

March 20, 2020

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



*"For surely I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord.
"Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future
with hope." --Jer. 29:11*

This passage from the prophet Jeremiah--written to God's children in exile in Babylon--has been on my mind all week. I am sure some similar passage longing for hope or comfort or solace has been on many of your minds as well.

This week I write to you after the Executive Board of The Episcopal Diocese of Texas has convened. We met with Bishop Doyle and all of our bishops to discuss our church's ongoing work in caring for one another in response to COVID-19. The entire Executive Board commends the work we have done as a church to find creative ways to still be present to one another as the Body of Christ while also self-sacrificially keeping social distance to slow the disease's spread. You, the people of St. Stephen's, have been exemplary in the ways you have taken up this cause, proving that we are not only Christian community when we are in the same room! Bless you all!

Our work of striking this balance will continue. It has been decided that in-person gatherings will remain suspended until at least March 30 and the bishop is asking us to begin preparing ourselves for the possible need to remain suspended for eight weeks. The most qualified health officials are telling us that this is the best way we can slow COVID-19's spread and prevent the healthcare systems of our nation from being overloaded.

Yet even in our social distance we will continue gathering in outside-of-the-box ways. I invite you to keep an eye on our parish Website, ststephensbmt.org, where we are creating online opportunities to join us in:

- Worshipping Together--featuring live online worship Sundays 8am & 10am and Wednesdays 5:30pm

- Forming Christians--featuring *Episcobasics Online*, Bible studies, and other opportunities for Christian education
- Building Fellowship--featuring online video chats like *Coffee Hour with the Rector* and *Sharing Faith Dinners Online*
- Spreading the Word--featuring a place for you to share your own videos and messages of love and support for one another
- Serving the World--featuring a list of resources of how you can help others during this time of trial
- Pastoral Care--featuring resources for how you can seek help and assistance as well

My sincere hope is that, over the course of the next few weeks ahead, you will see that we are every bit as much the same loving community of St. Stephen's even when we cannot be in a room together.

I have attached a letter from Bishop Doyle that I ask you all to read. One of the most reassuring messages he shared with me was the reminder that this is hardly the first time our church has faced such adversity and yet Christianity thrives. From the 1918-1920 flu pandemic to the persecutions by the Roman Empire, the Black Plague to World War II, there have been plenty of times when it was not safe for us to gather as Christians, yet we survived and thrived remembering that Christ was before, is now, and always will be with us.

My regular updates to you will continue as we are all in this together, as such is the way the church has always been for millenia. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me via telephone (409-892-4227), text (313-405-3995), or email (sbalke@ststephensbmt.org).

And as I close and ask for your prayers, I want to bring us back to the words of Jeremiah:

"When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me," says the Lord. "And I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you," says the Lord. "And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." --Jer. 29:13-14

My friends, we will not always be physically separated. I am grateful for the blessed ways we get to remain one people despite our trials. I am comforted that this too shall pass and we will soon be even more thankful to gather together as the people of St. Stephen's.

Peace and blessings to you all through our Lord and Savior Jesus 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.

Further Resources:

Online resources for worship, fellowship, and formation/education:

ststephensbmt.org

Message from Bishop Doyle:

epicenter.org/health-resources

COVID-19 medical protocols in Southeast Texas:

beaumonttexas.gov/covid-19-medical-protocols-for-southeast-texas