

*Home by Another Road:
The 9 AM Service at Old St. Paul's, Baltimore
The Second Sunday after Christmas Day, January 4, 2009*

On Trinity Sunday 1991, six priests of the Episcopal Church in the diocese of Maryland issued what came to be known as the “Baltimore Declaration.” In fewer than 3,000 words, the manifesto charged that denominational leaders were increasingly repudiating “the doctrinal norms of the historic creeds and ecumenical councils” and were relativizing the authority of scripture. Although the declaration did not specifically mention it, some of the signers rejected the ordination of women to the priesthood, revisions to the prayer book, and other progressive trends in the church. One signer was the rector of Old Saint Paul’s Church in Baltimore. This is a traditional parish of the Episcopal Church. So traditional was it in the 1990s that it stood against all kinds of modernization and ecclesiastical updating. Today, a woman priest serves on staff, a child-friendly worship service is offered, and a more forward-looking ethos is evident. At the same time, however, a basic commitment to orthodoxy and Anglican tradition remains in place.

Founded in 1692, Old St. Paul’s is situated in what is now downtown Baltimore, on a busy intersection, surrounded by a hotel, shops, and offices. The first church was a log cabin, on Colgate Creek in southeast Baltimore County. The parish moved to the current location in town in 1730. Theirs is the oldest continuously owned property in the city, and the rectory, built in 1791, is the oldest continuously occupied building in Baltimore. Old St. Paul’s has founded numerous institutions, including schools and other parishes. In the parish cemetery are interred the remains of Samuel Chase, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. In the 1840s it moved from a high-church position towards Anglo-Catholicism. Its widely known and highly regarded choir of men and boys was founded in 1873; this would be complemented by a choir of men and girls in 2004. With the flight from the cities in the 1960s, Old St. Paul’s began to suffer a decline in membership, a trend that is only now reversing. Since 1959 the church has probably become best known worldwide for its accidental association with Max Ehrmann’s poem “Desiderata,” which has often been re-published with the mistaken statement that it was “found in Old St. Paul’s Church”. The parish reports on its website (www.osp1692.org) that it receives several enquiries a week about the poem.

The current church building, completed in 1856, was designed by Richard Upjohn (1802–1878), who is also noted as the architect of Trinity Church, New York City. The previous church was destroyed in a fire, and Upjohn incorporated the walls that remained standing into his design. Because he had recently returned from a journey to Italy, and because of the constraints of the plan, Upjohn deviated from his more characteristic Gothic Revival style and instead produced a church inspired by the Italian Renaissance. A legend says that he modeled his plan on St. Paul’s Outside the Walls, built in 384 in Rome.

The church features eight stained-glass windows from the studios of Louis Comfort Tiffany, as well as a large central chancel window by Helen Maitland Armstrong, one of Tiffany’s protégés. The window themes, primarily biblical, include depictions of the Resurrection, the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and the parable of the ten talents (Matthew 25:14-30). Among the Tiffany windows are depictions of an Angelic Missionary Spirit, the Angel of Faith, and the Angel of Hope. Armstrong’s great east window features an angelic host gathered around and focused on a sheep above, identified as the Lamb of God. This fresco lamb, painted on plaster, was restored about ten years ago as

part of a major restoration project. Completed in 1904, the window is described as a depiction of “A Song of Creation,” or *Benedicite* (“O ye spirits and souls of the righteous, bless ye the Lord,” from the Septuagint version of Daniel). Below the window is a light grey mosaic reredos by Tiffany, featuring peacocks with opalescent feathers. The church organ is an eclectic instrument, containing pipe work of Roosevelt, Skinner, Austin, and Moeller.

The inside of the church gives a spectacular first impression, as it is in excellent condition, having been repainted and restored inside as recently as 1992. Owing to the urban setting and the expansive stained glass, the church is dark, but complementary lighting provides a striking contrast between light and dark, in addition to making it easy for members of the congregation to read worship materials. (A complete report on the building is available as a Historic American Buildings Survey of the U.S. National Park Service.)

The present rector has served since 2004. His wife serves on the staff as the priest for Christian Formation. Not unlike the clergy of other parishes with a long-standing Sunday morning pattern of 8 AM Communion and 11 AM Morning Prayer (both celebrated in traditional Elizabethan language), the rector of Old St. Paul’s has elected to develop an alternative 9 AM service. A simple altar table, built by the son of a former rector, is placed between the choir stalls for this service. The schedule allows for those attending both the 9 AM and 11AM services to participate in a 10 AM adult forum, which is held next door to the church at an elegant conference center.

A visitor, in town for a conference, attends the 9 AM service for the convenience of his schedule, and happily discovers a sturdy, simple Prayer Book liturgy. Upon arrival, he is greeted by a buzz of activity at the rear of the church. A priest in cassock-alb and stole greets visitors warmly, in between conversations with acolytes and ushers about service details. The service leaflet is attractive and welcoming. “We are so glad that you have joined us today,” it says. “Everything needed to participate in this service is contained in this leaflet,” it boasts.

After finding a pew and kneeling for prayer, most visitors are approached by an elegant matronly woman in a fur coat who asks if they would bring cookies the following week. The woman graciously moves on when she understands that she has approached visitors from out of town. As the congregation of about eighty (including perhaps fifteen children) gathers, a guitarist plays a prelude from a position near the front of the church. (The choirs enjoy a holiday on the Sundays between Christmas and Epiphany.) A peal sounds on the carillon, and then all stand to sing two stanzas of “We three kings of Orient are,” as a procession enters down the center aisle. The procession consists of cross, two tapers, and two priests.

The service that follows is spoken, not sung, with texts taken entirely from the Book of Common Prayer. The service follows the loose pattern of “An Order for Celebrating the Holy Eucharist,” rather than a strict Rite Two, in order to allow for the fuller participation of children and to keep the duration of the service within a limit of fifty minutes. Facing the people across a small wooden table placed in the midst of the choir, the priest begins, “Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” All pray the Collect of the Day together. A song of praise, “We are walking in the light of God,” follows rather than precedes that. The congregation sings the one stanza in English, altered from the version printed in *Wonder, Love, and Praise*, which renders the first line “We are *marching* in the light God.” After the song, one of the priests ushers the children to a separate service of the Word downstairs.

Next comes a reading from Ephesians (1:3-6,15-19a, “he has made known to us the mystery of his will”) and seven verses of Psalm 89 (1-4,24-26, “I will sing of your steadfast love”), recited responsively, followed by another hymn, “As with gladness men of old.”

Here as elsewhere, the hymn is truncated (in this case to stanzas 1, 3, and 5). The melody line only is printed with interlined next, thus facilitating congregational singing in unison. The priest then proclaims the gospel (Matthew 2:1-12, Herod and the magi) from the midst of the aisle, then moves to the pulpit for her sermon.

The sermon begins with a sobering rehearsal of the state of the current economic downturn, but then turns quickly to the subject of dreams. “Desperate times call for desperate matters,” the priest says, suggesting that all should take the risk of paying more attention to their dreams. Using concrete examples from her own experience and from history, the priest makes a distinction between dreams that are from God and those that are not. Dreams from God, she says, will lead us to be more loving and whole. She ends by calling the congregation to listen for the voice of God, to consider—like the wise ones in the gospel story—taking another path that will surely lead us home. It is not difficult to make a connection to the parish’s recent history and this new venture in common prayer.

Upon returning to her prayer desk, the priest leads a recitation of the Nicene Creed. A lay person leads the intercessory prayers, which are followed by a brief exchange of the peace, during which the second priest returns with the children. The presider then gives a hearty welcome, along with various announcements. During a voluntary played on the guitar, an offering is taken. This is followed by Eucharistic Prayer B, with the *Sanctus* sung to the Proulx setting from *The Hymnal 1982*. After reciting the traditional Lord’s Prayer and the *Pascha nostrum* fraction verse, the congregation receives communion at a station at the base of the chancel steps. Two lay people assist the two priests by administering chalices. The lay ministers are nattily dressed in street clothes and seem familiar with their roles.

After the post-communion prayer and blessing, the congregation sings “What star is this?”, omitting stanza 2. The procession retires and a dismissal is proclaimed from the rear. Finally, an organ voluntary is heard as the congregation gathers at the rear of the church for coffee and cookies. A forum will follow at the commercial conference center next door. The church has no facilities of its own for such a gathering, as the building’s undercroft is entirely devoted to children’s ministry. Those preferring the 11 AM service may also attend this forum.

St. Paul’s has thus managed to maintain fidelity to its inheritance—including a choir of men and boys, a tradition of formal Rite One worship, and service times of 8 and 11 on Sundays—while simultaneously building a parallel track that includes a Rite Two, child-friendly, more informal worship, and another choir that welcomes the voices of girls. Under the current leadership, the parish is well positioned for the emerging culture of the twenty-first century. The rector reports that parishioners come not only from the city but also from throughout the surrounding county.

“We Need Your Participation!” the printed parish notes proclaim. While the specific appeal is for an annual pledge, the leaders of Old St. Paul’s are also seeking to build the congregation through a diverse and well-planned series of programs and liturgies. Printed announcements lament the termination of a Tuesday music series and Vespers due to budgetary cutbacks. “These difficult decisions are being made thoughtfully so that we can weather these tough economic times as gracefully as possible,” the bulletin reads. Clearly, the leadership of Old St. Paul’s is not afraid to admit to the harsh reality of today’s world. While honoring the tradition inherited from the past, they are also able to lead their congregation into a new and different tomorrow. Not unlike the metaphor in the gospel story of the wise ones from the east, Old St. Paul’s appears to be headed home on another, and more vibrant, road.

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