St James'... how do *you* measure a year?

One way that occurs to me, which shows up nowhere else in our statistics or reports, is this. About 3,000 times in the past year, someone has come face to face with the glory of God. That's stunning, when you think about it. You might be wondering when those moments happened – but that is what we do; that is what happens when we come together for worship. In singing praise, in prayer, in receiving communion, in blessing, in sharing life with God's people, we meet God and we see into the light of heaven. That's not something you can make routine or ordinary. Maybe sometimes we miss what's really going on, because we think it *is* routine or ordinary. But what it really is, is transfiguration.

The pattern for that experience is the one we hear in today's gospel. Jesus' three closest disciples, praying with him up on the mountaintop, see him in a new light. The eastern Orthodox tradition holds that the light in this incident is the light of heaven – so that the disciples are seeing Jesus, if you like, in his natural setting. It's a difficult experience to integrate into the rest of their lives – in fact, this Bible story is what gave rise to the common expression "mountaintop [or peak] experience" that describes something which stands apart from everyday life. The disciples don't know quite what to do in the moment; they don't talk about it; and shortly afterward they are back in the thick of things, with one more person needing help that they seem unable to offer. [Luke 9:36]

Rather than seeing the incident as a dead end, though, we are invited to see it as the beginning of the recovery of something which had been lost. If you go all the way back to Moses, you find a story of a man who was able to see God's glory, to speak with God as with a friend, and as a result to shine with the light of God himself. And St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, teaches them (and us) to recognize that what God did for Moses, he wants to do for us all – to reveal the light of Christ shining within us, and shining out from us. As we see the glory of the Lord reflected as in a mirror, he says, we too are being transformed into the same image. [2 Cor 3:18]

So, those thousands of individual moments of encounter, when people come face to face with the glory of God and witness the light of heaven bursting out into everyday life – those have to be central to what we are about, here in this church. They are the means by which everything else that matters here, can happen. We can't come to know God more deeply unless we first encounter God's presence. We can't come to love each other with the fullness of God's love unless we are being transformed into its likeness. And we can't reflect the light of God in the world, or bear witness to its reflection in others, until we learn to expect, anticipate, and wait for the transfiguration of life by the presence of Jesus.

As we review the life of this parish in the last year, and look ahead to the year to come, I want to invite you to hold those moments of worship, communion, and blessing in the foreground of your perspective. They are not the entirety of our life with God, but they give us the light by which we can see what all the rest means. They are key to our identity as the people of God and the body of Christ, they are what forms us together as a community of disciples, and they are also what propels us "back down the mountain", with the conviction that our ministry and service and outreach and evangelism will be bathed in the same light of heaven which breaks through to us in our mountaintop moments.

Building up our common life

Several years ago, our vestry identified three themes to describe our aspirations for the life of this

parish: strengthening our structure, deepening our fellowship, and reaching out with the good news. As I'm sure you can see, those three themes are not independent departments of work, but rather three different dimensions of our parish life which support and interact with each other. To have a strong parish structure, reflected in good communications and decision-making, as well as attention to our buildings and finances, creates an organizational atmosphere in which community and ministry can flourish. Knowing one another better, and sharing life together, enables the trust and commitment which build up the parish internally and in relation to the world around us. And a focus on our call to live and proclaim God's love, enlivens both our institution and our fellowship with a purpose that is not merely our own, but much bigger than ourselves.

Those three dimensions also serve a purpose in relation to our primary focus of encountering God. While we can meet God anywhere – that's kind of the point of the Transfiguration – it is “good to be here” where we learn how to do that, and how to be open to it. So it's worth building a strong and resilient community, rooted in fellowship and growing in the direction of our neighbours, because that's the kind of space where the encounter with God happens, for those of us who identify with this parish as well as for the people we reach out to.

A year ago we were conscious of a necessary imbalance in the way we were working on that sacred space. The need to repair and renovate, and the opportunity to upgrade our physical facilities, were taking first priority, and that was something we could commit to for a time, knowing it would not be forever. So in the first part of 2015, the focus was on finishing the repairs and upgrades to the lower hall – but even as we did that, we kept in mind how much of an asset that space is, both to our shared life as a parish, and also to community groups whom we welcome into it. It was great to see the new design take into account what would best serve our fellowship and our outreach, and even better to reach the end of the year with the Soup Kitchen, Brownies and Guides, and other groups returning to use the new space. Being without our kitchen and a hall for so long stretched our ingenuity when it came to fellowship times, but I think it also brought home how important it is to sit down together, at coffee hour or at a meal or event, and we have certainly been enjoying moments like those once again through the fall and winter.

All the work we've done was underwritten by very generous financial support, reflecting the spiritual value of this place and this space to many different kinds of people: regular worshippers, people for whom St James' holds “mountaintop memories”, and even those in our town who do not identify with us directly but appreciate and support what we offer. The monetary cost of preserving and operating a historic building is something we will always need to review, but the substantial gifts people are still making to the building fund demonstrate the value of this place, beyond the cost of labour and material.

While there is still a need to replenish the building fund as an investment in the future, a particular challenge in the coming year will be to shift our attention to funding new ministry and outreach. The economic uncertainties all around us actually invite us to greater generosity, since it is at times like these that people experience greater need for, and greater openness to, the light of God's love breaking through our fixation on wealth and success. One possibility I want to explore in the coming months, is for St James' to sponsor a program in our community that would offer people a different way to look at money – as a means not an end, and a means to accomplish what is truly important in their lives.

One other important gift is the time and care people pour into this place. Often that happens out of the public eye, but it became visible in some very specific ways as we moved through the hard work of the last few years, with projects that were too big for one individual to take care of behind the scenes. I particularly want to thank Dale Shewchuk, who is completing his term as Rector's Warden, for the leadership he's given in bringing the hall upgrades to completion. He was certainly not alone, and I'm sure we all want to express our appreciation for those who gave their time, expertise, and willingness to deal with the frustrations of getting everything back in order – as well as to the people who are now

stepping up with new initiatives and fresh energy, to make the best use of our new facility.

Disciples making disciples

While the three-dimensional model of “structure, fellowship and outreach” may help us to understand where our focus has been and how it is shifting, it has a potential flaw. Those three dimensions are only meaningful to the extent that they relate back to the core reality of people encountering God and being enabled to see their lives in the light of heaven. So it's been very helpful this year to find our diocesan community offering us an alternative perspective which brings us face to face with that primary reality. Together with people just like us in parishes across the diocese, we have been asking some hard questions about what it would take for us to be more effective in our ministry, more deeply rooted in fellowship with one another, and better users of the gifts God has given us. The answer we keep coming back to is that we all, always, need to keep growing in our relationship with God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit. The particular word we are learning to attach to that perspective is “discipleship”.

One manifestation of our diocesan journey of discipleship is the Athabasca Discipleship Training School, led by Archdeacon Terry Leer. Terry is designing short courses which deliver new information about topics disciples need to know – but at the same time, invite us to make a commitment to using that information and living by it. St James' was the first parish to register for the School, and we have been through modules on the Bible, prayer and pastoral care, and evangelism, with a range of attendance averaging around ten. I know the participants have appreciated Terry's passion and energy about communicating our faith, and I should also tell you that he was grateful for your interest and support, which enabled him to get the ball rolling, and to make these courses available to the diocese.

The other major diocesan initiative which reflects the theme of discipleship is the Faith Lift team, a group which visits parishes over a weekend, to offer an intensive time of worship, prayer, teaching, and invitation to draw closer in following Jesus. We have not had a Faith Lift time here at St James', and I would welcome some conversation about whether and when it might be the right choice for us – but I mention it in particular to recognize the participation of several parishioners (including Kim Marceau, Barry Craigen and Veronica Lawton) who have carried this ministry to other parishes, where their presence and support has been welcomed.

Within our own parish, one way we are consciously working on our discipleship is through the E100 Bible Reading program, currently in progress. The Bible is the touchstone for our relationship with God, and one of those places where the Transfiguration light shines most clearly. So whether we feel familiar and comfortable with it, or unsure and tentative, returning to the Bible with closer attention is always a way to deepen our faith and our sense of being called to follow Jesus. The E100 program offers a couple of advantages, as we get to see the Bible as a whole, broadening our perspective from the short passages we encounter together each Sunday; it also invites wide participation, as people are able to follow the program at home on their own schedule. With over 30 guide books in circulation in the parish, I am confident that this activity will have an impact in our community of disciples.

There is one other, less structured but much more significant, way that we need to apply the concept of discipleship to our parish life, and that is in the welcoming of new members. The presence of new members continues to be a large and positive influence in our midst – continuing the pattern of recent years, 10% of our membership was new in 2015. People who come to St James' often comment on how welcomed they have been, and how easy it is to join in and become part of our community. But we owe our new members the same kind of opportunity we all want, to experience the full depth and breadth of what it means to believe and trust in God, to be a follower of Jesus, and to live by the Spirit. This is by no means a matter of saying to newcomers, “Here, we know this, learn from us.” Rather it is a matter of learning together, as people who join us with different backgrounds and experiences bring both new insights and new questions. One of my goals for the coming year will be for us to create ways that new

and long-time members can come together, to study and practise the key elements of our path of discipleship, so that together we can be “transformed into the likeness of Christ, from glory to glory.”

Looking ahead

When Peter and James and John came back down the mountainside with Jesus, they weren't very clear on what to expect. The mysterious experience of the transfiguration prepared them for something, but they didn't know what. We might guess that they expected something amazing, and in a way that came true, when Easter dawned and Jesus rose. Perhaps only then were they able to make sense of what they had seen. What they probably didn't expect was the tough stuff that would come in between: the growing tension and conflict with the authorities, the hardline demands Jesus would start to make on those who wanted to follow him, the slide from Palm Sunday popularity to Good Friday condemnation, and the sheer terror that followed. They didn't expect, but they learned, the cost of discipleship.

We are in a different position from them, knowing how the story turns out, believing that the cost is worth it, and being empowered through Jesus' resurrection to see the light of heaven now shining out everywhere. But we still share their journey: it is even baked into the liturgical year in the moment we are in right now, getting ready to turn from the light on top of the mountain to the valley of the shadow of death, represented by Lent, when we sharpen our consciousness of what discipleship actually costs. I'm conscious of a turning point like that in our parish life as well, as it feels we are ready to set out on new journeys without knowing quite where they will take us, recognizing there will be challenges, but encouraged by the conviction that the risen Jesus waits for us somewhere over the hill.

Some of our immediate next steps are clear. The costly but life-affirming work of welcoming refugees to our community will soon become a living breathing reality, for which we have prepared as much as we can. I trust that we all still have our thinking caps on to come up with ways to put our new kitchen facility to use, in service to others, and in building new relationships with our neighbours. Later this year we look forward to a diocesan conference, which we hope will be shared with partners from Ibba diocese (in South Sudan), enabling us to learn our discipleship together with people who live in a very different environment. And we will continue the work of studying and practising the marks of discipleship in our own context, knowing that we don't want to miss a single moment when we might come face to face with the glory of God.

Our goal for this year, though, isn't to do this project or that program. Our goal is transformation – to become different people, in a different world. More importantly, that is God's goal for us, the reason God shines that light on us in Jesus, and calls us to be the kind of disciples who mean what we believe. How different we are as a result might not be visible to us – just as Moses didn't know his face was shining until, presumably, someone mentioned it to him! But as we look ahead, knowing that discipleship demands something from us, and being willing to commit to it, we can expect and believe that God will do something with us, and we can look forward to finding out what that is.

Respectfully submitted,
Iain Luke, Dean & Rector

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