

Fourth Sunday of Lent and Third Anniversary Among You
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
19 March 2023

John 9:1-41

There is a well-known strategy during crisis situations: You shelve all unnecessary playbooks and concentrate on the emergency in front of you. You may have had all sorts of strategic ideas before the emergency, plans to expand, to advance, to improve, to grow, and to develop, but none of those plans mean much when disaster strikes. As soon as the winds start blowing, the rooftops begin to fall, the trees are shaken to the point of falling, and the waters around you begin to rise, you know the time has come to shelve all playbooks and to start dealing with the crisis at hand. You find protection for yourself and your family, you ensure enough food and supplies to ride the storm, you shelter in place in a safe location, you monitor the news, you hold on to your faith, and you pray for the storm to pass. There will be time for strategy sessions later on, for now, your main goal is to survive, to make it to the other side.

Three years ago yesterday, on March 18, 2020, I arrived at Saint Dunstan's as the waters of a worldwide pandemic were beginning to rise. The first task I was given was to shut the church down. Many of us thought the virus would be over within a couple of short weeks, after which we would dust off the strategy books and begin to grow. We didn't know then what we know now. And as week followed week, and as we shifted our entire life to the nebulous worldwide net, many of us began to realize that perhaps this pandemic was here to stay for a little bit. We created a Regathering Committee very early on and this committee began to meet regularly to plan a systematic, responsible, and faith-filled return to our sanctuary. One of the first things we realized was that, if our liturgical life was going to be done through live streaming, we needed to upgrade all our systems as soon as possible. We accomplished this in record time, and in the meantime, David Horn would come from one of the side doors, Katie Lamb would arrive from another one, and I would already be set in place ready for the service of the Eucharist. We taped, edited, and polished all our services by Thursday of each week, and then we loaded them to the website early on Sunday mornings. I preached for seven months to an empty church, but the message was never empty. Those were messages of hope, and I repeated often that God was in control and that as long as we remained centered on the cross of Christ, we would ride the storm in due time.

We then moved to in-vivo live streaming, working out all the kinks within record time. Then, little by little, the Diocese and the Regathering Committee gave us permission to enter the sanctuary for one service a Sunday and a limited capacity of 50 people. We installed screens to help us in liturgy, so we didn't have to use bulletins or books of common prayer, we upgraded our sound system and purchased additional microphones. These first services were opened within 7 months of the original closing of the church. These were anxiety-filled days as many congregations had decided to remain

closed. We took all sorts of precautions, we wore masks and shields, we installed sanitation stations, we placed stickers on our floors to keep us separated, we abstained from the common cup, we closed for two weeks when we had a scare, but as soon as we could, we re-opened back up. Eventually, the Diocese and the Regathering Committee allowed us to increase capacity to 75, then to open two services, then to open the three services, and then to return to campus for our Bible studies and fellowship. And eventually, we arrived at a new normal. In the meantime, we gained a faithful online congregation of 65 to 100 people every Sunday, and this congregation is here to stay. We now live stream three services a Sunday at 9:00 and 11:00am and at 1:00pm in Spanish. The presence of our online congregation has been a great blessing to us and I pray it will remain strong and vibrant.

As you guessed, today I am celebrating my third year anniversary with you, and my heart is filled with gratitude and joy. Dealing with this pandemic has been one of the hardest things I have done as a leader, but I am very proud of the work we have done together. It hasn't always been easy, but we have emerged from isolation stronger, more determined to grow, more open to what God's Holy Spirit is doing among us, and better able to reach out in love to all of our parishioners who feel isolated from God and from each other. And we are growing again. Now, it would be easy to take all the credit. After all, I am God's gift to the preaching profession (wait for laughter,) but this work has been done by you all primarily. You prayed with great fervor at times when prayer was the most needed, you reached deep into your pockets and funded a complete restoration of all our roofs and air conditioning units, you restored and renamed our Price Fellowship Hall, some of you gave me the resources I needed to start ministries for Spanish-speakers and I obtained the rest from our Diocese. You pivoted to Zoom Bible Studies and when the time came you returned to in-person meetings. You have funded initiatives for Invite-Welcome-Connect and we already have seen the growth in our congregation, as we have welcomed a number of new parishioners over the last three years. You allowed me to create a fourth service, this one in Spanish. You welcomed our amazing Curate almost two years ago, and our Associate Rector for Hispanic Ministries last July. And you have funded our children and youth and our outreach ministries in substantial ways.

I am often at Diocesan gatherings and I am asked, "How were you all so successful at returning from Covid?" I answer in the same way our blind person in the passage of John answers, "I don't quite know, all I know is that the man, Jesus, kneaded mud from within our own context, applied it on the eyes of our faith, and sent us to new waters to wash up. All I know is that we were as scared and cautious as all of you. We were as uncertain about the future. We were as fearful of death and severe illness as all of you, but together, we placed our faith in Jesus and our Regathering Committee opened doors through which we walked in faith. And Jesus has done the difference. And this was not the work of two or three people. This was our incredible staff and committed vestry; our dedicated altar guild and acolyte core; our courageous musicians and choirs; our ushers, finance committee, and technology team; our Street of Shoppes warriors; our

home-study hosts and Sunday School teachers; our Kids Hope and Hope Center volunteers; our Pastoral Care teams; and our clergy... In short, this has been the work of an entire community who knows deep in our hearts that as long as we remain focused on the cross of Jesus, and as long as we place all our hopes and aspirations on him, we will emerge stronger and more determined after any crisis.

I often hear great longing for the good old days, but my friends, these are our best days. Jesus is kneading mud and he is applying it to our eyes, and our scales are falling off every day, and our vision is being restored, and now the road in front of us is clearly visible. Christ is making us anew, and a new vision is now possible. A vision of more inclusion. A vision of more engagement with our community. A vision of a faith that has become more vibrant and engaged. We will go back to Dominican Republic in July, and a small team will travel to Cheyne in September to prepare a large mission for 2024. We just had our second food distribution yesterday and we run out of food within an hour, as we had three times the amount of people we expected. Our partnership with NAM is now producing fruits as we have referred parishioners to their mental health programs and they have prioritized our people. Our communications department has been greatly stabilized after a difficult transition and our new Coordinator of Communications, Kyra Helmick is doing a phenomenal job. Many of our children and youth will be going on two different camps this Summer, and all of this is the result of Sarah Quiroga and Angela Stengel's efforts and your financial generosity. Our clergy are happy and energized for the mission ahead. And new members are added to the rolls every single week, in large part due to the incredible hospitality of Dede Johnson and many of you. There is an energy about us that is palpable and many have seen it. We are stronger, and we have a clear mission and vision. God is on the move among us, and it is very exciting to be your Rector.

Has all of this been easy? Of course not, change is always hard. Like the blind man in our story, we are still adjusting to the light, and there are times we still find new blind spots. But this is normal. Life in community is hard, but God is with us, opening eyes, leading us into more and more of the brightness of his light, molding us into the people and the church he wants us to be.

Thank you for your love and your support, thank you for your patience as we advance God's kingdom in this area of Houston together. Thank you for your financial provision, and thank you for your friendship and hospitality. This is the hardest I have ever worked in my life, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

May God continue to bless you, Fr. Roldan+