

**260th Anniversary of St. John's Anglican Church
Lunenburg, Nova Scotia
Sunday, June 9, 2013**

Pew #22

What a joy to be here! Thank you Michael and (wardens).

It is often said of churches "If the walls could talk, what stories they could tell!"

The same could be said of the pews "What stories they could tell!"

Today one of the pews in this old church is going to tell its story.

I am pew #22. All that is left of me is the end that once faced a side aisle. I am propped up near the chancel step this morning. In the long history of faithful witness to the Gospel of Christ in this place I am a relative newcomer. Like many of you I have heard of the preaching of Jean Baptiste Moreau who would gather all the town folk in the square. He would preach from the very place where the monument to his labours stands today. I have also heard of the missionary Rectors who succeeded him. Paulus Bryzelius and Peter dela Roche. I have heard of the original church built in 1754 with boards from the Old King's Chapel on Boston. It had square windows and its conical shaped tower resembled those in our Fatherland.

As the congregation grew the building was moved ahead on the lot to accommodate a chancel. The whole building was reconstructed in 1870 in a style known as Carpenter Gothic and beautifully decorated with ornamental pinnacles at the tower.

Under the supervision of Solomon Morash, I saw this building widened through the addition of the side aisles in 1892. Like the arches opening in to those aisles and the great one opening into the chancel, like the hammerbeam structure supporting the ceiling, it was built by master carpenters using old fashioned square headed nails. If you look closely you'll see that I still bear a few of those nails. You see, I was built to last.

I have witnessed the comings and goings of numerous clergy who have served this parish. I have seen the passing of generations of the faithful and welcomed several new ones in my lifetime.

I must say I was always most content when I was occupied, not empty.

In my first few years I was numbered – 22. For many years occupied by Mr. Jacob Smith and his family. That was in the days of pew rentals. As those days passed I was free and available to any who wanted to occupy me.

I was always happy to hear the carillon of ten bells, that wonderful gift of Lt. Col. Kaulbach in 1902. Someone told me the inscription on the great bell reads "Lord may these bells forever be a tuneful voice o'er land and sea to call thy people unto thee".

And came they did - in droves those faithful people. I could hear them singing all the way down through the Church Square, I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord".

And in they came, taking their places, row upon row. These are people of great faith and they are given to good works. They have worked hard through the years to maintain the fabric of this old church - to keep it in the beauty of holiness.

They have so persevered in this task, and with such a measure of achievement, that this church is designated a Provincial Heritage Property and a National Historic Site. It is one of the architectural gems in old town Lunenburg, honoured as it has been by UNESCO as a World Historic Site.

While these distinctions mean so much to this town no distinction is greater than that which the faithful give it. Those, who week by week gather within its sacred walls for worship and then go out to live the gospel they have heard.

"How dear", they say, "how dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts". Yes that's how the faithful feel about this place. They see it not as a monument to the past, but as the courts of the living God who still swoops down from heaven to touch the face of mortals, to touch their hearts with grace and glory. This living God comes to forgive and heal, to comfort and console.

From my place, indeed from every place in this church, I realize how we are surrounded on every side by images of God's loving purposes in sending Jesus into the world - for its healing and transformation, that the day will come when the whole world sends back the song which now the angels sing "Glory to God in the Highest and peace to God's people on earth."

On one side of the church those beautiful works of stained glass, so skillfully restored by a local artist, set before us The Humbling of Jesus - The Annunciation, The Nativity, The Visit of The Magi, The Presentation in The Temple.

On the other side we see the Exalting of Jesus through The Crucifixion, The Resurrection, The Breaking of Bread, and The Ascension.

From behind the altar The Good Shepherd looks out to welcome us at his table, to feed and anoint us.

From the Light of the World window in this corner he bids us to open our hearts that he might come in and make his abode within us - for that in his desire.

From another corner, he calls us through the story of The Good Samaritan, to be merciful, to care for those in need, to feed the hungry, and shelter the homeless, to be about the work of building a truly just, healthy, and peaceful world.

I Pew #22 was always glad to see a family approaching to take their place in the space I provided. I enjoyed their singing. I was moved by their attentiveness in listening for the Word of God. I heard their prayers. I watched them go forward to receive Holy Communion and then give thanks when they returned from the altar. That was my life every Sunday for so many years.

And then of course there were those occasions when I was occupied by guests rejoicing with a bride and groom giving themselves to one another in marriage; and occasions when I was occupied by friends grieving at funerals.

For some I really was a comfortable pew and I know, in all honesty that I wasn't so comfortable for others.

Then came a day when after a decision of the Parish Council to create space for families and sponsors in baptism to gather around the font.

I was pulled apart and all my joints were exposed - everything that had held me together. It was hard to bear, thinking I'd no longer be occupied but I was humble enough to see the wisdom of the Parish Council.

I was removed from the church and taken to the Rector's study in the parish hall. A few year's later he left Lunenburg to become a bishop and he took me to Halifax. I'm not really sure he should have done that but he did. There I stood for twelve years in his study.

Because I was there I was spared the fire that ravaged our church on November 1, 2001. But then again I understand all the pews were spared. They needed massive cleaning and refinishing though. The Bishop was happy to be at the Rededication of the Church on June 12, 2005 and he told me every pew was occupied and there was in fact an overflow congregation on hand many of whom were standing outside. What a glorious celebration it was. A beautiful offering to God of a labour of love such as this town had never seen, for so many had contributed to the Restoration Project. In its own way it drew all the churches together - the whole town in fact.

Well, I remained in Halifax for a couple more years and then I found myself en route to Toronto.

The Bishop had been called to a yet wider ministry of pastoral care and oversight for our Church from coast to coast. And there I have stood for another six years in his study - a beautiful reminder to him of such good times in ministry in Lunenburg.

When plans were being made for the 260th Anniversary of the parish, he got a call to preach at this Service of Thanksgiving. It wasn't long before I realised he was struggling with a decision. Should he keep me as a real piece of the old church, forever his, or should he bring me back to Lunenburg. It wasn't an easy decision but I sure am happy with it.

Two nights ago he carefully wrapped me in bubble wrap and brown papers and string and brought me home.

In coming back to you I want you to know, that even in all those years I was away from you, I have never lost sight of the truth that this parish with this grand old church is dedicated to the Glory of God under the name of St. John, the Evangelist. "Johannes" in the German tongue.

- the one who reclined close to Jesus at the Last Supper, the one who could hear the heartbeat of The Saviour
- the one who stood at the foot of the cross, the one into whose care Jesus commended his dear mother
- the one who outran Peter to the tomb and in an instant knew the glory of The Resurrection

John was the one who recognized the figure on the seashore giving instructions about where to cast their fishing nets. They had toiled all night and caught nothing. At Jesus' word the catch was bountiful and at his invitation they came and had breakfast at the shore.

John was the only one of the twelve to live into old age and die of natural causes. In his infirmity he would be carried into the Eucharist, saying "Little children love one another".

John was the founder of a community out of which emerged The Gospel and Letters in the New Testament that bear his name.

His Gospel is magnificent. From the Prologue to the conclusion, the theme is new life in Jesus. "These things are written" he said "that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that believing in him you may have life in his Name". (20:31)

With all the loftiness and depth of this great gospel there is a humility with which it ends. John writes, "There are also many other things which Jesus did, and were every one of them to be written, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that could be written". (21:25)

Thousands of books that have been written on the life and ministry of Jesus, the interpretation of his preaching, and the writings of holy men and women through all the ages.

And I think that alongside those there are thousands of others and they are the stories of parishes across this land and all around the world - stories of communities of men and women and children drawn together in Jesus, formed by his teaching, and engaged in multiple good works to which his Gospel calls us.

Yours is one of those stories – 260 years of faithful witness to this Gospel. There is so much for which to be so very grateful, so much for which to be so very hopeful.

I, Pew 22, am home again. House me where you will and I will be content.

From the very day I was constructed and sanded and finished by a master carpenter, I have realized that I am probably the principal furnishing in this or any church that can say what I am now about to say

“Remembering our solemn obligation to maintain the fabric of this house of God, let us remember as well our sacred calling to continue building here a church of flesh and bone, a church of soul and spirit.”

And even as I say that, my heart sings to read the gracious word of invitation on the cover of the bulletin for this Service of Thanksgiving.

To all who mourn or need comfort,
To all who are weary and need rest,
To all who seek friendship,
To all who desire to grow in relationship with God,
To all who yearn to pray,
To all who need a Saviour,
and to all, whoever will worship,
This Church of St. John’s opens wide its doors
and in the name of Christ our Lord says, “Welcome”.