

## Rector's Report - 2020

1/7/2021

Dear saints of St. Paul's,

What shall we say? How shall we look back on a year that by name, or at least number, should suggest perfect vision? We rub our eyes now in early 2021 as if just waking up from a bad dream, and find our view is still at best, blurry. They say hindsight should be revelatory, guiding us to a better way. We can only hope.

Rather than recount a chronological journal of what was 2020, perhaps we should categorize what we experienced and what we (hopefully) have learned.

Early 2020 began as a prosperous New Year. By all 'churchy' metrics, St. Paul's was flying smoothly, and gaining altitude. Average Sunday Attendance was up, funerals were down, welcome was abundant, finances were generous, and a spirit of pursuing God's purpose was palpable. Despite generally 'successful' times, our various ministry teams were pursuing the improbable, with faith in God's possibility.

News of a deadly virus of potentially pandemic proportions began to build. After Sunday worship on March 15th, and a funeral on March 16th, our community life changed. Since then ...

We learned St. Paul's is not a place ... it is our community. Our Pastoral Care team and others reached out in an organized manner, using our directory and phone, email, or written note. Many also reached out to one another organically, checking on those who were alone or isolated. With direct contact being limited, even dangerous, we learned to abide with and comfort one another in very difficult circumstances. I am sure we have missed some. Others would like more contact. All of us long for an in-person visit, a handshake, or a hug. Hope remains.

We learned to use whatever means necessary to remain connected. Despite the tendency of many of our people to be 'low tech' (and I am being generous here), our community learned and embraced technology of email, websites, Facebook, zoom gatherings, and more to be together, even if only on a computer screen. Our Men's and Women's Breakfasts, Bible Study, Vestry and team meetings have all continued online. We even gathered for Parish Night Out via zoom. Most of us will confess some degree of technology fatigue, but we continue to do what we must to remain connected because we are important to each other.

We learned worship is possible outside the walls of our church. Worship has been primarily via video. Spring to Fall we prayed Morning Prayer online together, each in our own place. Amazingly, our online numbers were (are) higher than our in person attendance. Although hard to quantify, our community has clearly grown with many we have not met yet. We hope many of these new to us will join us in person one day, but there is clearly a need for online worship. We will not turn our back on those joining us for worship in other towns, states, and countries. While there will be great celebration when we resume worship in our church building, we must add live, online streaming to serve all who seek solace, strength, and belonging at St. Paul's.

We learned to adapt with outdoor worship to end 2020. In November and December we gathered safely, according to diocesan guidelines, for Holy Eucharist in our Outdoor Chapel. While our attendance was about half where we left off in March, we also streamed worship live online to continue to welcome those unwilling or unable to gather in person. Our faithful

worship teams helped make all this possible. Many reported how lovely it was to worship in the outdoors, and talk of improving the Outdoor Chapel for future use began.

We learned how the seemingly simple act of offering prayers of Compline every week night at 7pm on Facebook can be transformative. Approximately 10 couples faithfully rotate leading us in the Daily Office. We have received many reports of how meaningful this regular worship has been in people's lives. Sometimes the participating views are 40-50, and other times in the hundreds!

We learned about unity and our polity. The name 'Episcopal' means 'of bishops'. We have followed the guidance of our bishop and a task force of health care professionals. Thanks be to God we have not lost any of our precious people to COVID, or even had a reported case, due to community gathering. We continue in solidarity with our sister parishes as we value and protect each other's lives. This is sometimes difficult in the face of other churches that are gathering normally. They may be willing to accept casualties as collateral damage. As per our Baptismal Covenant, we are not.

We have learned much about sacrifice. Most all of what we have done in 2020 and continue to do is about sacrifice. Our treasured traditions, meaningful moments together, personal presence have all been sacrificed for the love and care of our own and other's health. None of the best health safety practices we endure are an individual choice, because they effect us all.

We learned about stewardship. Specifically, our Stewardship Team invested much of 2020 in an online class to learn how holistic stewardship in our lives, practiced as a spiritual discipline year round, creates a flow of God's many blessings, including other than money gifts such as time, space, leadership, and truth. We hope to hear more about this good work in 2021.

We learned our financial obligations go on even during a pandemic. Some spending areas have received a break, such as utilities in unused spaces, or saving paper and print costs of weekly bulletins. Other financial needs continue such as personnel, property and grounds, technology improvements, and our commitments to outreach. We have learned our financial gifts are not an economic exchange, as if a ticket to a Broadway show. We give not for what we get, but we give for the greater glory of God and the work done in and through our community.

We learned how essential our supported ministries are in our community and around the globe. We maintained our pledges to support the good work of the ministries we pray for weekly. We also continued volunteerism in a safe manner to serve those in need. Some ministries adapted such as Path To Shine and Freedom School to continue transformative work in the lives of young students and their families. A new ministry was launched to reach out to our literal neighbors in St. Paul Apartments to companion them during isolation via phone and notes.

We learned new ways to navigate grief and loss. Despite a heroic battle with the pandemic, we have lost many beloved to other causes. Many funerals were family only graveside gatherings with no visitation or reception. Some waiting for a better time to celebrate the life of their lost loved one. Despite physical limitations, we have held each other tightly and propped one another up as we mourn our loss and remember those we love and see no longer.

We continue to exercise muscles of endurance and hope. This and all of the above we are still learning. We have learned that God is decidedly in control, and we are not. We are struggling with where God is amid this pandemic, though examples of grace and mercy abound. It is difficult to sort. We are still figuring out ways to engage in Christian Formation when we cannot gather. We struggle with tough conversations of our current culture and politics when we cannot talk face to face, possibly disagree, and heal our division with hugs.

While many New Year's sentiments suggested we write off 2020 and simply hope for better days, our posture during these continuing times is gratitude to God. God's love continues to be the most powerful force in the universe, and with God's love, we have all we need.

The church is not closed ... we have never been more open to God's possibilities.

Our doors may be shut ... but our hearts are wide open.

We may be isolated ... but we are reaching out farther than ever to hold on to one another.

May we keep one eye on our feet to take the next faithful step, and the other eye on the horizon to see the coming of God's Kingdom!

Respectfully, lovingly submitted,

Bryan+

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