

March 27, 2020

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



Peace to you all in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior,

This week we have perhaps seen the most dramatic changes due to COVID-19 in our local community of Southeast Texas. We have seen the first confirmed cases of the disease. We have had the first fatality in Mr. Michael Westbrook, made all the harder by the fact that the Westbrook family is known and dear to many of us. And we have, as of today, a new order in place by the government to stay in our homes except for essential needs.

In the midst of these troubling times I think the most about Romans 8:31-39:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*'For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I know your hearts go out to the families in our community who are sick and I know your prayers are with all of the first responders and healthcare workers who are keeping us safe, the teachers and students who are continuing school the best they can, and all of the businesses and employees trying to discern next steps. This is an uncertain and scary time, which is natural and appropriate, but I want to assure you that God is

present with us and we are still a strong community of God's children together. Our keeping distance from one another is a self-sacrificial act of love for our community, protecting those whom we hold dear. Yet even in the midst of our physical distance we find creative ways to gather and share our love of community in worship, fellowship, formation, and service.

St. Stephen's has been working diligently to provide access to a full array of opportunities to gather virtually through our Website, www.ststephensbmt.org, including:

- **Worshipping Together**
 - Sundays at 8:00am & 10:00am
 - Wednesdays at 5:30pm
 - And now Compline (worship at the end of the day) every night at 8:30pm

- **Building Fellowship**
 - Coffee with the Rector - Mondays 8:00-10:00am
 - Sharing Faith Dinners - Thursdays 6:00-8:00pm
 - And now a message board where you can share and read words of encouragement, prayers, or devotionals

- **Forming Christians**
 - Episcobasics Online - Sundays at 1:00pm
 - Bible Study Online - Fridays 8:00-10:00am
 - And now Godly Play videos online for all of our children

- **Serving the World**
 - Online Giving to continue supporting the ministries of St. Stephen's
 - Information on other ways you can help others during this health crisis
 - Many resources to support the church, help others, and receive help during this time

We are also working on putting together all of our Holy Week services online so that we can gather together just as we always do, including:

- Palm Sunday at 8am - Jesus's Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem
- Palm Sunday at 10am - Liturgy of the Palms and Jesus' Triumphant Entry
- Maundy Thursday at 6pm - Agape Meal
- Maundy Thursday at 7pm - Jesus's Last Supper and Arrest
- Good Friday at noon - Jesus Crucifixion and Stations of the Cross

- Good Friday at 7pm - Jesus's Crucifixion and Stations of the Cross
- Holy Saturday at 9am - Waiting at the Tomb
- Saturday at 7pm - The Great Vigil of Easter!
- Sunday at 8am - Easter Morning
- Sunday at 10am - Easter Morning

We are not alone. We have each other and our God has us. Remember what Paul told us in his letter to the Romans: nothing can separate us from the love of God. I hope to see you soon at one of our many opportunities to gather as God's people via www.ststephensbmt.org.

In the meantime, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven". The letters are cursive and fluid.

The Rev. Steven M. Balke, Jr.

Further Resources:

Online resources for worship, fellowship, service, and formation/education:
ststephensbmt.org

Message from Bishop Doyle:
epicenter.org/health-resources

How to take proper precautions and if you feel ill:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>

Stay-at-Home order for Southeast Texas:
<https://www.12newsnow.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/beaumont-issues-stay-at-home-order/502-946e08ff-0446-4682-9f63-689eb7acf182>