



The Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast

March 17, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

For my sermon last Sunday, I was struck by the Gospel and specifically the immense “distance,” socially, religiously, culturally and ethnically, between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. And yet, despite all the differences, divisions and distance between them, the power of God’s redeeming grace binds them together and transforms the moment into one of new life, hope and meaning. It is the power of perfect love; it can and does cast out all fear. So, amid all the fear and uncertainty of our current time, let us trust in this same Gospel power of perfect love to carry us, bind us together, and transform us.

Standing amid the storm are our diocesan clergy. I am humbled and inspired by the many reflections, messages and sermons I have read. Thank you. This morning I met via Zoom conferencing with our clergy and some of our senior wardens to listen to their advice for the directives that follow. Most of our 62 congregations were represented. I am grateful for their wisdom and counsel.

DIRECTIVES TO THE DIOCESE OF THE CENTRAL GULF COAST MARCH 17, 2020

+ All in-person, group worship in the diocese is suspended until Easter Sunday, April 12. I realize this includes services of Holy Week. As Holy Week draws near, we will revisit this. Even if we must postpone Holy Week and Easter, we will celebrate! After all, the church set the date of Easter, and it is movable. So, it may be we ‘move’ Holy Week and Easter. **Easter is coming!**

+This directive also includes midweek worship services and group meetings. Postpone funerals and weddings to a later date. Graveside burial is permitted with no more than 9 people present. I trust the clergy to interpret and do what’s best for all involved.

What do we do on the Sundays we cannot gather for worship? Our clergy discussed several ways to remain connected in spirit while we are apart in our bodies. Some will live-stream a brief Sunday service and reflection; some are considering ways to offer “Communion under Special Circumstances”; some suggested watching the live-stream from the National Cathedral. I have decided to not issue a mandate to be utilized in every congregation. I will trust each rector/vicar/priest-in-charge to prayerfully and carefully make a decision appropriate to their context and one that respects and reflects our sacramental theology regarding the efficacy of The Holy Eucharist. We will also be posting worship resources on the diocesan website: www.diocgc.org/concerning-covid19.

With that said, I am personally persuaded by a quote shared by one of our clergy who intends to live-stream a celebration of the Holy Eucharist from the altar of the church, but hold the reserved sacrament until a future date. Such a practice harkens to the 4th century when Saint Augustine wrote of people being physically unable to partake of the sacrament. Bishop Marc Andrus of the Diocese of California said this: "What Augustine saw was this: the Christian who desires to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ will always be met by a gracious and loving God. Though we may not be able to receive the bread and wine, nothing can prevent our all-loving God from giving us what we ask for from our hearts. We will, Augustine said, truly commune spiritually."

+All congregational and diocesan **in-person** gatherings (including committee meetings) scheduled until Easter Sunday will be postponed. Those meetings that can be conducted by Zoom conferencing or teleconferencing will be encouraged to take place. Our diocesan offices can assist with setting up Zoom meetings for various diocesan committees. Please be in touch with Jennifer Johnson for assistance with Zoom.

+ Efforts should be made to continue feeding ministries with special precautions as preparing the food and serving it in to-go containers to guests, avoiding the gathering of groups. Food distribution programs (Meals on Wheels, Food pantries) should also continue to conduct their work as long as there are adequate volunteers and the distribution takes place in an efficient manner, not inviting a gathering of groups.

+ Schools, daycare centers and preschools associated with Episcopal churches should follow the plans, policies and procedures of the local public-school systems.

+ AA and other recovery programs may still meet at churches with the permission of the rector/vicar/priest-in-charge [or vestry if there is no priest] with the added protocol that participants spray surfaces and wipe them down following use and participate in good hygiene practices, including the use of hand sanitizer and minimal physical contact. The work of these groups is lifesaving to people with the experience of addiction. The final decision for such use is the discretion of the rector/vicar/priest-in-charge [or vestry if no priest].

+I will reschedule my visitations for the following three Sundays; the Duvall Center will utilize web conferencing and other forms of communications to limit the number and size of in-person gatherings that are necessary. The staff at the Duvall Center have been given permission to work from home.

To journey together in this wilderness, we will be posting on the diocesan website resources for live streaming worship and prayers for your home. To begin this journey, I suggest the use of the Litany for a Pandemic from St. Mark's Episcopal Church Basking Ridge NJ, found here <http://stmarksbr.org/litany-during-a-pandemic/> or The Supplication found on pages 154-155 of *The Book of Common Prayer*. I am sure there will be more to say. I am exploring the idea of leading a weekly Bible study and meditation.

Please use the coming days to create phone trees, email groups and form prayer partners by which you can stay connected during this time. And trust your gut. Yesterday an old friend called me. It was a

much-needed lift and he began our conversation “I was just thinking about you and wanted to tell you so.” There is power in reaching out, even when we cannot be in each other’s physical presence.

I hate this, and I know that you do, too. As I said last week, a sacrifice is giving up what you love for what you love more. I love being together for worship, but I love my neighbor more. This sacrificial decision is meant to err on the side of the greater love for our neighbor, especially those most fragile and vulnerable.

In one of the darkest times in history, a portion of the following words were found scratched on the cellar wall where Jews were hiding from Germans during WWII. It was later expanded and turned into a beautiful anthem. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIw66le1GLo>

“I believe in the sun even when it is not shining
and I believe in love even when there's no one there
and I believe in God even when he is silent,
I believe through any trial there is always a way.
But sometimes in this suff'ring and hopeless despair
my heart cries for shelter to know someone's there.
But a voice rises within me saying hold on my child
I'll give you strength, I'll give you hope just stay a little while.”

I’ve often wondered about faith that could write such words in such a terrible time “to believe in God even when he is silent.” The Bible speaks of times of storms, wilderness and exile. They were times of distances, loneliness and loss. They were times of famine and lament. They were even times of silence. However, such times also brought forth the surprise of new life, new ways of worshipping as a community, and stronger faith in God. God is always reaching to us and for us. So, in this storm, let us keep reaching for God. And keep listening.

+ Russell