**Skating in the Dark**

A sermon by The Rev. Chris Wendell

For the Annual Meeting on the 4th Sunday after Epiphany, January 30, 2022

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

My neighbor Steve is a generous man. Every year he spends Thanksgiving weekend installing a homemade ice rink in his yard, ostensibly so that his teenage kids can practice there hockey skills. But the truth is that my kids end up skating on it at least twice as often as his do!

The other night we were out there again, this time after dark. We stumbled through the shadows of the yard towards the rink, grateful for the ambient street light so we could see at least dimly where we were going. But on the ice, it was pretty dark. We’d been told there was a remote control that would trigger some outdoor floodlights Steve had rigged up. So I fumbled around the edges of the rink in the darkness trying to find it –to no avail. The boys didn’t care at all about this. Without missing a beat, they laced up and began to skate in the darkness with joy. I guess that’s why Jesus said that if we want to live in the Kingdom of God, we must become like children!

Now the truth is, skating in dark isn’t the same as skating when you can see what’s ahead of you. You really shouldn’t skate as fast. You probably ought to wear some extra protective gear and keep greater distance between yourself and those around you. And it’s not really possible to play the same kind of games on the ice when everything is so dim. But the boys didn’t seem to mind. They weren’t terribly interested in extra personal protective equipment, but they did skate a bit slower. And they figured out new ways to play that fit the conditions on offer.

As I think about this past year of ministry together here at St. Paul’s, it feels like we spent it skating in the darkness. We really couldn’t see more than a few weeks ahead, what conditions would be like. We had to slow down. We had to spread out. We had extra safety gear to wear. And we couldn’t play together in the same ways we used to. Some of us, like me out on the hockey rink, tried very hard to get more light – to see further ahead, but with only moderate success I think. Others of us stayed mostly off the ice, waiting until conditions improved. And a good many of us, like my kids, simply laced up and figured out how to make new fun in (mostly) safe ways.

I want to say, that I respect and I appreciate each of you in this church – whether you were on the ice, on the edges, or warm and safe in the house watching on the live-stream. Our community thrived in this past year, but only because we had both those ready to get out on the ice and try night skating, and those calling to us from the sidelines saying, “Hey you gotta slow down! It’s not as safe as skating during the day.” The enthusiasm of our night skaters and the prudence of those waiting for a brighter day worked in creative tension to help our church be faithfully active even in the most challenging of circumstances.

In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul’s writes, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly. But then, we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” This past year has been like seeing in a mirror dimly – well, actually, it’s been like being trapped a funhouse of mirrors, not sure what vision of the future is real and what is just deception. It’s been tempting to just try and wait until that moment when the masks finally come off and we can see each other face to face again. It’s been tempting to just wait until we could know fully how this pandemic will end.

But to do that, would have missed the point of what St. Paul is saying here. Because Paul’s point is that the entirety of the human condition is to live with incomplete knowledge, to see the truth only dimly, and often only in reflection. The “coming to know fully” that he writes about is an ultimate state, not one that occurs on this earth, or in this lifetime, or even within the concept of time. It’s not part of the human experience. To be human is to muddle through the funhouse of mirrors…and to make our own joy doing it, like a child skating at night.

This year, we more than muddled through. We really did thrive. Most obviously were all the ways that we adapted much of the ministry we share in Jesus’ name to the realities of life before, during, and after vaccines. And what wonderful adaptive work you all did! Here are some highlights: Between January and June our remote Sunday worship averaged about 80 different households viewing on YouTube within the first 24 hours. We laughed our heads off playing party games at the virtual Pancake Supper. We drove around the neighborhood on Palm Sunday with branches waving out of our moonroofs, horns honking, and bagpipes blaring! We blessed car-keys for 12 new drivers out in the Memorial Garden. We figured out how to seat 19 people socially distant in 3 fifteen passenger vans so that we could offer our summer Youth Mission with Appalachian Service Project. We outfitted our church with better live-streaming technology in June (at a fraction of what we thought it would cost) so that when we resumed in-person worship we could still welcome the 35 or so households who continued to watch on YouTube. We went to our VBS and Catechesis and Kairos sessions outside in the summer and fall! We figured out to have an Advent Fair in person again; we fit as many people as we safely could in the pews to hear a live Lessons and Carols service, and, by the grace of God, on that Sunday before Christmas, the Angel Gabriel once again walked down this aisle and brought Jesus right into the middle of our church.

But beyond adapting the familiar, we also found new ways to be the church that God needs us to be, guided by our Strategic Priorities. We began offering Parish Nights to build intergenerational fellowship outdoors once a month. If you haven’t come yet to huddle around the fire-pits sharing S’mores and conversation and listening to kids running with glee around the driveway, sign up for next Sunday! We continued opened ourselves in new ways to the experiences of vulnerable communities and systemic oppression through our Sacred Ground ministry, studying books by Black American theologians in our men’s and women’s groups, vestry advocacy for establishing Indigenous Peoples Day in Bedford, and by celebrating our first LGBT Pride Sunday in June. We built up our spiritual confidence in numerous ways, but especially through discerning, discussing, nominating, and supporting one of our own parishioners to enter the ordination process towards becoming an Episcopal Priest. And I’m delighted to share with you that we found out earlier this month that Mary Curlew has been accepted by our diocese into that process.

I lift up all these adapted and newly established ministries aware that there has also been loss this year, too. We have said farewell to parishioners who have died or moved away – often without the robust funerals or farewell blessings that we’d like to have had. And, as we’ve started to welcome several new families again, there are still a small number of folks we really haven’t seen much at all whom we miss! We yearn so deeply to be all together again in one room at the same time, for worship, for fellowship, for pancakes, for thrift sales…for whatever we can do. And while I wish I had the remote to turn on the lights so I could see when and how and where that would happen, I think we’re going to skate in the darkness a little while longer together. But we’ve got some practice now, and we’re getting better at it. It’s not ideal, but it’s not for ever. 2021 was a better year than 2020. And I have faith that 2022 promises further opportunities to continue discovering what God has in store for us.

We can already see that happening, even just a month in. Though our Sanctuary support ministry ended last April when Maria was able to leave First Parish in safety, we now have a thriving ministry supporting some of the hundreds of Afghan refugees being resettled in our area, bringing groceries, gathering winter clothing, and collecting funds, through our longtime partner the International Institute of New England. Though Sacred Ground finished in 2021, we’re looking ahead to a Lenten program that our Diocese’s Antiracism Commission is offering titled ‘What is Truth?’. Just last week I was able to resume services at MCI Concord, and I hope to do the same at Carleton Willard as soon as they allow. We got word a few days ago that come Ash Wednesday, I can actually put ashes on your foreheads this year! Do I dare hope that before the year is out we’ll be square dancing in the parish hall to raise money for Haiti again??

In truth, mostly what I hope for is that God will continue to help us live the Way of Love together – in new ways, in familiar ways, in adaptive ways, in surprising ways, in messy ways – whatever. Because though today is a day to reflect on the ministry of our church, we must always remember that our ministry exists for the sake of the world -- of the families, neighborhoods, communities, countries, peoples and the planet that exist beyond these walls. Our world needs Christians like us to embody and embed Jesus’ compassion, generosity and love into it. Whatever the shape of our church looks like, we are here to welcome, comfort, challenge, and strengthen each other in Christ’s name so that we can bring more love into this world. We may still know only in part…but friends, that’s the part we know. Love God. Be like Jesus. Change the world with love. Amen.