

In the early 1960s, God blessed Immanuel Church on the Hill with a big problem: So many people had moved into what was then the West End of our city that their building on Seminary Road—their building which was less than 10 years old—was overflowing with people. And Immanuel’s ancillary chapel on the “holy hill” of the nearby seminary was even smaller. Where was Immanuel to put all the people?



*Zabriskie Chapel,
Immanuel Church on the Hill,
Alexandria, Virginia*

According to Arnold Wells, who was on Immanuel’s Vestry at the time, each additional seat they wanted to add would cost \$1,200. This was the cost to disassemble their church building and put everything back, but on a larger scale. Immanuel couldn’t afford this solution. So they prayed about how to respond to their problem.

That’s how God called out Immanuel Church on the Hill, called the people of Immanuel Church out of their comfort zone. They were to help the diocese create a new church nearby. That new church, of course, was this very church, Resurrection.



The Rev. Frank W. Pisani

You probably already know that our very first worship service was in the auditorium of Hammond School, right up here on Seminary Road. Our founding priest was an experienced church planter named Frank Pisani.

By all accounts, Frank had a charismatic personality. He had a great golf game. And his wife Hap was an absolute jewel. In other words, Frank had all the assets needed at the time to charm your wallet open (and I mean this in an admiring way). Frank was the Assistant Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary, responsible for what we would call “development” today. Our fledgling church was not his full-time day job.

What Frank did, though, was to convince a whole bunch of people at the seminary to leave the holy hill and worship at this new church he named Resurrection. There were 50 people at that first service on Palm Sunday 1964, and 35 of them received Holy Communion. These folks were called out of their old worship existence, into a new reality that God was creating.

God never does anything on a whim. God had a reason for our existence, a mere two miles from Immanuel. Now don’t tell me that we exist so that Immanuel could keep its building picturesque. No, God had something else in mind for them, even as he called us out, called us into existence, for another

reason. If Immanuel is Church on the Hill, we are Church in the Valley. Life has always been a bit harder for the folks who live here in the Beauregard Corridor than on the “holy hill.”

Immanuel, by the way, gave a lot more than money to help God call Church of the Resurrection into existence. God called that church’s curate, a young priest named Jim Green, to be our first Rector. And when Jim came with his wife Dibbie—who I am delighted to say is here tonight—a whole bunch of folks left the Church on the Hill and followed Jim here, called out to be part of this Resurrection experience. And, when Jim retired, God called out a new Rector, Anne Gavin Ritchie, to be our shepherd.

In our gospel reading we hear of Jesus commissioning Peter as the rock on which God was to build his church. If you’ve spent any time in church at all, you will know that Peter WAS a rock. Utterly dependable, but also a person who could be relied on to say absolutely the wrong thing. A rock in all senses of the word. So Peter was an improbable selection as the person upon whom Jesus was to stake the future of his work in this world.



And as our gospel lesson tells us, God had blessed the disciples with a big problem: They knew Jesus’ true and full identity. Jesus is the Messiah, the promised living son of the living God. God in the flesh, here with us. This was knowledge that could and would eventually get them killed, martyred. What were they to do about this problem, this dangerous knowledge? They were, counterintuitively, to proclaim Jesus’ identity to the world, not just by themselves, but through something new called a “church.”

Church: EKKLESIA, a Greek work that means “called out.”



My dictionary says that church is “a building used for public Christian worship, as in ‘they came to church with me.’” Well, the Greek definition knows more than Webster’s, and shame on us for letting

our culture lose sight of what we here at Resurrection know so well: a church is not a building; a church is a people, called out to help Jesus complete God's work here on earth.

So, being a church and having thrived for 50 years, what is the mission that God has given us to do? What purpose does God have in mind by putting THIS group of people together to work together despite our obvious deficiencies? We ARE improbable, you know. Just like Peter and his colleagues were improbable.

Put another way, the question becomes, what new reality is God calling US out to be part of? After a year of discernment, we think we know. We are to be Reborn from above. Replanted. Repurposed to serve the need which—unknown to us—God has nourished and sustained us for along.

On THIS rock God has built, is building, will build his church.

