

## **RECTOR'S REPORT**

### **The Rev. Phillip Parker**

To All Saints' Episcopal Church in common mission with Christ the King Lutheran Church,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from Christ our Lord. I thank you for your ministry and your love. I thank you for your support during this very trying year. Thank you for your thoughts and prayers. It has meant so much to me to know that you are here, and that together, we can move through this pandemic. There is so much that we have experienced this year. There has been so much struggle and anguish. There has been heartbreak and sadness. There has been frustration and anger. However, there has also been joy, happiness, and excitement. We have experienced fully what it means to be human. Yet, we have also experienced the fullness of God's love and grace. We can rest on the knowledge that God has been with us and has journeyed with us through a difficult year and that God will continue to be with us.

It is hard to believe that during our last Annual Meeting we were preparing to host the Annual Council of the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi. That was just last year. It seems like a decade ago. So, let us focus for a moment on that Annual Council. All the reports that we have received indicated that the 193rd Annual Council was a success. I have heard from Bishop Seage that he really enjoyed Council and he stated several times that Tupelo is one of the best venues to hold Council. Thank you to everyone who worked so hard to make the 193<sup>rd</sup> Annual Council of the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi such a great success.

Due to the pandemic, All Saints' and the Diocesan Office have been unable to schedule a time to debrief about Annual Council. It was my hope that we would have time to talk about our experiences of hosting Council with those in the Diocesan office. Even as late as August 2020, Canon Ponder had stated that a time to debrief would be beneficial to the Diocesan office. However, due to our attention towards the Coronavirus, this debriefing has not been scheduled.

It would have been nice if Annual Council would have been the most difficult item that we had to face in 2020. However, we now know that was not the case. A few weeks after Annual Council we started planning, with the Diocesan office, a service of new ministry. After checking on Bishop Seage's schedule, this celebration was scheduled for March 18. Around this time, we started to hear about cases of Coronavirus reaching America. On March 13, Bishop Seage directed that all in-person church gatherings be suspended so to reduce the possibility of spreading the Coronavirus. This also included the Celebration of New Ministry.

I have often heard that All Saints' is a church that likes to plan and to have a plan. We do not wait until the last minute to complete our ministry. I saw this with our planning for Annual Council. However, how do you plan for a pandemic which results in suspended in-person gatherings? We had not. We have a plan now. When the suspension first happened, we just believed that worship services would be suspended for a few weeks. We then thought that we would return to services for Holy Week and Easter. Finally, we got to the point where we just did not know when we would be able to return. At that point, we knew we had to re-think worship.

With limited technology and no knowledge of live streaming, we started live streaming on Facebook. I was using an outdated LG cellphone, my phone, to live stream on Facebook. The church had no Wi-Fi service in the Chapel or Nave. The only way to live stream was through my phone service. That is what we did. With the help of a small number of volunteers, we attempted to offer

worship from All Saints' and CTK on-line. I attempted to model the "stay at home" order by live streaming services from my house. During Holy Week, I offered a live stream of The Stations of the Cross. On Maundy Thursday, I offered a Foot Washing service from my house with the invitation for those watching to participate by setting up their own foot washing station in their homes.

Our hope at this time was that the suspension would be temporary and that we would return to in-person worship as soon as we could. In-person worship was suspended from March until June 2020. In June we received directions from Bishop Seage that we could return to in-person worship with a restriction on the number of people who could attend, wearing masks during the service, social distancing, and communion in one kind. It was decided that we would attempt to return to in-person worship while also continuing to stream the service on-line. For several reasons, we decided to hold our worship service in the Parish Hall. This would allow us more space for social distancing, and it provided an easier space to clean after the services. We were able to worship together for several weeks before it became clear that moving back to on-line only was needed due to the increasing number of Coronavirus cases in our area.

At this point, it was determined that we needed to really look at how we were attempting to be the church. In August and September several meetings were held with the Wardens, members of the Vestry, Stewardship committee, and others to help us identify what was needed to improve our ability to worship, seek, grow, and gather as a church during a pandemic. The technology being used was reviewed and plans were made to make improvements with our audio/visual technology by adding new cameras and an iPad. Our Wi-Fi infrastructure was improved so that all areas of our buildings were covered with Wi-Fi. We could then see how important it was for us to be able to offer a high-quality online worship experience even when we are able to return to full in-person gatherings. However, even with this new equipment there was a learning curve on how to best use it, and it did take some time to become accustomed to this new technology.

Learning how to do online worship was not the only need. How do we offer Christian Formation during a pandemic? I started to offer a weekly email article. I offered articles on spiritual practices that could be done at home to help individuals deepen their relationship with God, such as how to pray with prayer breads or a rosary. One of the most exciting endeavors was the start of the Lectionary Podcast. It is no secret that Les Alvis and Caleb Bedillion do a fantastic job in their ministry with the Lectionary class. Their ability to take that ministry and shape it to fit into a weekly podcast on the lectionary readings was and continues to be outstanding. I am truly thankful for their ministry.

For Children's formation, I am thankful for Tommie Moore and Michelle Hester for finding activities that All Saints' and CTK could mail to our children to help keep them connected and engaged. I am also thankful for the volunteers who helped with EYC as we offered online EYC in the Spring and a scaled down version of in-person EYC this past Fall. We said, "thank you" to Stacy White as she stepped down from her 10 years of youth ministry as the All Saints' and CTK Youth Director.

During this pandemic, we found ways to stay connected. Efforts were made to reach out to our members so that we might stay connected. The Vestry was encouraged to make phone calls to connect with our church family. I have attempted to reach out to everyone. I am sorry if I have not been able to connect with you and I promise I will continue in this pursuit to grow in our relationship. Since the choir is unable to meet for in-person practice and community, they found a way to stay connected online with weekly Google meet Compline services; thank you Taylor for your ministry. I know that several of you continue to stay in touch with each other. I also encourage you to reach out to each

other and if you have not been able to stay connected with All Saints' and CTK, please reach out to us. You are important to us and we love you.

Our work in God's kingdom continued even during a pandemic. We celebrated three baptisms this year. While I had hoped that we would have had more, I feel this is still okay due to the situation in which we have found ourselves. It was our understanding that Bishop Seage would be with us to celebrate our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. However, we were not sure if the Bishop would be doing confirmations, so I decided to postpone confirmations until we are able to return to meeting together as a group. If you are interested in becoming confirmed, please let me know and we will begin that process soon. This year we celebrated the marriage of Connor and Marcie Harper. Even during a pandemic, love wins. They will be able to tell everyone that they got married during a pandemic.

One of the hardest parts of this pandemic is hearing about the number of people who have died due to this illness. Even though death is a part of our lives, and we have faith that death in this life is not the end, it still grieves us when someone we love leaves us. This year we did have some to leave us and while their passing may not be caused by COVID, we still mourn for them. We remember Kathy Fealhaber, Ken Priest, Tom Prather, and Tom Evans. May God's light continue to shine on them.

This year has taught me and us a lot. A lot about what it means to be followers of Christ during a time of need. A lot about what it means to be the church when we cannot meet at the church building. A lot about how to do ministry differently. I will admit that I have not always been successful in trying to find new ways to do ministry. There were lots of failures this year. However, it is in the failures where we learn to grow. I hope that we can take what we have experienced and learned this past year and grow.

I do believe that we, the church, are in the middle of a transformation. A transformation not caused by the Coronavirus pandemic but aided by the pandemic. The church is being transformed. And now we can either look at this transformation as death or as resurrection. Since we are believers of the resurrection, we must look at this transformation as resurrection.

The church is being reborn. We, as Christians, must now seek and pray even harder. We must pray for God's guidance as we are transformed into a new church. We must seek and see Christ in each of us. We must seek Christ in this world. That is the work given to us by God to do, to seek Christ in this world and to love everyone as ourselves.

I often hear people say that they cannot wait until things get back to normal. I have even said this. However, the truth should be that we should not want things to go back to exactly the way it was before. The way where greed and hatred shaped our lives. The way where we care for God's creation by polluting the environment for profit. The way where we treat our neighbors with hatred simply because they do not look like us or sound like us. The way where we base someone's dignity on their salary, car, house, or career. A way where we view the most important aspects of our wealth and the wealth of others based solely on their bank accounts. My hope is that we do not return to this type of normal.

My hope is that we can return to a place where instead of greed and hatred, we love each other as God loves us and that we share in God's gifts with everyone. My hope is that we begin to care for God's creation, God's garden, and seek new ways to live in unity with all of God's creatures. My hope is that we see Christ in everyone and love everyone as if they are us. My hope is that All Saints' and Christ the King can become a place where we all feel God's love in our lives and are willing to share

that love fully with the world. My hope is that we truly become a community that lives into our Baptismal Covenant.

To do this, I hope that we can begin, when it is safe to do so, ministries that invite us to come together rather than being divided. I hope we can start to ask difficult questions and to seek answers to those questions. Where we can become hard on the issues but soft with each other. I hope that we can begin having conversations with each other so that we can find new ways to grow in community. I hope that we can also start to invite those who are outside of All Saints' and Christ the King into conversations about issues that affect our surrounding communities so that we might begin to see that our community is larger than just this building and so we can see everyone as children of God.

While we begin to invite others into conversations and community, we will still focus on worship. We need to remember that everything we do here at All Saints' and Christ the King should be grounded in worship. It is in worship where we find hope, direction, and rest. Worship should be at our core. As we return to in-person worship services, we will need to re-engage with the Liturgy. Let's use this time during this pandemic to reflect on what worship does. Rev. Dr. Nathan Jennings professor of Liturgics and Anglican Studies at Seminary of the Southwest, will tell you that the Liturgy does not have a meaning because Liturgy is an action. The Liturgy calls us into the presence of God as we participate with the heavenly host in praising God. We are liturgical beings. We are liturgical beings not because we are Episcopalian or Lutheran, but because we are children of God.

As we begin to emerge out of this pandemic, we need to place worship at the center of our being. If we do place worship at the center and if we reach out in community as a community of followers of Christ, we will be able to address all the important issues that face our church with a new focus. A focus centered in the Gospel. We do have some difficult questions ahead of us. We have the question about running a deficit budget this year. We have questions concerning our debts and debt reduction in the upcoming years. We need to ask questions about our outreach to the community and ask the question, "how do we invite our neighbors to All Saints' and Christ the King?" We still have questions about church security and how do we provide a safe place for all to experience God? These are just some of the questions that we will have to seek answers for.

I have faith that we can discern answers to these questions and any other questions that may come before us. I know this because I have seen what we have been able to do this year during this pandemic. We have already learned how to ask difficult questions and how to discern answers to those questions. This year has shown us how to stay focused on what is important while also learning how to pivot, change direction when needed, and bend without breaking.

Again, I thank you for being a part of this loving parish. I thank you for your grace and patience this past year. I know it has been hard. Let us remain focused on what is important. Let us remain with God and grounded in the Gospel. May God be with you and may God bless you.

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