

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, October 1, 2023

Proper 21, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary Track 1

[Exodus 17:1-7](#)

[Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16](#)

[Philippians 2:1-13](#)

[Matthew 21:23-32](#)

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Take a mental trip back sixty years, to this very spot in 1963. It's the day of the groundbreaking for Farlander Hall, our fellowship hall next door, and the quadrangle of buildings around it. Three years prior, in 1960, Incarnation's congregation and vestry had made the decision not to move to the rapidly growing suburbs in Bennett Valley, as had been proposed, but to stay put in this patch of downtown Santa Rosa—the building project that gave us the church campus in almost the shape we know it today.

I think about that generation of leaders here at Incarnation and what they imagined might happen on that campus, in those buildings, over the decades ahead. They created spaces for us, and those before and after us, to worship and learn and meet and eat together, to sing, to play outdoors, to pray, and to welcome and serve our neighbors. They gave us a gift without knowing who we would be and what we would be like. In 1963 Martin Luther King led the March on Washington and John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. The Beatles had yet to have a song played on radio in the United States.

The United States was a churchgoing society and the baby boom was packing mainline churches with members dressed in good Sunday clothes. It was still twelve more years before women would be ordained as priests in the Episcopal Church; if you can believe it, it was seven years before they could even serve as deputies to the church's General Convention. The idea of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans people being out and proud in church leadership would have been utterly unimaginable to all but a prophetic few. If that generation of church leaders had tried to build a campus by imagining exactly who we would be today, what society would be like, what ministry programs we would need to have, they would have completely missed the mark. But they built spaces that were able to adapt to the need over time.

Since then this campus has housed the Living Room, a day center for homeless women and children; the Incarnation 100 bike ride and its afterparty; a family day care in our nursery after they were displaced by the Tubbs Fire; concerts, classes, Bible studies, congregational suppers, twelve-step groups, and of course countless services of worship to the glory of God. The specific needs of the times have changed, but our need to come together as the People of God and to offer hospitality to our neighbors remains.

Back in the days of the Exodus the People of God wandered in the desert for forty years, and God provided for them. There was manna for their hunger, and as in our story from today, there was water for their thirst. Often it was hard, and the people complained, and asked if God was really with them. God often didn't provide for them in the way they would have expected, or chosen. But God was there, and God brought them through to the promised land.

This fall the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation marks 150 years as a parish. Nearly four times the length that the Israelites wandered in the desert. And we too have known God's provision, through hard times and good ones. There have been times of harmony and times of conflict, times of growth and times of leanness. Today after lunch we will gather for a workshop about the future of this campus, this special corner of Santa Rosa. Our vestry and congregation are working together with our design team to imagine the kinds of spaces that are needed for the next forty and fifty and sixty years. Take a moment and imagine to yourself what life will be like sixty years from now, in 2083. It's surely at least as hard for us to imagine what church and society will be like then as it would have been for our forebears in 1963 to imagine our world now. But we can make some guesses about the kinds of spaces that will be adaptable enough to meet the needs of our mission even as it changes with time.

We plan to still be a congregation that comes together in this beautiful sacred space to praise God and pray for the needs of all God's world. We will need community gathering space for food, fellowship, and conversation, and that we can invite our neighbors into. We will need spaces where adults and children can meet to share their lives and grow together. We will need outdoor spaces for play, conversation, and contemplation. We will need space that is "ours," so to speak—though nothing about church is ever really just for ourselves—but space that is set apart from the outside; and we will need space that is public, that welcomes our neighbors and proclaims who we are; and we will need to be able to invite our neighbors in with both clear boundaries and wide-open doors. We will need a physical plant we can manage and care for sustainably over time.

Last year we laid the groundwork by gathering for a series of congregational conversations. We developed a list of ideas and hopes that we are now ready to build on in imagining concrete futures for this campus. We will do it together, as a community, seeking the wisdom and ideas of everyone, guided by the kind of community ethic we heard about from St. Paul today: “Make my joy complete; be of the same mind; have the same love”—which means not that everyone should have the same opinions or preferences, but rather that our diversity finds its unity in Christ. “Do nothing from ambition or conceit, look not to your own interests but to the interests of others”—which means not that we should stifle our own hopes or dreams but that we test them all with reference to the common good of all God’s people.

This will be exciting, and challenging, and fun. And God is with us on the journey, providing what we need.