

ALL SAINTS' MEMORIAL CHURCH

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“And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” (Mark 3:25)

The tree stood tall.

Its base was broad, speaking of many seasons of standing as a sentry on the rectory lawn. It had no doubt seen many things come and go—changes to the community, many storms including Superstorm Sandy. It appeared strong, healthy, solid. But appearances, alas, are deceiving. On August 4th during Tropical Storm Isaias, a strong hurricane force wind gust felled the tree, breaking it off at the base, snapping it like a twig. The storm winds, adding that final layer of stress, revealed what one could not see from the outside—that inside the tree was damaged, not having the resources to withstand the storm winds.

What the storm was to this tree, so is the pandemic like to our society in a way. A society already stressed by many divisions has had those divisions sharpened in light of this new stress, splintering apart communities, friends and families. We can blame the pandemic and all the various ways it has affected our lives (from death and illness, to the loss of ‘normalcy’) all we want—but in the end its stress on our society and our lives has only revealed what has been there all along—and frankly, in too many ways it is not pretty. The injustices of wealth inequity, systemic racism, lack of access to health care, mental health care, or technology for learning are just among the few things laid bare this year.

Now, it is true that in many places and spaces, people did rise to the occasion during this stressful pandemic time and call on their better angels within—there are many stories of caring and compassion and heroism being shown by neighbors and first responders and our health care workers. It is good and right to celebrate and hold onto these as a reminder of who we are called to be, how we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves even amidst the most trying times. All these acts of compassion stand as signposts, pointing the way to how God wants us to love and care for another, dotting our lives like seeds scattered on exposed ground.

However, for seeds to grow and bear fruit they need nurturing. That means tending to our hearts: keeping the soil of our hearts open and not letting them grow hard, and to weed out things like bitterness and cynicism, apathy and disdain. It also means tending to our communities—paying attention to those in need, to those who lift up their voices crying out for justice, to work to build more loving societal structures from the inside out instead of just papering them over with the glue of force and order, or dismissing a different perspective than our own. To do this kind of tending takes courage: the kind of courage that comes with honesty, with repentance, with the willingness to look deep within one’s own heart and acknowledge the places where we need to be healed and transformed. It also calls us to use our voices to share that and call our society, our communities, to repent of the ways of divisiveness and injustice, and to engage in reconciliation, in compassion, in mercy and love.

This is the mission of the Church, and of each and every Christian. However, it's not a mission we can do on our own—we need the Holy Spirit's guidance and strength and comfort. It is a mission that needs each of us as members of the Body of Christ—no matter what your age or gender or color or heritage or political party. For Christians, God's mission is our primary mission—all else is secondary and should reflect God's priorities for the world, and not the other way around.

And God's mission is love—Love God, love your neighbor. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry often says, *"If it's not about love, then it's not about God."* This holds true for not only families and church communities but also our larger world, our towns, our nation in how we live together, work together, play together, and share our resources together. It is to undergird our policies, our programs, our speech, our education and even our policing. It may sound utopian—and you may scoff at even envisioning it, particularly in times such as these. I get it. But the message of the cross and resurrection is that all that mire and muck, all our suffering and even all our sin, does not have the last word; God does, and God's word is life, and forgiveness and hope, and that we were made for better things: a life of love and community with God and each other. God has not given up on us—and asks that we don't give up on God and God's mission or one another.

Our parish has had its share of storm winds this year, Isaias notwithstanding. The year started off with great hope and anticipation: the Auction committee looked forward to building on last year's success; Sunday school attendance was growing; pledges had increased nearly 20%, more people were engaged in study and conversation, new events were being planned. The final event held in our hall this winter, the Pancake supper, saw a great turnout. And then, in a matter of days, all things in our area came to a screeching halt. We moved worship onto Facebook Live and Sunday school onto Zoom, and offered up prayers and added online compline and a conference call. We set up online giving, posted bulletins on our website, started a YouTube page. Like many, we hoped that within a matter of weeks or certainly by fall we would be on the other side, with life returning to 'normal'. But the virus has proved resilient and tenacious, and while steps have been made in resuming some normalcy, we are a long way from 'life as usual' as it was in February 2020.

The death of Deacon Michelle in the midst of all this was a blow no one saw coming—least of all me. Michelle helped to coordinate altar guild, led the women's bible study, and was a pastoral presence and resource to so many within our community and beyond. She made us laugh, pushed us to try new things, and spoke the truth in love as Deacons often do. She was passionately dedicated to God's mission and lived that out courageously. She touched many lives--and now, that task falls to each of us. May we too live out God's mission in our lives, with love and courage and renewed passion.

Here is how All Saints' is currently faring as we strive to live out God's mission in this 'brave new world':

Worship: In late July and early August, we reopened the parish campus and buildings for in-person worship with an outdoor Saturday 5:30 pm evening service, and 8 am and 10 am services in the church building—with the 10 am service being livestreamed. And while the service of Holy Eucharist remains (by and large) the same, the additions of masks and social distancing, reservations and no singing, along with a limited exchange at the sign of the peace and other greetings make worship a different experience indeed. I thank so many of you who join us outside on Saturday evenings or inside on Sunday mornings,

and those who faithfully join us online—thank you for all of you being part of our parish community. I am so grateful for your prayers and presence.

This fall, we will continue the Saturday outdoor service (weather permitting) as long as possible. Depending on local virus counts and attendance numbers, we may add this service to our rota of indoor services for the cold months. We have yet to see what the holiday season will bring. I plan to hold the Blessing of the Animals service outside as usual (with masks—for the humans—and social distancing). The ‘Second Sunday’ family service is currently on hiatus but I am trying to come up with other ways to engage our kids (suggestions welcome).

How you can help/participate: if you feel comfortable attending in person services, please make sure to make a reservation so we can prepare. Readers and check in persons (and cleaning persons) needed for all services, especially our Sunday services. For our online services attendees—share the link to our services with friends!

Finances: The Vestry and I are so very grateful for your contributions, for your notes, and for your participation and donations to things like Deacon Michelle’s fund, Project Pet, and the Food pantry. It has been a challenging year for the parish budget, and for so many persons, it has been a challenging year for personal budgets between job losses and income reduction for small businesses. The loss of our major fundraisers (Auction, Candlelight Concert, Rummage Sale, and Stone Church Players) has left nearly a \$35,000 hole in our budget, which has been only partially helped by a loan from the Payroll Protection Program of the CARES Act. The loss of Sunday plate offerings has also left a gap of several thousand dollars. We are very appreciative to so many of you who have kept up your pledges as able, and for those of you who have contributed online or via mail.

Of course, just like in your own households, expenses are not always influenced by income: utilities and insurance and maintenance are ongoing. A decision was made at the outset (even before the Payroll Protection act loan) to maintain payroll as usual for as long as possible, and we have been able to do so. We did not fill the administrator position after Mary’s departure in January, and that has aided finances. We have also been able to hold fast to our commitment to the Diocese. All that has only been possible thanks to your generosity—though this summer (as is often usual in most summers) we had to withdraw some funds from savings. The air conditioning unit in the Church died over the summer, and replacing it cost over \$6000; thankfully we had a small emergency fund to draw on but replenishing it is important. The storm damage to the Rectory should mostly be covered by insurance, but we still have a deductible, plus other costs such as covering the cost of the removal of a large amount of debris blown down in the cemetery, parking lot, and grounds. Our Memorial Garden stone has maxxed out on space for names, and we need to purchase an additional one. All these and more have stretched our budget mightily.

How you can help/participate: If you made a pledge for 2020, please try to meet it as you are able. Any and all donations are welcome for our General fund either in person, via mail, or via our online giving at <https://allsaintsnavesink.breezechms.com/give/online> or text-to-give by texting the amount and ‘Give’ to 732-400-5774.

If you wish to send a donation in to offset costs for the new air conditioning and other building issues, you can mail in a check with ‘AC’ in the memo; or follow the online giving link above and pick the

‘Building’ fund from the drop down under ‘funds’. For Text to Give, text the amount and ‘AC’ to 732-400-5774.

Alternately, if you need help, please reach out to me; the Discretionary fund is not large but we will do what we can to help, as well as link those in need to community resources.

Formation, Education and Fellowship: The Diocese is in the process of releasing new guidelines for children’s formation (Sunday school) and hospitality/fellowship. All involve masks, social distancing, and extra cleaning and ventilation protocols; the Vestry will be examining these soon. For the Hall to be used on a regular basis, we need to file an additional plan with the Diocese with details about capacity, contact tracing, and other items. Until that takes place, the Hall is closed for general use.

However, we can still gather online—starting with the *Men’s Group* on beginning on Saturday, September 12 at 9 am on Zoom, and continuing each second Saturday. Prayer and Bible Study will be shared—but breakfast is an ‘on your own’ affair! If you are interested, please contact Jim Cook at jimcookjr47@yahoo.com or call 732-614-3134.

The *Women’s Bible Study* was started by Deacon Michelle and was held on the last Saturday of the month. While we cannot gather in person for the present, we can gather on Zoom. A session will be held on Saturday, September 26th at 9 am. Contact Mother Debbie at mother.debbie@comcast.net for the Zoom link. Our first session we will do a brief overview of the bible and then discuss where to go from there.

Another study—this one involving a book—is called ‘*The Way of Love/A Practical Guide to Following Jesus*’ by Scott Gunn. It is based on The Way of Love rule of life put out by our Presiding Bishop a few years ago, and it is an 8 session study that helps in our faith formation and practice. I’m thinking of offering this on Wednesday evenings starting September 30th from 7:30 to 8:30 pm on Zoom—depending on feedback from interested parties we can adjust the time. The Book is found at <https://www.forwardmovement.org/Products/2586/the-way-of-love.aspx> or you can order it on Kindle. Please email me at mother.debbie@comcast.net if you are interested or if you have questions, or call me at 732-492-1943.

A last word about participating by Zoom—you need not be ‘tech savvy’! First, if you have a computer with a camera and a microphone (most laptops do), it is easy to download and use. Second, if you have a smartphone, you can download the Zoom app and use it that way. And lastly, there is always a call in number (that you use by entering a few codes), so all you need is a phone! Like all technology, it has its moments and glitches can arise—but we can work them out.

Sunday school will again be led by Mrs. Shanley. She is hoping to offer some in person classes—even if outside—but all this is a work in progress. We know social distancing is tough to do with kids! And there are other protocols that would need to be followed as well. Please contact Mrs. Shanley at evanemshanley@gmail.com for more information.

Events: Because space inside is limited, and most of our events involve people being together in closer quarters (Candlelight Concert, Auction, Stone Church Players), we have postponed most to 2021. But all is not lost!—the Stone Church Players, in conjunction with the Atlantic Highlands Arts Council, is offering an online version of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Information on the multi-night showing (Sept 21-25) as well as a Virtual Lecture and Teen acting workshop is found at <https://aharts.org/the-tempest>. Check it out! Not only is our Stone Church Players group offering up their talents for the benefit of the community, but these partnerships allow for the fostering of the arts for others.

Outreach: With the school year of area schools in flux, we were unsure what to do with Project Backpack—if school was virtual, would they be needed? What kinds of materials would be best? We decided to wait and see—and if some needs arise as the school year progresses, we can help meet those. We are still collecting for the food and pet pantries, and we hope to offer an on-line sign-up for the Giving Tree. Suggestions of outreach projects we can do welcome.

Looking ahead....

We have been in this new paradigm for six months now, and while we have adapted in many ways, it is wearying at times. We may long for return of what we knew just last winter. We miss visiting with family and friends, dinners out, attending concerts and plays, traveling. We miss worship and singing, coffee hours, gathering around the table in the Parish Hall for formation and fellowship. We may even miss the office or the classroom! Experts say we have a ways to go yet, and until a safe vaccine is ready and distributed, the virus will be with us (even if at reduced levels). So, we cannot let our guard down—for as Christians, we are to value other's lives as much as our own—if not more so; it is not about 'what I want' but is about what is best for the greater community.

However, this time gives us a chance to reflect on who we want to be going forward. God willing, new ways of being together, worshipping together, and ministering together will sprout up. Even in a post-vaccine world, worship will continue to be livestreamed. We can continue to offer online prayer, whether it is Compline or Morning Prayer or other types of services: and many of these can be lay-led as well. We can offer classes and meetings online on a more regular basis; we can livestream events; we can even expand our reach beyond the Navesink/Bayshore area. We can record church and campus tours and share them to our YouTube page and other web resources for those who are not local.

But God's mission is local as well. What ministries, what outreach, do we feel called by God to do? I ask you to pray on this, to reflect on what God is calling you to. And if you think God is not calling, or God is done with you—*think again*. Certainly, we have our fallow times—but often those times are for preparing the ground of our hearts and lives for new growth, just like a winter rest prepares the earth for spring. You may be at home—but you can offer prayer, write notes or cards, make a phone call—and if you have access to the internet, you can participate in on-line offerings or even lead them. Perhaps you feel called to share your talents with the parish community—being part of a buildings and grounds committee, helping with cemetery records, participating in outreach or worship or education. But most of our lives (except maybe for mine!) are spent outside the church walls—and more often than not, your call to ministry in the world, in witness to God's mission, lies there: How can you share the good news, in word and deed, right where you are? What do you long for, where is your joy found? Theologian Frederich Buechner said, "*The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.*" Let us look for those places not only in our own lives and the lives of All Saints' but also in our own communities. After all, that is the real mission field!

As Christians, Jesus bids us to come and follow: follow him out in the world, to the places of deep hunger, trusting that we will be led to those places that will waken our deep gladness. It's usually not a straightforward trail, at least not at first. But we are called to keep following, to keep trusting, to continue to move forward even when we'd rather not. Please know I write these words as much to myself as I write them to you! But I trust God's promises are sure, even as I may long for things to be different. I pray you trust in God's promises as well.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. (Colossians 4:13-15)

Let us live into the unity that God has called us to—in love, with humility and peace, and with thankful hearts.

Peace,

Mother Debbie+

The Rev. Debbie Cook

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