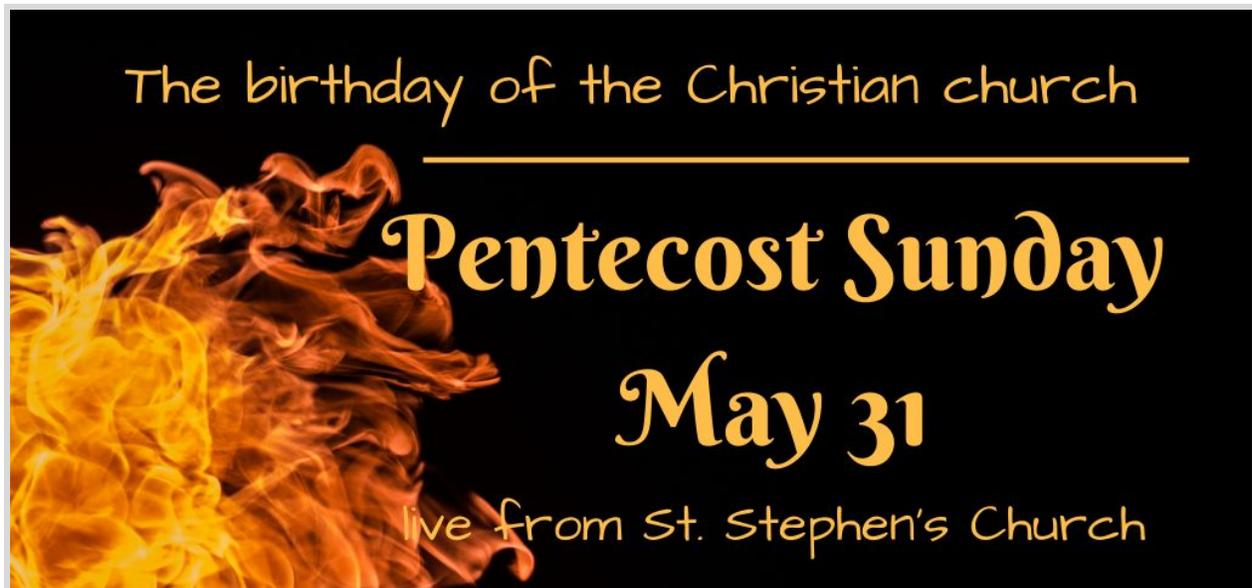


May 30, 2020

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



Tomorrow is Pentecost, the birthday of the church. Most of us have experienced (or will experience) a birthday that did not proceed according to plan. Just this year we carefully planned out my son Elliott's birthday party. We invited all his classmates downtown for a big celebration at the Beaumont Children's Museum. When we arrived with armloads of decorations and food it turned out that Beaumont was hosting its first downtown Mardi Gras float parade that same evening. Every street and parking lot around the museum was closed and there was a sign on the door to the children's museum stating "no entry." A few resolute party-goers parked across town and trekked through barriers and the costumed, but most were deterred. Victims of forces outside of our control, Elliott's party featured far fewer invited guests than we planned but included a group of strangers from the other unfortunately scheduled party in the museum. Again, sometimes birthdays do not proceed according to plan.

Our careful plans for this Pentecost church-birthday have not come to fruition...or perhaps they have, but will bear different fruit than we expected. It is true that we will be livestreaming our Pentecost service online from the sanctuary of our parish instead of attending in-person, but it is also true that our worship service will include people who have been excluded in years past: St. Stephen's members who have been homebound and unable to join us will be able to celebrate with us again, friends of the church from

across the country will join in, and worshippers will be inspired by the Holy Spirit to share and invite others in a truly Pentecost-worthy evangelism. It is not what we are used to but it encourages us to live into the birthday spirit in a creative and new way.

During Elliott's misbegotten party, I had a chance to look past my regret of what didn't go according to plan and see some surprisingly special moments. Elliott got to generously share toys and treats with children he did not know, broadening his sense of who counts as his neighbor. He got to have some more deeply intimate time with a few special friends that he would not have if everyone on the guest list had arrived. With fewer kids to wrangle the adults got to spend more time enjoying everyone's company. And don't forget that cleanup was easier.

It takes practice sometimes to look past our foiled plans and see the gifts that lie before us. This time in the church is no different. We will come out of this experience together with new skills practiced, gifts to share with others, a deeper understanding of God's call in our lives, and more. I look forward to things going according to plan again, but in the meantime I am reminded mostly pointedly that I was never the one in charge of making plans. My trust has been and will remain in the Lord.

In addition to our Pentecost plans, your vestry, staff, and I are hard at work carefully discerning the best way for us to resume in-person gatherings at St. Stephen's. Much of that planning is behind the scenes, so I want to give everyone an opportunity to learn more and contribute. I have scheduled three times this next week when you can join in a Zoom video meeting with me to ask questions, make suggestions, and be more informed about the planning we are doing for St. Stephen's. Whether for just a couple minutes or a couple hours, please consider joining in the discussion one of the following times:

Monday, June 1, 8am-10am
Thursday, June 4, 6pm-8pm
Saturday, June 6, 11am-1pm

The link to join the Zoom meetings is

<https://zoom.us/j/6304681012?pwd=ZWdBc25CQ3dqeFJYcXdZMGZzZWVVOQT09>

If you would rather join my telephone instead of being on video, you can join by calling 1-346-248-7799 and using the meeting code: 630 468 1012.

I hope to see you all there at one of these information sessions and I look forward to celebrating Pentecost together tomorrow!

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