

“I will listen to what the Lord God is saying;
for God speaks peace to faithful people and
to those who turn their hearts to you.” AMEN!

(Breathe) After a two week vacation,
part of it in the mountains of Yosemite and
the other part on the beach in Santa Cruz,

I am reminded of my time as youth director.

When I'd plan a trip with the high schoolers
we always went to the mountains.

We always went to the mountains because
that congregation was really close to the beach.

In contrast, churches that are located in
the mountains almost always go to the beach.

As the Holdcraft family spent our 11 days
we were blessed to be able to experience both.

We walked trails in Yosemite that gave us
spectacular views of beautiful waterfalls
and majestic mountains.

Then, in Santa Cruz, we saw sea life and
breathed ocean-salted air.

We didn't make the conscious decision to
do both the mountain and ocean destinations
but perhaps it was because Tallahassee
we have the beauty of living among

stoic trees and rolling hills and we are also blessed
to be kind of near the ocean and the gulf. :-)

Regardless, it was a time of retreat and rest.

Times to reconnect with my stepdad and friends,
as well as with Colleen and the kids. (Pause)

Another thing that time away does is
help us get our heads on straight.

If you haven't noticed I tend to get distracted and
quiet time away helps me put proper
priorities back in place.

Maybe it is just me, but it can be tempting
to go around putting out fires and forget
the important discipline of
building momentum.

So what are my priorities concerning
St. Stephen, you ask?

First and foremost, as you can probably guess
is to be sure that the coming repairs
and renovations are done with utmost
safety and longevity in mind.

I understand the frustrations expressed
by some about the length of time it is taking.

Honestly, I also wish that the projects could
have been completed by now.

Yet, these kinds of decisions,
especially in a church, cannot be made
with extreme haste.

But, the momentum is building now...

On top of that good order, we have been doing
this under the threat and disruptions
connected to Covid.

Video conferencing is not as good
as in person meetings.

Decisions about the building and fundraising
for the project takes time and it is not
something we do every couple of years,
thank God!

But, we are now on the verge of receiving
contractor estimates and the selection of
our general contractor.

Once construction starts we will
move our worship to the fellowship hall.

We will need to worship there for about 6-8 Sundays,
perhaps more so we'll need to be flexible.

In the fellowship hall, we will be able to
seat people who want to worship in person
and we will still live-stream the service.

It is not just a movement of one space to another,
but plans to set up an altar and providing
good sound and music will take
a lot of volunteer expertise from
members of St. Stephen
in order for us to pull this off.

I have no doubt that we
can achieve this challenge together.

Look how well we have fared
this past year and a half.

There wasn't perfection every time,
there were moments of sweating a

few minutes before church as
some unforeseen problem reared up.

But we moved forward in love and
mutual purpose, trusting in one another
and through a lot of prayer we made it. (Pause)

When the renovation is completed
we will move back into our beloved sanctuary
and there will be a terrific opportunity
to encourage those who have

been reluctant to return to live worship
to come back to a newly renovated space.

We will keep the same precautions in place.

Mask wearing while singing.
Refrain from shaking hands and hugging
unless both parties know
the other is vaccinated
and shorter services.

We recognize this re-entry will be slow
because Covid has affected each of us in
different ways.

And while church online is effective and
spiritually motivating we do need to know

that there is no “replacing” the physical
benefits of being together in person
when it is safe to do so.

You may remember me telling the children on
an occasion at children’s time on Sunday that
I was happy they were there because
a pastor can’t do children’s sermons
without children.

The same can be said about church.

Church happens best when people are present. (Pause)

The next priority is to give each of us time
to get to know one another again. (Pause)

I am so thankful that a lot of you have been
reaching out by phone to each other,
or connecting on social media, but
others have been disconnected
from people they were used
to seeing each Sunday.

Simply put, we need to re-introduce ourselves
to each other.

I need to hear from you how this time of
separation has affected you and you need
to hear how it has affected me.

Everyone will be different, but everyone also
has a story to tell.

A God experience to share and
a burden to express.

I have heard from more than one person that
they may want to try a different
ministry in the church.

We need to feel comfortable sharing these ideas.

So, once the main sanctuary project is completed
we will want to gather
(it will probably be around food)
after church once a month to fellowship
and get to know one another again.

To listen to each other (and to the Holy Spirit)
and discern to where we are being called.

To come to the fullness of how God's Work is going
to be done through Our Hands. (Pause)

We are at a reset point in our individual lives
and in the life St. Stephen, too.

I picture a compass that is spinning without

a sure point directing us where to go.

That's ok, because that it is
God's way of telling us to stop and listen.

To get our heads on straight in
quiet time of reflection and retreat.

To renew our relationships with each other and
listen to where the other person is, and
get a sense of what they are feeling, and
to use the time to listen to where
God is calling us.

And, finally, my plans are simply that...mine.
What makes this congregation of St. Stephen
great is her people...

your principles and priorities!

God's work of love and forgiveness
through each of you.

It is not I nor any pastor, but the
work of God's Spirit in you that will be
the momentum for what is coming next.

AMEN!