



“NEWS FROM THE PEWS” FOR MARCH 2021
ST. STEPHEN’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
BILLINGS, MONTANA

Greetings Brothers and Sisters!

Recently NPR has been running a series where they ask people when they knew that things had really changed due to COVID-19. I know what that moment was for me. It was when I read a statement that Presiding Bishop Michael Curry shared with the bishops of The Episcopal Church. On March 12, 2020, Bishop Curry shared the following: “The next 30-60 days at the least are simply going to be unlike anything we have experienced in recent history, even including 9/11. The dilemma of what we know and what we don’t know will continue to complicate our decision making and our lives.” I remember first reading that and thinking that he was being a bit hyperbolic, but in reality, he was quite prophetic.

In the time since Bishop Curry wrote that statement at least 530,000 Americans have died as a result of COVID-19. More than 1,300 have died in Montana, including 239 in Yellowstone County. Tens of millions lost their jobs and countless lives have been immeasurably changed. But there is hope! In mid-December 2020 two vaccines were given emergency authorization and were shipped out around the country. As of March 10, 2021, Montana had administered 323,135 doses of vaccine and fully vaccinated 121,288 people, which is just over 11% of our state’s total population. Yellowstone County is administering vaccines at a slighter greater rate than the state overall. Additionally, the spread of COVID-19 cases and the positivity rates have dramatically decreased in Montana since mid-January.

Given all of this, I feel it is appropriate to resume in-person worship. On Sunday, March 21, 2021 we will observe the Fifth Sunday in Lent with the celebration of Holy Eucharist at 10 am. This will also be exactly one year since we closed the first time due to the pandemic.

Of course, things won’t be quite back to normal. We will still ask that everyone wear masks while inside the building and require physical distancing between households. Many elements of our common life from before will not be present, yet. We aren’t able to have traditional coffee hours, share the cup, or sing. However, those should return in time. Resuming in-person worship will take some time, so I ask for your patience as we try to chart the best path forward.

While we are resuming in-person worship on Sundays, not everything is returning to pre-pandemic form. For the time being, Saturday evening worship will continue to be offered online only so we can ease into things and also to make things a little easier for our Altar Guild and lay readers. Additionally, Sunday morning worship will be live streamed onto our Facebook page and will also be uploaded afterwards to YouTube.

We will continue to offer Bible Study on Sunday mornings at 9 am. This will be offered in the library but through the magic of technology, we will also offer it online through Zoom simultaneously. This way people can still take part even if they do not feel comfortable being physically present. Our weekly Bible Study is a casual discussion based on a reading or readings that are assigned for the week. Information is emailed out each week by the church office with the reading(s) and some background context.

In addition to resuming in-person worship, there is also much to look forward to in the coming weeks. On Thursday, April 1, we will celebrate Maundy Thursday with a service of Holy Eucharist at 7 pm. The Good Friday liturgy will be offered online on April 2 at Noon. And on Sunday, April 4, we will celebrate the resurrection with Easter services at 10 am.

Related to Easter, our dear church secretary wanted me to share the following: Parishioners are given the opportunity to participate in an offering to the Glory of God or in Memory or Honor of loved ones by contributing to the purchase of Easter flowers. Please contact the church office with the reason for giving and the amount you wish to donate. Please make checks payable to St. Stephen's Church with a memo of Altar Guild.

Additionally, on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 11, 2021, we will be joined by Bishop Marty Stebbins for her first regular annual visitation with us. This will be a wonderful opportunity for us to continue to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and the resurrection of our community. So please save the date!

As always, please reach out to me or the church office if you have any concerns or questions. We are in this together and we can make it. Keep the faith!

Yours in Christ,
Father Stephen

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