

May 2, 2020

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



The image is a screenshot of a Zoom video player. The main video frame shows a man with glasses and a clerical collar (a white tab collar over a dark shirt) speaking. He is in a room with framed certificates on the wall and a large bouquet of colorful flowers (roses, sunflowers, etc.) in the foreground. The Zoom player interface includes a progress bar at the bottom of the video frame showing 17:34 / 30:23, and a chat window on the right side. The chat window is titled 'Top chat replay' and contains a list of messages from various participants, all of which are 'Happy Easter' or 'Thanks be to God'. The video title at the bottom left of the player reads 'ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH St. Stephen's Easter Sunday 04-12-2020 8am'. There is a 'HIDE CHAT REPLAY' button at the bottom right of the chat window.

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

As many of you know from our night compline services together online, we regularly recite together from Psalm 91:

*You shall not be afraid of any terror by night,
nor of the arrow that flies by day;
Of the plague that stalks in the darkness,
nor of the sickness that lays waste at mid-day.
A thousand shall fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand,
but it shall not come near you...
Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
and the Most High your habitation,
There shall no evil happen to you,
neither shall any plague come near your dwelling.*

It feels a little on the nose to me, yes? This psalm is thought by many to stretch back to the time of Moses himself, preserved by King David, reassuring their people that God will save them from that which they fear. It is important to know that, while the psalm is

not a magical spell that will guarantee you and the ones you love will not get sick (or, yes, even perish, as we all must someday), the psalm is a reminder of God's promise to Noah, to Abraham, and to all of us that God's people will survive. We will triumph and transcend beyond this temporary threat. Though there is a plague that stalks in the darkness and though many may fall, this virus has no power to stop us from being the loving community of God's people we are now and will be forever. We have made the Most High our habitation and our dwelling is safe. I promise you, as does this psalm and as does our God, that someday this will all be ancient past and we will still be here loving one another just the same.

I have other important updates to share. First, I have received many survey responses from y'all and I am grateful for the feedback. This will help St. Stephen's continue to improve serving the needs of our community. Thank you! A few things that we are offering in response to the survey feedback:

- Episcobasics is moving back to its regularly scheduled time of Sundays at 9am CDT. You can enjoy Sunday worship at 8am and then join us for Episcobasics afterward, or join us for Episcobasics before the 10am service. Starting this Sunday Episcobasics is going to be looking at some often overlooked stories in the Bible and how they change the way we think of the scripture at work in our lives. Exciting!
- For everyone who wants to know how they can help, we have updated the StStephensBmt.org Website to include new ways to help. If you want to help provide food for others in need, there is info for that. If you want to drop off food or are making masks, we are creating a drop-off station at the church office to drop off supplies so that we can distribute them to people who need them.
- If you are in need of assistance, we have updated that part of the Website as well. We are working on a pick-up station where you will be able to collect masks, food, or even new issues of Forward Day by Day (since the last issue handed out ended, also Forward Day by Day is available online at prayer.forwardmovement.org/forward_day_by_day.php)
- We will continue to offer Monday morning coffee gathering online, Thursday evening fellowship dinners online, and all our online worship services: Compline every night, Wednesday Evening Prayer, and Sunday Morning Prayer.

Again, I thank you for the feedback. Keep it coming!

Second, as you know all the clergy of the Diocese of Texas gathered to prayerfully discern and discuss the process for returning to in-person gatherings in our church. The bishops have been amazingly supportive and informative leaders through this process. The next step is for me to gather with our vestry and staff to begin working out a process for St. Stephen's that will balance our desire for intimate community with protecting the safety of those we love. I will be upfront that this will not be a quick process because your vestry and I take seriously our responsibility to y'all. Over the coming weeks you can expect more information about our plans for gathering safely. I can say to you now that it will probably be a very slow process of gradually allowing more people to gather slowly closer together, with great care taken each step of the way. I can also assure you that, no matter what we do in-person we will continue to offer online worship and fellowship opportunities to gather, because it is meeting a great need for our people and has even connected many who have felt isolated since long before the pandemic. I promise to continue updating you on our progress.

Finally, please know that you are all in my prayers constantly, as I know you are keeping everyone else in yours. The people of St. Stephen's and the people of God are in good hands.

Yours 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.

StStephensBmt.org