

April 4, 2020

From the Rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Beaumont, Texas:



My friends in Christ,

I begin this letter with some somber news. Our dear fellow member of St. Stephen's, Mary Lou Vickery, died this morning. She was at home with family by her side. Arrangements will be made for a future date to gather publicly to celebrate Mary Lou's life when it is safe to gather, but in the meantime I ask you to keep Mary Lou and her whole family in your prayers. In addition, my wife's father, John MacDougall, died yesterday. Katie traveled to Indianapolis to be with her father and her family at this time. It is unknown at this time if coronavirus played a role, but I likewise ask you to keep my family in your prayers at this time.

This next week is Holy Week. It will certainly be a different Holy Week than most of us have experienced. Each of us are probably going through a lot of emotional processing over how dramatically our lives have changed--I know I am! Part of me mourns the loss of the ways we are used to doing things--showing our love by gathering, studying together, hugging, singing together, sharing a cup of coffee. It is tempting to despair and feel like, if we cannot gather the way we'd prefer, maybe we should just not even bother trying this year.

I am thinking a great deal nowadays about the early Christians, the ones who lived in hiding because Christianity was against the law of the Roman Empire. They too were not always able to sing Hosanna triumphantly into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday or walk the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday. It was too dangerous to gather for an Agape Meal on Maundy Thursday or certainly to joyously proclaim together the Resurrection of Christ at Easter. In a way this social distancing we are doing as a church connects me at a deeper level to these early Christians. Maybe this spiritual discipline to which we are called right now is forming us in some profound ways.

Seen another way, however, we are far luckier than the early Christians because we do have the ability to creatively gather in ways they could never dream. This Holy Week we need to gather--perhaps even more so than usual--and we are blessed that we can gather with one another. I ask you all to please join us in marking and celebrating this Holy Week. Our church

is stronger than the forces that try to isolate us. This Holy Week is a chance to show in word and deed what it means we say that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Please pray over how you intend to join us. Visit www.ststephensbmt.org to find all of the ways to participate with us online. Let God's work happen among us, even if not in the ways we pre-plan for it to. I have included here a schedule of the many ways we can gather to mark Holy Week:

- Tomorrow, Sun. April 5th at 8am & 10am: Palm Sunday, where we will gather like the first Christians to share the story of Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem
- Sun. April 5th at 1pm: Episcobasics, gathering to learn more about how we celebrate Holy Week
- Sun. April 5th at 8:30pm: [Compline](#), a prayer to close our day together before bed
- Mon. April 6th at 8am-10am: Coffee with the Rector, easy fellowship to start our morning
- Mon. April 6th at 8:30pm: Compline
- Tue. April 7th at 8:30pm: Compline
- Wed. April 8th at 5:30pm: Wed. night worship, featuring a traditional service of [Tenebrae](#), where we recognize our need for Christ's light in the world
- Wed. April 8th at 8:30pm: Compline
- Thu. April 9th at 6pm: Agape Meal, where we have dinner together from our homes as we remember the Last Supper
- Thu. April 9th at 7:30pm: Maundy Thursday, where we remember the last commandment Jesus gave his disciples before he was taken away
- Fri. April 10th at 8am-10am: Online Bible Study, featuring the stories of Holy Week
- Fri. April 10th at 12:00pm & 7:30pm: Good Friday, where we remember Jesus's sacrifice for us and walk the [Stations of the Cross](#) with him
- Sat. April 11th at 9am: Holy Saturday, a short service while we wait at the tomb

- Sat. April 11th at 7:30pm: The Great Vigil of Easter! We proclaim the Resurrection because Jesus is Risen! Bring your candles. Bring your bells, keys, and other noise-makers!
- Sun. April 12th at 8am & 10am: Easter Sunday, where we proclaim the Resurrection

Again, all of these opportunities to participate are available through our website, www.ststephensbmt.org

Finally, my last request for you all is to make sure you share these events with those around you. There is a great feeling of isolation out there. Many people do not know where to turn for some hope, some contact, some sense of meaning. The many ways to creatively engage with one another this Holy Week are open to all who want to join in. May this be a way that we can be there for each other.

Until I see you again, may you know that I am holding you all in prayer as I know you are doing for each other. Peace be with you, my friends in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a large initial 'S'.

The Rev. Steven M. Balke, Jr.