Rector's Annual Address to the Parish of St. John in the Wilderness
January 25, 2026

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor ruler, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

My Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

As we come together to reflect on our common life as the people of St. John in the Wilderness, we do so in the midst of a world that seems to be flying apart. And yet, I take great comfort in the above words from Paul's letter to the Romans. Nothing, he says, has the power to separate us from God's love. With all that is happening in our country and in our community, our faith community has beared witness to these words and become a haven for many.

Our parish is comprised of people who have opinions that are all over the map. As such, there have been and will continue to be disagreements among us, but nearly all in our community are resolute in the determination to continue to pray and grow and serve together. And for that, I am immensely proud.

2025 was a special year for us, being the one hundredth year of the laying of the cornerstone for our church building located on the corner of First Street and Clark Avenue. Instead of one big birthday bash for our beloved building, we stretched our celebration over the entire year. With the capable and enthusiastic leadership of Emily Brunner, our Centennial Committee planned and executed monthly events to aid us in our recollection of God's Spirit among us. A winter reenactment of the skidding of the original church building across the ice was held at the Brunner Farm in Grant with the children and youth of the parish doing the heavy lifting (or skidding). Parishioners and other members of the White Bear Lake community enjoyed a special concert celebrating 100 years of fine music offered to the glory of God in the church. Educational programs about our cemetery, our stained glass windows, our history with Native Americans, and our role in the establishment and growth of our town were superb. During the Manitou Days Parade, we gave out hundreds of root beer floats to the community. The capstone of our monthly Centennial Celebrations was a Cornerstone Eucharist in which we welcomed back a number of both parishioners and clergy who have worshipped and served with us in the past. It was such a fantastic and meaningful way to celebrate all of the life and love that has happened in our church building for a hundred years.

An old building such as that of St. John's takes a great amount of care and maintenance. Jake Malark has been our sexton for many years and not only cleans the spaces, mows the lawns, and monitors the condition of the building, but also does smaller repairs. He has been assisted in the last two years by Nick Pearson who faithfully comes to church several mornings each week to help with the cleaning tasks. And, of course, we are blessed by the presence and relentless work of John Brunner and Nick Howe who are at church nearly every week to attend to those repairs that require a deeper dive. All of this is under the

direction of Dennis Thoemke who continues to serve as Chair of the Property Committee that must make difficult decisions about which projects deserve our energies most urgently and intently.

There were three larger property projects that were, or are in the process of being, accomplished. Kathy Smith oversaw the completion of the parlor renovation. That space has been utterly transformed into a beautiful and versatile space for both meetings and other gatherings. New carpeting, new ceiling, new lights, new tech, new furniture all make for an inviting space that will serve the parish for years to come. The kitchen has received much needed renovations as well. A new refrigerator has been purchased, the old gas cookstove has been fixed, some of the walls have received a new paint job, a new commercial sink will soon be installed. These renovations will continue over the next several months as we equip our old kitchen to help us offer hospitality to the glory of God. Finally, problem trees have recently been removed from the cemetery, and the diseased ash trees that line the boulevard on First Street are scheduled to be removed this summer. Maintaining the building and grounds of St. John's requires constant attention and financial resources. Our people, however, are up to the task. The building is in fine shape and realistic plans for future maintenance are in place.

Worship continues to be the foundation of all that we do at St. John's. Because it is so important, a great deal of time and energy are expended in preparation. Months before an actual service of worship occurs, lay folks and clergy gather to talk about it and consider ways that we can most effectively draw out the themes of the season and the day. All of that work is then reviewed and then implemented by those who faithfully serve as Altar Guild members, vergers, lectors, musicians and singers, greeters, ushers, eucharistic ministers. Alec Watson, our new Music Minister, has brought new energy to our worship as the Chancel Choir and Heartbeat band lead us in song. The whole process and the amount of life energy that is expended to pull off each service of worship continues to inspire me. It is our communal way of expressing our love and devotion to God.

Nearly as important to our common life as is our worship, however, is our loving fellowship. Indeed, I would conjecture that the primary reason that many come to church on Sundays and Wednesdays each week is to connect with each other. This is as it should be, and we do it well. Nichole Korth and her team of Coffee Hour workers quietly and faithfully provide the food and setting for the rest of us to connect with each other in real and authentic ways. In addition to our Sunday coffee hour(s), we have become accustomed to coming together for several large annual fellowship events as well. Mark Sears and his kitchen team have continued to do the massive amount of behind the scenes work for these lifeblood events, and we remain so grateful.

Another vital component to our parish life is Christian Formation for children, youth, and adults. This, of course, occurs each and every Sunday morning during the school year, but also on other days, especially Wednesday nights. Sylvia Lovett and Kathy Smith have consistently led adult Bible studies on Sunday mornings this year with Sylvia also leading a popular summer Bible study. Adult Connect groups led by lay leaders, book studies and retreats led by clergy, and other special adult formation classes have rounded out the faith development program for adults. Under the leadership of Kate Maxwell, the adult formation program has become an extremely vibrant part of ministry at St. John's, and I remain grateful to all those who have worked diligently to make it so.

Maggie Howe, our Rising Generations Minister, has done a magnificent job by leading Sunday School, Wilderness Wednesdays, Confirmation classes and retreats, and monthly outreach events for our young people. Both students and their parents are fully engaged in both learning and serving. Students have developed bonds with each other and with their adult leaders. A recent and very visible part of the children's Christian formation program has been the *Imaging and Imagining God* work of students and their adult mentors. *The Wild Star* blessed our sanctuary in the Christmas season, and the new spectacular *Epiphany Altar* currently serves as the table on which we prepare the Lord's Supper each Sunday during this liturgical season of Epiphany. In short, Christian formation, both for students and adults, has never been stronger at St. John's. I am thankful for all those who have worked to accomplish this.

Yet another important part of our parish ministry is our outreach to others. The Little Food Shelf that graces our entrance foyer has become the flagship and most visible expression of our service to the White Bear Lake community. The food shelf is supplied by parishioners bringing in food and other supplies as well as through pledged money to the parish. It remains the only food shelf that I know of in the Twin Cities that is open 24/7 and asks no questions of those receiving. Our deacon, Margaret Thor, has been the coordinator of our efforts, and a special Little Food Shelf Committee is currently being formed to share in its future direction.

In addition to the Little Food Shelf, however, we have engaged in numerous other outreach work throughout the year, supporting other churches and organizations in their projects. A faithful crew of parishioners volunteers to host the very regular blood drives that are offered in our parish hall. Further, we recognize that many of our parishioners are engaged in the work of God in various ways that is not directly supported by the parish. We are doing our best at St. John's to support these people in their individual heroic efforts to serve the least among us.

In all of this work of praying and growing and serving, we are living out our faith together. Both laity and clergy are faithfully playing a part in our parish. We are taking seriously our bishop's charge to become lay-led and clergy supported, and I believe that we have become a model for healthy parish life in this regard. Again, I am exceptionally proud of all of you who have played such a vital role in helping to shape our common life and ministry.

Financially, St. John's remains strong and poised for continued healthy parish life. This is due, of course, to the generosity afforded by you in the form of financial gifts and pledges as well as that of our forbears who generously gave to establish our healthy endowment. Our wardens, Jim DeMay and Mike Carpenter, along with our Treasurer Barry Kostyk and the Vestry have carefully worked hard to ensure that we are living within our means (almost). They have been faithfully assisted by Maureen Vruno who quietly and competently serves as our Financial Coordinator. This important behind-the-scenes financial work of the parish will continue to be challenging as everything becomes more expensive, and as we seek to provide fair compensation to our fantastic St. John's staff.

I also need to express my appreciation to Carrie Thomas who serves as our Parish Coordinator. Carrie's work is at the hub of our common life. Little happens at St. John's without Carrie having her capable

input. She has been particularly helpful to me as I have juggled my daily responsibilities as your Rector. Many mornings I have come into the office and have asked Carrie, "what need to be my priorities today?" Carrie, heartfelt thanks to you. I am also so very appreciative to my clergy colleagues, Kate Maxwell and Margaret Thor. They are strong and wise women who have kept me on the straight and narrow! They have provided indispensable counsel to me on a weekly basis, and do so much work for the parish and the diocese on a purely non-stipendiary basis. We are mightily blessed by their presence and faithful work among us.

As I conclude my report on life and ministry at St. John's for 2025, the centennial year for our church building, I am filled with gratitude. I remain amazed at how God's Spirit is working in and through so many of you in our parish. I am proud of where we are and of the journey that has brought us here. Despite so many challenges in these troubling times, we have come together and have stuck together. This resilience and faithfulness to God and to each other is a bold witness to the Way of Jesus.

This will be my last Rector's address to the people of St. John's. I am leaving in just two weeks time to semi-retire, taking a part-time position at a small country parish in northern Wisconsin. I hope that the next chapter of my life and ministry as a priest in God's church will be quieter and more contemplative. I hope to have significant time to spend in God's spectacular natural world, developing a more intimate relationship with the non-human part of God's creation. I look forward to this new chapter.

I will, however, miss you desperately, more than words can express. I have done my best to minister faithfully among you, and I hope to have been helpful to at least some of you in your lives of faith. I need you to know also, however, how crucial you have been to me in my life of faith. The years that I have been with you have been challenging ones in my personal life, and through it all, you have lovingly cared for me and my family. That love has sustained me, and my heart is filled to the brim with gratitude. Thank you.

As I conclude this annual address, I return to Saint Paul's words to the nascent Roman church.

> *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor ruler, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)*

Like us, Paul himself lived in an extraordinarily difficult time of conflict in which political and religious entities were all vying for power and control. Caught in the middle of the chaos were the fledgling new communities of Jesus' followers who were just beginning to learn and live the Way of Christ. Often, these early Christians received the brunt of abuse. I am sure there were times they wanted to give it all up. But Paul counsels them to persevere. Nothing, he assures them, will be able to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus. At times such as these, I echo Paul's words and exhort you all to trust in the goodness and loving kindness of God.

The Parish of St. John in the Wilderness is a loving, resilient, faithful community of people who are doing their level best to love and serve and walk in the Way of Jesus. As I leave this community, I do so

with immense pride and gratitude. In a world torn apart by the forces of this world, it is my full hope and expectation that this community that God has built among us will continue to faithfully witness in word and deed to God's love and power. May God bless your lives, and may God bless this amazing parish.

Gratefully, and with all my love,

The Reverend Arthur Hancock
Rector