

Welcome. As I said this morning in worship, it has been 8 weeks since we were together in person. In that time, much has happened for you, for us, and in the world around us.

I shared with the Vestry last week at our meeting that I've been reading a lot of people speculating about where God is in this time. And even some more conservative folks who are claiming that God is somewhere in the midst of this virus – that perhaps this is a punishment for us of some form. And so, I want to be really clear to say that – as Anglicans – we don't believe in a God who would do that. So, God is not in the virus. This virus is a result of the world we live in. Of the messy world we created. And while God watches and weeps with us – God is not the cause of this virus.

If you're looking for God – you will find God in our response to this virus when we respond in love. And God has been in the response of this place to this virus. And in some ways, that's what you're going to hear about today. God is in you. And in us. And in our life together.

Today we are going to share with you some pieces of the story of our response to this virus – the story of God at work among us. Everything you will hear is folded into the life you and I are living and building together – all of it folded into the life we share with God. We have responded to this virus on every front. With our worship, our programming, our fellowship, our participation in God's mission. We've responded inside – and outside – our metaphorical walls with love and compassion. And of course – it's much broader than what we can cover in an hour – but the goal is to show you a snapshot – so that you know where the parish is and how we intend to proceed.

The first few of these categories align with the slides.

When can we open?

This is the question I've heard most often in the last few weeks. A few reflections that will help illustrate where we are and where we're headed:

- 1) On a call with the Bishops and other diocesan clergy last week, Bishop Ian said he expected our closing to last at least a month past May 20th. In part, this because CT has some of the highest per capita infection rates in the country. The Bishops indicated that they are working on protocols, checklists, and concrete recommendations which they intend to share in the next few weeks (before May 20th). These will serve to ground our conversations about opening when it's time to prepare for that.
- 2) When we open (and we will open!) we will continue to be careful. We will go one step at a time, evaluating programs on a case-by-case basis. Probably many things will stay virtual for a while as we stagger an opening. We will need to explore hybrid worship – both

online and in person. And the staff and I are already discussing what pieces of our virtual life should carry forward into the fullness of our life together when we can be back in person. I can't tell you exactly what this opening will look like – but you know already that it will be a long time before things can really go back to “normal”.

- 3) I want us to be together as soon as we can. I can't tell you how much I miss our life together. And my first priority will always be to keep you safe. So, I will consult with the Vestry as the time approaches, we'll continue to monitor the situation carefully, and when I have information about how to safely open and worship together, I'll share that with you.

In the meantime – there are many ways for you to stay connected!

Worship

In so many ways, we our worship is something special. Our worship is dynamic and engaging a truly unique way. You see more faces and hear more voices than any other place I've seen. And from the beginning this was my hope – that you wouldn't just see me standing in the sanctuary by myself – but that it would feel like you went to church because you got to see and hear each other. This is one of the magic things about St. Matt's – the relationships we share a deep and special. And so the way that we're worshipping in this time seeks to honor that. Our worship continues to be a reflection of who we are – and that's just as it's meant to be.

From the very beginning of this virtual season, Dave Cristini & Sharon Pearson – Dave Cristini & have been helping to make sure this all happens – and I'm very grateful to them. Our worship is also a team effort of the clergy and staff. Scott prepares the music and the choir who so ably help us to sing and pray. Sam is consistently present and often offers prayers written by our kids. Nancy helps to prepare the bulletins and communicate with everyone. And Don has continued to be present with us for worship on Sundays, Tuesdays, and sometimes for tea!

Our worship may look easy from out there on your TV or computer screen, but it's not. For the choir, especially – and for all of us to some extent – this is a challenging thing to do – and to do well. And I'm proud of what we've built. Despite having to be virtual, Holy Week and Easter were really special this year. We worshipped together every day. And the music throughout the week – and particularly on Easter – was lovely. Scott even found a way to invite harp and trumpet into that day.

Over the next few weeks, as we continue to worship online, we'll look for some ways to add in variety and some surprises. So keep an eye out for that. We'll try something completely new (that to my knowledge has never been done anywhere else) on Pentecost (5/31). So make sure you join us for that.

And of course...worship isn't the only way to connect...

Other ways to Connect

On the slide, you'll see a number of specific ways to connect. And if you look at the layout of the week, you can see that the staff and I have worked hard to create multiple landing pads for children and adults throughout the week. We want to be part of your routine, part of the structure of your day and your week. So, include us in your patterns, in what's getting you through this time. Many weeks it's been true that there was a place to land almost every day – and sometimes actually every day.

Adult Education has been strong in this season. In some ways, being virtual seems like it allows people to connect more. Which is a great thing. We're having deep and meaningful conversations. In May, a group of us are exploring the theology of Karl Barth (<https://www.stmatthewswilton.org/blog/barth-willimon-and-hauerwas-online/>). In June we'll do a series on Christian meditation (<https://www.stmatthewswilton.org/blog/christian-meditation-learn-the-basics/>). And we'll begin a new Sunday book group in a few weeks as well.

This website is where we're collecting everything – all our worship and programming. So take a scroll through here every once in a while to get a sense of the life of the whole place: www.stmatthewswilton.org/virtually.

Your Vestry and Officers are also working to offer more social and fellowship opportunities as well. So please keep an eye out for those.

Pastoral Care

Each week, I spend somewhere between 15 and 25 hours a week in one-on-one pastoral care conversations. Most of these happen on Zoom, some of them also happen over the phone. **The easiest way to schedule one of these conversations is by sending me an email!** When I shared the number of hours I'm spending on pastoral care each with someone a few days ago, their response was, "Oh! Then we don't need to meet! I'm really okay!" And please – hear me when I say – I am never too busy for a conversation. And our having a chance to connect is always the highlight of my week, it's always my favorite part of my job – even when we are wading through really difficult things together. And that hasn't changed in this season – in fact, it may be even more true. I'm so happy to have a chance to talk with you one-on-one. So please don't hesitate to schedule those conversations.

Instead, I think it's important to share the number of hours of pastoral care because that tells you two important things. First, that folks are needing support – and they're leaning on me, on the staff, on the place, to find that support. And that's a good thing. And second, some of the care I'm giving is to our larger community as well. And that is a part of the witness to hope of the whole place. My ability to offer that care on behalf of St. Matt's is really important. And your presence in our community, your giving, your contributing – makes it possible for us to support people both within and outside our (now metaphorical) walls.

I am also not the only person doing pastoral care! Our Pastoral Care Team has been in the mix since the beginning – checking in frequently on some of our more senior members and those who might be at greater risk. And Pam Ely has been helping to coordinate a number of responses –

some of our creation...and some that sprung up organically. With Tom Carlson's help, there have been some really lovely and special treats delivered to folks who couldn't get out or who just needed a lift.

Your Vestry has also been calling, emailing, checking in, and hosting zoom calls with parishioners – we continue to check on members across the life of the congregation.

And we really do have a team of people who are ready to help – to grocery shop, pick up prescriptions, drop off your mail, or leave you something special. So if you need something – please don't hesitate – be in touch with me or with Pam and we'll find a way to set it up for you. Let us help.

So where are we, really?

We are in a really good place. The reality is that we made some very difficult decisions last year in order to sure up our financial future. And those decisions did just that. We entered this year with a surplus because of those decisions and because of your generous giving. It makes a tremendous difference that we entered this difficult year on sure footing – thank you for that. A few really important things for you to know:

- 1) **We are doing everything we can to meet the challenge of this time.** You heard from Keith that we secured a PPP loan (with thanks to Keith & Jonathan Woods for their great work). We've also applied for some clergy assessment relief from ECCT. We are exploring more methods of online giving. And we are doing what we can to cut expenses. We have good, smart, faithful people working on this from every angle. We will continue to do everything we can on our side.
- 2) **We need you to do your part, too. We need you to continue to honor your pledges because that is our bread and butter and that is what will help us make our way through this year.** A pledge is a hopeful promise – it's what you *hope* you can contribute in the next year, all things being equal. We know that this year, for some of you, all things are not equal. And to the best of your ability, we need for you to honor the commitments you've made to the parish. If you're in a position to do a little more to help in this time when others might come up short, please do that. If you can prepay your pledge to help us now, please do that. While we do everything we can to be creative, we need your help, and if you can, please honor your pledges – that will make a huge difference for us.
- 3) **Having said that, if you are in a place where all things are not equal and you cannot fulfill your pledge, come talk with me about that. The first thing I will ask you is, "How can we help you?" You are important to us – and we want to help you.** And we do have resources to help. My discretionary fund exists for this reason. If you are coming up short on electric or money for groceries, please come tell me that. I have resources that can help – and those conversations are completely confidential. When I report on spending those funds, I note that it went to "electric bills" or "groceries", but I never note who it went to – so it really is completely confidential. If I can help, please let me know. Thus far, I've only heard from a few families who know

they won't be able to fulfill their pledges this year due to job loss and financial insecurity in this season. If you need help, or if you can't fulfill your pledge, please be in touch with me. **Let us help. We are all in this together – and we are here to support you. You are important to us and to our community.**

- 4) **We are grateful for all the ways you give and support the life of St. Matthew's.** And I hope that you can see in what we're sharing that it makes a big difference. Your giving allows us to care for the life of the whole community – through pastoral care, mission, virtual worship, virtual programming for people of all ages, live music broadcasts, music education for kids (k-12) and so much more. Your support makes a big difference – and everything that we do is made possible by you choosing to give to St. Matt's out of all the blessing God has so freely given to you.

Some last things...

As your Rector, everything that we do goes past my desk. Or my virtual desk now as the case may be. So, I see and help curate every part of our life. And I can tell you that we are always a busy place. In fact, that's one of my greatest joys in being your Priest – we are busy about God's work together – all the time. And in this time, that has been even more consistently true. And I am really proud of what we've built together. I'm proud of the many ways we are reaching out to help our neighbors – everything from ice cream to virtual 5ks. And I'm proud of all of you; for staying home, for staying safe, you who jump in to help, you who show up virtually, all of you who continue to support each other and this place through this time. Thank you.

We are blessed by so many people and so many gifts. There are many people who have stepped up to help, to contribute, to engage. I'm grateful to the Vestry and the Officers, to our staff, and to the WEPCO staff. I'm grateful for our partnership with WPC, and Shannon and I continue to check in. I'm also grateful to all our lay leaders who continue to sustain our life. And this has been a heavy lift – I know it's draining, and I know it's hard. I know that many of you are tired and frustrated by the lack of an end date. I am, too. And. You are God's beloved. And what you're doing, and what we're doing together, is really a beautiful thing to behold. So, thank you for continuing to be part of our story. Of God's story. Thank you for all that you do to be part of this place and to support it. Thank you for sharing your story with me and with us.

If you have questions, please be in touch, I'd love to set up a time to talk more.
marissa@stmatthewswilton.org