

Good Book Club Preaching Series  
2 Lent

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Matthew 2:1-12

Psalm 22:22-30

Matthew 2:13-23

Mark 8:31-38

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*The following is a joint sermon offered by the Rev. Lonnie Lacy, Rector of St. Anne's, and Dr. Alan Peaslee, Senior Warden of St. Anne's 2015 Vestry.*

**Fr. LONNIE**

Good morning and welcome to St. Anne's Episcopal Church. Today I have asked our new Senior Warden Alan Peaslee to join me in the pulpit for what you might call a "collaborative sermon." With so much going on in our parish these days, it's good to refresh ourselves on our vision, and it's important for you to hear from your Vestry leaders from time to time.

But first, let's acknowledge the milestone we've reached in our yearlong program of reading the Bible as a parish: we have *finally* found our way out of the Old Testament and into the Gospels! What a powerful thing it is to have landed in the Gospels right as we have arrived at the season of Lent. This year, we are not just walking with Jesus *40 days* to the cross. This year, we are walking *33 years*.

And it all begins today with the story of three men and a baby. Three men from the east who went looking for something: a king, a prince, a royal priest. Truth is, they didn't really know who or what they were looking for, but they believed they would know it when they found it. And after all those hot nights roaming the desert sands, following that star, they found a baby... and they fell in love.

Have you ever felt that? Have you ever gone looking for love, looking for meaning, looking for *Jesus* ... and been utterly surprised when you found him in the last place you ever expected?

**ALAN**

My guess is you *do* know what that's like, because you're sitting here today. All of us have gone looking for Jesus. All of us have made the journey of the magi. For my wife Pat and me, that journey was 18 years ago and sounded something like this:

"I want to go visit that white church over by our house."

"No you don't!"

"Yes I do!"

"No you don't! It's an Episcopal church."

“So?”

“Well I took you to an Episcopal church once, and you were so miserable I promised never to do that again.”

“I don’t remember that. I want to go visit that little white church!”

“No you don’t!” And so it went until one day I said, “Okay.”

Then, on Palm Sunday 1997, Pat and I found ourselves sitting in this sanctuary, in the back where visitors and seekers try to blend in so as not to be too noticed. The service was approaching two hours. There was this “healing” thing going on at the altar rail after Communion. I looked to my left, and Pat was crying. I thought, “Oh my, what have I done this time?”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “We’re home!”

You see, we went looking for Jesus, and we found him here at St. Anne’s.

We’ve come to learn that this story is not unique to us. Various versions of this story have been told by generations of St. Anne’s members, past and present, young and old, longtime and new. In our hearts, we are all trying to find Jesus.

### **Fr. LONNIE**

That’s the thing. We are not alone. As we have seen in recent years, there are plenty of people looking for the kind of Jesus we know and love here at St. Anne’s. A Jesus of love. A Jesus of healing. A Jesus of grace, forgiveness, and peace. Perhaps you are one of our more recent magi who have come looking for the Prince of Peace and have found him here. There is a reason why St. Anne’s parishioner Steve Rigdon is right when he says, “Lonnie, small south Georgia towns need strong Episcopal churches.” Steve is right because the Jesus we worship here is special, and there are plenty of people in our town, in our county, who are looking for the Jesus we have found, who need the Jesus we know.

### **ALAN**

But what does that mean for us today? Well, believe it or not, we’ve been here before.

When I was elected to the Vestry once before in 1999—fifteen years ago—St. Anne’s was a growing church with a youth minister, a large youth group, and a brand new church van. Sunday worship was AWESOME! Our Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) was 160. We had 40+ acolytes; we sang; we prayed; we healed (I was healed!); and we loved, oh how we loved! Some

of your parish leaders today were formed here in those years. We had it “going on,” and on the surface it all looked calm, quiet, and graceful.

However, under the surface we were struggling, paddling like crazy. Our former rector, Fr. Hurst, was having a hard time meeting the demands for pastoral care, and we were struggling to pay the salaries and our bills. We, as a Vestry, did not really want to keep growing.

I believe we were scared—afraid of losing what we had—and we did not have a vision of where we were going or how we were going to get there. We had become an “unstable intermediate.” Jesus was knocking at the door, but we were afraid to open it... afraid of what he might ask us to do or how he might ask us to change.

Fortunately, our Jesus is a loving, patient, and understanding Jesus, so he waited and watched us as we struggled. We slowly shrank back to a size that was stable. Our programs contracted. Our Sunday attendance dwindled. Eventually, we did not really need that youth minister anymore. We did not need to think about an assistant rector. We didn’t need much at all. And people began to look for Jesus elsewhere.

Then our rector left, and God sent us a loving and wise interim rector, Fr. Ron Davidson. In time, he led us to clearly envision what we wanted to be, and so we started to rebuild. We were eventually able to call our current rector, Fr. Lonnie, who accepted our call and helped us create a vision. And it was “so good.”

### **Fr. LONNIE**

Three years ago, I shared [this vision](#) with you ... a vision for finding Jesus, and for making room for others to find him here, too. We called it [Salt & Light](#), based on Jesus’ call to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

So where are we with it? Well, if you haven’t looked at it in a while, you should. At our recent Vestry retreat, we were surprised by all that we’ve managed to accomplish in the past three years. We’ve started new projects and new ministries. We’ve raised funds. We’ve added a second Sunday service at 5 p.m. We’re reading the whole Bible as a parish. We’ve sent missionaries to the Dominican Republic. (We’re sending *more* missionaries to the Dominican Republic!) We’re growing our outreach. We’re loving, supporting, cultivating our children. We’re praying Morning Prayer. And we’re building a facility to facilitate it all.

We’ve also ordained a deacon. We’ve brought on a new Minister of Music, a new Youth & Children’s Minister, and a phenomenally gifted, seasoned Assistant Rector who loves it here and hopes to be with us a good long while.

We are worshipping, celebrating, healing, baptizing, marrying, burying, and loving. We are finding Jesus. We are being salt and light.

## ALAN

And yet, as we discovered at our Vestry retreat, we still have work to do. With the help of Canon Frank Logue, our facilitator for the weekend, we realized that for our vision to come to pass in its totality, we have more work to do. We have work to do in **outreach**. (How will folks find Jesus in here if we're not making him known out there?) We have work to do in **pastoral care**. (Our programs and patterns of caring for one another as a church must grow and change as our congregation does.)

But hardest of all, we still have work to do in **making room in our worship**.

Yes, we started a 5 o'clock Sunday service two years ago, but let's face it: because no one had to change, no one did. It was the safe option in creating a new service. The 5 o'clock Eucharist is lovely and beautiful, but it has not actually helped us open up our space and or make significant room for new individuals and families. And so, our average Sunday attendance for two years in a row has leveled off in the 160's. You've heard that number before. It's that same "unstable intermediate" ... the exact unsustainable place where we found ourselves in the late 1990's.

## Fr. LONNIE

While we were on our Vestry retreat, Canon Logue shared some eye-opening statistics with us. (Statistics, of course, aren't everything, but they do tell us *something*.) One of the numbers he uses to evaluate the relative health of a parish is the ratio of Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) to the population within a 5 mile radius of the parish.

0.3% = doing poorly

0.5% = doing okay, but probably not involved in the community

1.0% = doing well, and probably known for its ministries in the community

1.5% and 2.0% = thriving, with vital ministries and a strong impact on the community

Within our diocese, several rural county seat type parishes—like St. Anne's—are at 1.0% to nearly 2.0% of their surrounding population. These are the healthy, vibrant churches that are truly finding Jesus and making him known.

But what about us? Let's be honest: we at St. Anne's see ourselves as a healthy, vibrant parish, right? After all, life here is "so good," right? Any guesses what percentage of Tifton's local population actually attends St. Anne's on a given Sunday? You might think it's 1.5%. You might think it's 3.5%.

**It's 0.54%.**

Of the 29,851 people living within a five-mile radius of St. Anne's, 0.54% of them come to church here on a given Sunday.

By this metric, that's not exactly wildfire. Again, statistics aren't everything, but statistics do tell us something. What this statistic tells us is that it's completely reasonable to believe there are more would-be Episcopalians out there, more seekers searching for the unique Jesus we know.

**Brothers and sisters, if we're going to make room—if we're going to help people find the Jesus we have come to know at St. Anne's—we're going to have to offer an additional Sunday morning service. We're going to have to change.**

**ALAN**

And as we see in our readings today, change is hard. King Herod was scared of change. He felt threatened, scared, and afraid of what he did not understand, so he lashed out and killed 2 years of young boys from Bethlehem.

Peter was also scared of change. When Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and crucifixion, Peter said, "Lord no! Forbid it!"

We all have a bit of St. Peter inside each of us. He represents that part of us that likes things the way they are. Things are good, so why mess with success? Let's just keep doing it like we have been. After all, it's working, right? I can say from personal knowledge that even your Rector feels this way much of the time. He loves this place! And he's often fearful of changing too much too fast, even when he knows it's right.

Like Peter, we all like things the way they are. We are preaching, teaching, loving, and healing, and it is "so good!" But we are not yet what we believe—what we have *stated*—we want to become. We are again at an "unstable intermediate."

The path to our next stable state, like Jesus' path to the cross and Easter, is not easy. And like Peter in today's Gospel, we just want it to continue to be "so good." But we are a people on the move—in transition—and the transition will not be easy. It involves using some of our reserve funds, a building loan, and a mortgage. It involves changing how we do Sunday mornings. It involves following Jesus.

You might wonder if all of this worries me. IT DOES NOT. That is not to trivialize the challenge of change, but given all I've seen since Pat and I walked through those doors eighteen years ago, I am not worried. We have strong leadership. We have a Rector who guides, shares, and walks with us. We have a Vestry that listens and prays. And we have staff! ... a staff that works as a team and works extremely hard. But most of all, unlike last time, we have a vision, and we have a plan. That's what makes this time so different. We *know* where we're headed. We *know* who we are called to become. And we *know* that God is with us.

Fifteen years ago, Jesus knocked on the door of St. Anne's, asking us to make room for more seekers, and we said, "Nope." Two years ago, Jesus knocked again, and we said, "Well, okay ... as long as we don't have to change much." Jesus is still knocking. He hasn't given up on us yet, and he never will.

**Fr. LONNIE**

A few days ago I asked parishioner Ricky Day, “What do you think is the best thing about St. Anne’s these days?” Without a moment’s hesitation, Ricky said, “Oh that’s easy. It’s the chaos. It’s instability.” He said, “I love when I drive onto campus, and there’s a building in my parking space. I love that there are bricks and trash everywhere, and that right now everything’s just a little ugly. I love that we know we need to do more outreach but that we don’t know how. I love that we have crazy nights where we sing and play together and raise \$9,000 for the Dominican Republic. I love that the Vestry knows we have to move to two Sunday morning services and that we presently have no idea what that will look like. I love all of that. I love the chaos... because chaos means growth. Chaos means change. Chaos means resurrection and new life.”

Like the wise men who found Jesus in the chaos of the manger, like poor Peter who found Jesus in the chaos of the cross, we’re all looking for Jesus in the chaos, too. The truth is: he’s already here. He’s always been here. He’ll always be here. And because of that, all will be well.

In fact, it will be better than well.

It’ll be ... “so good.”

Amen.