

Sermon for All Saints'
The Rev. Brooks Cato

I'm gonna do something a little unusual this All Saints' morning. I'm going to read y'all the Cover Letter for this month's newsletter. Why? Well, it's an important one, and it's going to affect the way we approach being this church for the coming year or so. But have no fear! I think this is going to be a life-giving thing! But before we get into it, I wanted to look at how this all fits with what today means. See, today is our celebration of All Saints', a day set aside in the church to remember how we fit in the arc of St. Thomas', from past to present to unimaginable future. People have been gathering here in some way or another to worship in the Episcopal style since 1835, longer than Arkansas has been a state. Hamilton itself owes its existence to some of our founders who literally changed the shape of the landscape to establish our little village and our little church here. Today, on our better days, we've been doing the same, pushing our hardest to change what needs changing here so that this place knows God's love. We do this, honoring our forebears and laying foundations for unseen generations that will one day call this place home. But to do that well, we need to make sure our foundations are solid now. It's in that spirit that we're looking at this coming year.

Back in 2016, we began our relationship together as priest and parish, and we got off to a royally good start. Once I learned y'all's names, and once y'all learned who "y'all" was, we got to work, and we got to work in a big way. Seemed like each month brought new excitement, new challenges, and new people. At one point, our concerned Godly Play director came to me with the best problem I've ever had: we didn't have enough small chairs for the number of kids in our Sunday School classes! By February of 2020, St. Thomas' had grown in so many ways, and our momentum was a powerful thing to behold. We regularly saw over 80 people pack out our pews every Sunday, our pledges came in at astonishing levels, and just about all of us watched with wonder, awe, and glee as we came into our own.

And then the pandemic hit, and it hit in ways most of us couldn't make sense of. It hit hard and hit way too close to home, and St. Thomas' turned that momentum and energy we'd been fostering for years and focused it on keeping our church going even as the lights turned off. And then the pandemic hit me, and it hit in a way none of us could've anticipated, again. And when I stepped back to heal, St. Thomas' stepped up. You stepped up and you kept this place going through one of the greatest periods of uncertainty this parish has ever seen. You stepped up, and you worked yourselves to the bone, and you endured for months without knowing what was coming next. When I finally got cleared to return to work, I knew I needed to come back in a way that gave me space to keep healing. I needed to come back into this beautiful community that y'all kept so vibrant, and when I came back, I needed to see your faces and be sure of your love and, more than anything, reestablish my connection to God in this place.

But you know what I didn't do? Until just recently, in a conversation with the Wardens and the Vestry, I didn't see just how hard we've been driving this church. Not just this year, not just during the pandemic, but since I arrived, this whole church has been working extremely hard nearly non-stop for seven years. That number caught my eye, seven. It's a big one for Christians, from the weekly Sabbath to the Jubilee cycle, seven is an indication of completeness, and it's tied to creation, renewal, and rest. And that got me thinking. This is our seventh year together, St. Thomas'. Maybe it's a good chance for us to take some Sabbath time, maybe a whole year, give or take, of Sabbath.

Sabbath isn't a time just to chill. It's not a time to sleep in on Sundays or put everything on hold. No, Sabbath is a time set aside for God, for the work God has given us to do. Sabbath is a time to recenter our spiritual selves so that we can encounter the world with our foundations solid and our souls rebuilt, week after week, season after season, year after year. So, as we approach the end of this Liturgical Year and anticipate

beginning a new one, we're going to enter a time of Sabbath. I'm going to be honest with y'all, I don't fully know what that means just yet, but I'm encouraging all of us to listen to what our minds, our hearts, and our souls are telling us. If you're anything like me, then we're probably all more tired than we're ready to admit. And I don't mean tired in the sense of needing a nap. I mean spiritually tired. Our extreme ups and the world-upending pandemic downs and all the other stuff we've been through - and keep on going through - they have taken our energies, and it's time for us to breathe.

Along with all this, there's been lots of talk about when I'm going on sabbatical. I'm looking at the Summer of 2024. I didn't come to this decision lightly, but I have tried to come to it prayerfully and lovingly. St. Thomas' needs its priest, and its priest needs St. Thomas'. We all need this foundation rebuilt, and I'm deeply excited about the prospect of all of us laying that foundation together. I'll do a little more to facilitate your Sabbath Year now, and in turn, when the Summer of 2024 rolls around, maybe St. Thomas' can facilitate a Sabbath for me. And we'll all emerge at the end of that season with our hearts and souls stronger and more faithful than ever. In the meantime, I'd like to invite all of you into your own Sabbath Year with St. Thomas'. Yes, there is still work that needs doing. We'll keep at those things. But we can use this time to sort out what needs doing now and what still needs doing but can wait for us to catch our breath.

The Strategic Planning process we've started has highlighted a few things we really need to focus on, primarily the condition of the church building, a general decline in Sunday morning attendance, and a longing for a stronger, more visible presence in the community. Some of these are unique to St. Thomas', some are typical outcomes of a world changed by Covid. But even if our symptoms are common, how we respond to them doesn't have to be. We have the opportunity to respond with extraordinary faith, and to do that, we're going to need to do some work of our own. But we need to do that work while giving our sapped volunteers and our spiritually tired souls room to recover. With these priorities in place, we're putting the Strategic Planning process on hold for the time being. That work isn't ended, though. It is changed. We're looking at a handful of very pressing building issues in the coming year. Yes, there's other work needs doing, but we're focusing in on the most pressing items now. Yes, the Vestry will still meet. We're going to spend some time at each meeting thinking about our most pressing issues, namely getting our spiritual foundation solid and our church family rebuilt. Yes, the commissions and guilds still have work to do. But those extra things we've been driving so hard for can be set aside for the moment while we lean into our sacred Sabbath.

St. Thomas', I am hopeful. I am hopeful that our pews will fill back up. I am hopeful that our Sunday School classes will get boisterous and full again. I am hopeful that our buildings will be a source of pride again. And in that essential work, with that core focus, I am hopeful that we will emerge from our Sabbath Year with renewed energy, certainty in this place, and spirits solidly grounded in faith. That's rebuilding our foundation. That's our Year of Sabbath.

That's what's in *Tidings*, but I want to add one last thing. I love y'all, and I love those who have come before that have made this place the guiding light it has become for so many of us, myself very much included. I know we're talking about stewardship these few weeks, and I want to include a piece about that, too. We are called to be stewards of our money, yes. We've started that conversation and will hear more about it next week, too. We are called to be stewards of our buildings, absolutely yes. The Buildings Commission has been hard at work for years, especially this year, and there are three significant projects for this building coming in 2023: the roof, the paint, and that entryway. We're going to need your help to make those things happen.

But one thing I think I've failed to emphasize is that we are also called to be stewards of our souls. That requires some different work, work that's harder to see and sometimes much harder to do. And that's why we need Sabbath. We need to set aside distractions, need to reestablish kindness, the assumption of good intent, faith, and grace in our hearts. Sabbath is a faithful pause, a redirecting of our energies to point us back to the

core of our faith, back to each other, back to our neighbors, and back to Christ. That's the foundation, that's the Sabbath, and with the work we're entering into now, for generations to come, that will be St. Thomas' again.