

The Rector's State of the Parish Address, January, 2010 St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Jacksonville, Florida

"I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." (Joel 2:28)

I write and speak to you in the early days of the year of our Lord 2010, a time full of hope and promise. We have come through hard times, but we are now still on the road to recovery, in the economy and in the Church, especially here at St. Mark's. We have not yet come to the end of the road, but we are on the way, together, to a future full of promise in Christ. It is my primary intent in this to welcome you to our future, and to speak words of hope that are concrete and clear.

St. Mark's has been down several roads in its almost 90 year history. In 2012 we will celebrate the 90th anniversary of the founding of this church. St. Mark's developed in the early years as an island parish, serving the people of this remote part of Jacksonville. In the middle of the century it began to grow more rapidly as the population grew and as fine leadership continued to come its way, including the tenures of Douglas Leatherbury, Bob Clingman, and Barnum McCarty. By the half-way point of Barnum's tenure, St. Mark's was the largest and most influential parish in the diocese of Florida. After his retirement, St. Mark's went through what I describe as a decade-long interim period. There were rectors that were called and came, but only for short times, and several interim clergy came and went. A percentage of the parish departed over the decade, often due to protracted conflict within the congregation and the wider church. Whatever I may or may not accomplish during my tenure as your rector, I am presiding over the end of that transition. We are finished with debilitating controversy and acrimony, not because I am here, but because it has run its course. We all hold convictions on a wide range of topics and issues, but we are finished with fratricide and patricide as acceptable means to finding an outcome of religious and moral certitude. We are moving together into a future full of promise, chastened by the losses and wounds of the past fifteen years, humbled by the grace of God that continues to pour over us, and resolute to seize the hope that is the substance of our calling in Christ Jesus!

So, where are we going, and how shall we get there? I am neither a prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I can see the contour of the land ahead, and it is a goodly land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land fit for our habitation. I believe we will undertake a rigorous and disciplined feasibility analysis in 2010 to determine what we are ready to do in terms of a capital campaign to unite and improve our campus for the next quarter century. At some point in the future, probably within the next eighteen months, we will in fact undertake what

the feasibility study and prayer tell us we can accomplish on Christ's behalf in this place. My guiding light in this entire process as your leader will be to **equip St. Mark's for its next quarter century of mission and service**, and to do so in a way that builds on the history, the habitat and the sociology of this place. We are still an island parish and day school, bordered by a lovely village and parks that make my heart ache with their beauty. **I will never be a party to the compromise of the true nature and loveliness of this habitat.** My energy and effort will always be offered for building upon our heritage, bringing us into the future in such a manner that we can look at our environs, our Day School, our network of buildings and facilities, our beloved Chapel and Church, and still see St. Mark's, still recognize the promised land this was and is. But we will not be the same. God is, even now, making us into the Church of tomorrow, even while He honors the Church we have been. It's going to be a glorious thing to witness!

I have often said over the years that capital campaigns bring out the best and the worst in churches. The best is the vision and the commitment that make transformation possible. The worst is the deep gravitational pull to lose our perspective as we debate square footage, the wisdom of retention ponds, the type of roofing materials and whether (or not) we will move forward as a "green" campus. These debates are important, but they are not why we are here. We are here to give glory to God. So, I am determined to **maintain and expand our mission and service** during the capital campaign. I am also determined to **deepen and broaden our life of prayer**. In the next several months our postulant for Holy Orders, Amy Slater, will be working with me to develop a range of opportunities for our people to be taught how to pray, how to meditate and how to grow in grace. In the Spring we will hold our first-ever Parish Retreat dedicated to this hope. By the time we break ground for whatever project we undertake, I pray that there will be an even wider range of prayer groups and settings and that public daily prayer led by Lay Readers, will mark the morning and evenings of our life together on this our island home.

I see my primary calling as your rector as, in some ways, the same it has always been over the years as a parish priest. My calling is to form this congregation into a biblical community, a group of more or less ordinary twenty-first century people, who know the Bible as canon, as the measure of their lives. To that end I will be continuing to encourage the growth of bible study and reflection groups in our church, but I will also be teaching a course on the Land of the Bible, and bringing the Rev. Canon Dr. John L. Peterson to our parish in September to lead a weekend of biblical renewal as we study "Scripture and the Land". Then I propose that we celebrate our 90th anniversary in part by sponsoring and taking a **parish-wide pilgrimage to the Holy Land**. I can tell you from personal experience, that walking the land of the Bible is one of the most moving and transforming ways to come to "know" the Bible!

I want you to hear me when I say that **the habitat of the Bible, and the habitat of our parish are crucial to understanding and celebrating the fullness of the promise that lies before us.** In nature, there are short-term “communities” of meadows where plants are born and grow and die in weeks, not months, and where change is ever present. Then there are habitats of longer tenure, where bushes and shrubs begin to grow and where time is measured in months and seasons, not days and weeks. And then there are those habitats where all the species are in for the long haul: trees, predators, birds and bees. Time is measured in a hardwood forest very differently than in a mountain meadow. There are fewer young and they grow slowly and live for years, decades and even centuries as with our beloved live oaks. Everything and everyone in a long-term habitat must work together to care for young and old alike, using neither too much nor too little of the resources available and always living with the long view in perspective.

I believe that Ortega/Avondale/Riverside is a long-term habitat in a short-term culture. Our state and our nation live for the short-term profits and pleasure that can be squeezed out of the present. I believe that part of what has brought you to Jacksonville, and to Ortega/Avondale/Riverside and to St. Mark's, is a yearning for the long-term, **a loyalty to place that yields a loyalty to life.** We are here for the long-haul, I am here for the long-haul. I hereby rededicate myself to doing no harm to the remarkable habitat that drew me here, nor to the extraordinary parish that I serve. I ask you to join me in doing no harm over the next several years as we embark upon great initiatives that will enrich and improve our life together, to join me in honoring the past when the past has been honorable, in handling the water and land and air of this place as if we did not and do not possess them, in building for the ages, not for short-term benefit. Let us do the best, not second best and certainly not the mediocre, as we continue to build our unified campus for Christian growth and service here in this place, for us, for our children and for the generations yet unborn. Let us take the high road that will demand our best, not because I say so, but because the high road is the best road, the road that leads through the short-term into the long term and toward the “city not made with human hands” (Hebrews 11:16), toward which our ancestors have journeyed and where we will one day find our home in the company of all the saints in heaven and on earth, surrounding and embracing God the Holy Trinity who is our Origin and our Destiny!

May God guide us in the works of our hands, grant us the substance of dreams amid the prayers of the people, and finally show us the promise of the future!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Jonathan B. Coffey, Jr., Rector