



# St. Paul's Church

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## New Beginnings

At the recent diocesan convention, I was looking at hundreds of people like me who have very little idea of what their lives will look like three or six months from now. Surely, one would hope that we would have an idea of what "normal" by this time next year. I assume I was not the only one there who wished that we could somehow be given free trip around the board where the only things that would change would be that our lives would be characterized by stability instead of chaos, where surges in virus cases, political mayhem and regular instances of the denigration of our humanity would not be the features of our collective lives. But that world, we know, is magic. We go through our lives, as a community, nation and world, at a designated pace, and if you are like me, it is the church calendar that keeps us oriented. Advent will arrive on November 29, Christmas on December 25 and all the holidays will occur exactly as they are supposed to, with the world's events happening around them. God will still mourn with us over the suffering and the deaths, will celebrate with us in the births and

baptisms, but the calendar, the day-to-dayness of the year to come, will keep us moving forward and, hopefully, supply some sanity.

I say all this because, in the midst of the fixity of God's salvific work will be new beginnings, starts of relationships that we will have to work to nurture. One of them will be with Rutgers and the Nursing School, with a new clinic where nursing students can learn basic skills, our guests can be checked for high blood pressure and diabetes, and new relationships can begin. I sense a great deal of excitement about this new venture among the faculty at the nursing school, which needs community placements for their students to receive their "clinical hours," and I share their enthusiasm. Of course, only God knows what the social landscape will be by the time the first students and patients arrive in late January, but I have been looking at the room upstairs at St. Paul's being transformed and all I can think is, "yes" to the purpose God has for us in this new ministry.

I am writing of this ministry entering another stage not because I believe it alone will change the world but because it represents a "nevertheless" to all the disorientation we are currently experiencing. God is hard at work among us, for anyone who is wondering. God is giving us the opportunity to change lives, to bring people together in a way that can only be life-giving. I believe we need to celebrate these things, to say, "yes" to this work and its possibilities. As Bishop Stokes mentioned in his recent address to diocesan convention, we are on the front lines of this pandemic that has taken more lives than we can bear to contemplate. This new step will give us a new way to transform lives, initiate relationships and celebrate goals at a difficult time in our journey. I invite you to say, "yes" with me about this new venture and the work God is doing with us.

Fr. Mark

# Diocesan Convention 236

Candidly, I don't even know if the bishop knew it would turn out. All that the delegates, lay and clergy, diocesan staff and those observing on Facebook knew was that, with the participation of 500 members of the Diocese of NJ acting on behalf of 136 congregations, that God would be with us through all the business of the day. And, with God's help, it happened; new members were voted onto committees, delegates and alternates were elected to General Convention and important resolutions were implemented, including the beginning of Episcopal Community Services in this diocese.

That this convention was delayed by eight months and still held online underscored the pervasive effect of the pandemic on the life of the church. People are suffering and the bishop named St. Paul's as one of the congregations that are "keeping people alive." While I was heartened by that recognition, it was meaningful to me that basic ministries oriented toward feeding the hungry and clothing the naked were held up as the most serious work we have before us. The emphasis was on the ongoing work of healing that the pandemic has made necessary, of the creative



work needed for basic educational, formational and worship ministries to continue. And yes, there were the moments of tedium, but the necessary work was accomplished. My deepest thanks go to Brittany Fobia, Linda Ferrante and Betty Fletcher for giving up their Saturday so St. Paul's could have its voice in the work of the diocese.

Among the most moving of the resolutions was one that was submitted after the March deadline but, in my view, was desperately needed if the church was going to continue the work of reconciliation that is the heart of its mission. Bishop Stokes identified it in his opening address and it was heartening to see it pass without opposition. In part, it read:

*The Episcopal Church acknowledges that intentional action to address racial injustice is overdue. Racial justice and reconciliation are named a priority pillar of The Episcopal Church, and several dioceses are initiating processes toward righting the wrongs suffered and endured for too long. The breach continues to widen on a playing field that is not*

*equal when the legacy of centuries of slavery, segregation, mass incarceration, and unequal opportunity has not been confronted. A Repairing the Breach Task Force can lead the diocese to identify our sins, to repent, and to prayerfully examine actions and remedies. The Task Force would be called together by the bishop, who could appoint clergy and lay persons, and also constituted by other interested persons.*

Such a task force has clearly been overdue. It is hopeful however, that concrete action on the part of the diocese, working with New Jersey Together and other organizations, are helping to bring the awareness of the need for systemic change to the forefront of the business of our convention.

We will clearly contend with the virus and effects on our diocese for some time; in fact, the next scheduled convention in March will likely also be "virtual." But the effect we have on the world is real and painful as this time is, it is reminding us of the importance of our interdependence, on screen, in person and in our prayers.

Fr. Mark

# Advent 2020

*Lord Jesus, come yourself and dwell with us, be human as we are, and overcome what overwhelms us. Come into the midst of my evil, come close to my unfaithfulness, Share my sin, which I hate and which I cannot leave. Be my brother, O Thou Holy God. Be my brother in the kingdom of evil and suffering and death.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Advent sermon

It is hard to think of God dwelling with us. If you are like me, we have been raised with the idea (it's a very American heresy) that we are mostly on our own, until we are in a position where we simply cannot see our way through, and then God provides a solution for us. I had a professor in seminary who hated the song, "From a Distance," (I'm dating myself here), because it perpetuated this idea of God at a remove from our lives, looking at us "from a distance," as if we did not need the immediacy of an Emmanuel, a "God with us," who can be a brother to us as we go through the messes we find in our lives.

To ask God to dwell with us is an especially thorny idea, because we believe we know ourselves quite well. We know our tendency to act in self-interested ways, our own self-obsessions, our neediness, the things that we believe draw us away from God. The irony, of course, is that it is

exactly that neediness in us that made this enfleshed God inevitable, because we could not have made it through the scrapes in our lives without him. We needed this God-with-skin-on to walk our journeys with us. Advent is the time when we should be readying ourselves for the only thing that could save us.

This year, of course, has been an *annus mirabilis*, a year of wonder, not only because of the pandemic, of Black Lives Matter and a hard-fought election. In our slow walk through the kingdom of evil, suffering and death, we have had the presence of God with us, in the lines that stretched across the front of the church on Sunday mornings and afternoons, as a palpable presence when we have waited for news about the health of loved ones, at those moments we have felt that the whole world was going crazy. Underlying all these times when God was present was the idea of humility, that such a world that so

overwhelms us can be overwhelmed by this God, who comes close to our unfaithfulness if only because we could not recognize it as such without his presence. It truly has been a kingdom of evil and suffering and death in which we have lived, and what has made much of it bearable is the presence of this God.

So when we hear the prophecies of John the Baptizer, when we hear Mary say to Gabriel, "Let it be according to your word," something in us loosens because we are acknowledging two things at once. We know the kind of people we are, and yet we know the presence of the God who transforms us. In our waiting, our Advent preparations, we are saying "yes" to this God who dwells with us and who will not deny us the only thing we need, which is himself.

Fr. Mark

## Pledge Cards

It is not too late to make a pledge to St. Paul's for 2021.

Simply let Fr. Mark know if you need a card and he will make sure you receive one. It is NOT the amount that counts, only that we participate.

## Advent Quiet Day

We will have a day (actually two hours) of reflection on the scriptures for the new season on Saturday, December 5, 10am-noon. Please let me know if you can join us and I will make sure you receive the readings.

## Becoming Beloved Community

For those who would like the link to the Episcopal News Service announcement of our grant:

<https://www.episcopalnewservice.org/pressreleases/episcopal-church-announces-2020-beloved-community-rapid-response-grant-recipients/>