



# St. Mary's Episcopal Church

Message by Rev. Michael Burke  
Annual Meeting Sunday, Feb. 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024



My beloved St. Mary's family,

When I think of St. Mary's over these past couple years, one word comes to mind: Resilient!

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a worldwide pandemic and health emergency. Four days later, on March 15<sup>th</sup>, St. Mary's had its first online service, as the world entered a long period of shut-downs. Next month, it will be the fourth anniversary of that event. It was a devastating time for businesses, churches, and families around the world, many of whom never recovered. Never before in U.S. history, despite a civil war and two world wars, had in-person worship ever ceased in American faith communities.

COVID left us with a cumulative U.S. inflation rate, from 2019-2023, of 20.4%. At St. Mary's, church attendance dropped from 233 people per Sunday down to a low of 82. We found ourselves facing a huge financial deficit. To survive during these long dark months of periodic shut-downs over the last four years, St. Mary's used a majority of its savings and reserve funds. In 2024 alone, our budget uses \$182,388 in reserves, despite having made the very painful decisions to reduce from three clergy down to two, cut two other additional full time lay positions, and reduce the hours worked by part-time employees.

One year ago this week, after numerous congregational meetings and much prayer, St. Mary's adopted a plan to rebuild and reinvigorate our parish. By any measure, that plan has been very successful.

On-campus attendance has risen 62% from January 2023 to January 2024. Last Sunday, there were over thirty people attending on Zoom, twelve of them joining us from places outside of Anchorage. In our Fall ingathering, we had an all-time St. Mary's record of 39 new pledging households. We have twenty five people going on our mission partnership trip in May to the Episcopal Diocese of Colombia. Sunday School class last week was full.

This year, our volunteer ministry teams have partnered with over 40 community-based organizations to feed hungry families, rehouse homeless youth, support those fleeing domestic violence, work with trans and non-binary youth, educate young children, care for the sick and the dying, and an amazing array of work listed in your annual report booklet.

### **St. Mary's is back! We are... Resilient!**

But we are not “out of the woods” yet. We are still only about 75% of our pre-Covid attendance. With our current usage-rate, we have only about twenty months left in our reserve fund accounts. We need to give sacrificially and work diligently. We still struggle for enough helping hands to do the work of the liturgy and parish programs, such as adult and children's Christian formation. We still need to build Sunday attendance and need more liturgical leaders such as ushers and readers, before we can consider returning to two main Sunday morning services, at 9am and 11:30 am, that we had before Covid.

We have rebuilt before, in the socially turbulent 1960s and 70s. We have done it before, in the wake of the oil-bust period of the 1980s. We have done it before, when the issue of human sexuality threatened to divide us in the early 1990s. And, with God's help, we will do it again.

Back in the 1980s a common symbol of St. Mary's was the Monarch butterfly. Fragile, beautiful, yet, over a course of three years, these small creatures make an annual 3000 mile migration journey from the far northern Canada all the way down to Mexico and back again. No single butterfly completes the journey; it is the work of generations, following a guiding sense deep within that we can neither see nor fully understand.

Friends, we have just begun this new chapter in our life together as the people of God in this place. We are surrounded by what Scripture calls “that great cloud of witnesses,” all those faithful departed who have gone before us into that larger life with God. We are at the beginning of this journey of rediscovery. But we are on our way.

St. Mary's is strong, by the grace and power of God, working in us, and through us, and amongst us. To heal the broken heart of this world. To heal the wounded places in our own lives.

God is good / All the time. All the time / God is good.

We are... Resilient!