

Over the past week, I've been digging through our church records. I love those old books. The masking tape spines, the frayed covers, even the occasionally indecipherable cursive of a country parson in a hurry. Mostly I've passed my time in the old Service Registers, those books that record every single service we hold. You can pick any random Sunday, look up what service we did, what time it started, how many people showed up, who the preacher was, and sometimes even what the weather was like! But I found something interesting, or rather, re-found something. When St. Thomas' was preparing to hunker down at the beginning of this pandemic, I found a missing Sunday way back when we closed for the Spanish Flu, and I made a lot of hay about COVID not being the first time we'd done this. Well, I just found another, a different Sunday a few years later, when we closed again. Influenza was the cause that time.

There's other stuff in there, too. There's snowy days and guest preachers. There's burials and baptisms. There's even a service that had zero attendees with the comment "Rector absent." One can only imagine what the Rector had gotten up to. This is a longstanding set of records, by the way. We lost some to the Parish Hall fire in the '50s, but we still have ways to track down old information. The diocese keeps records, too. The whole church does, for that matter, and while most of the time they sit in a safe, occasionally we break 'em out for an adventure in their musty pages. My favorite example of notes from those old books, comes from an English minister in the 15 or 1600s, I can't remember which. One Sunday, a somewhat literate farmer got up to read the passages assigned for the day, and when he got to a phrase that referred to the great sea beast, "that Leviathan," he stumbled on the unfamiliar word. The minister notes that the reader did his best, saying, and I quote, "that...that...well, that Leather Thing."

Now, we don't just keep records for the delightful moments. We keep tons more, notes about marriages and confirmations, baptisms and burials, last known addresses and final resting places. We write it all down, strictly following more or less the same rules for centuries so that someday someone can sit in some office and peruse those pages looking for a hint about who we used to be and maybe who we're becoming. Really, it's organizational spreadsheets and administrative work, and that kind of thing gets glanced over when it comes time to hold up the ministries of the church. We like the big flashy things, but most'll never see the little notes in those aging books. They just sit there, a record for someone when they're ready. It's a patient and quiet thing we do, and it's chock full of hope.

Because we write this stuff down assuming some day it'll be useful. Some day, someone's going to care about "that Leather Thing" or how many people were here today. And maybe with the lens of history, they'll be able to tell something about us because of that.

Here's an example: when I was looking through our old records, there are two really explosive times of growth in terms of Sunday attendance: the 1920s and the late-1940s into the '50s. We need to do what they did, right? Well, pause a moment and think about why folks might've come to church then. There are a million reasons that could be, but there's a couple that stand out. For one thing, church attendance fell during the late 1910s and the early 1940s. It's gotta go back up, right? Now, it fell because many of our people weren't here to attend. They were off fighting on some distant front where they witnessed unfathomable horrors in trenches and battlefields. While many lost God in the foxholes, many found God there, too. And when they came home, they came to church for its safety and the comfort of a place to make sense of all that'd happened to them. Our church saw magnificent growth at great cost. And we wrote it all down. We celebrated the Armistice and lamented the need for it. We recorded the losses and the boom of children that followed. We wrote it all down. Wrote it all down for someone later, hoping that someone in the future would care that we were here, that we

lived at all, and that we were faithful, as faithful as we could be in the world we occupied. Don't worry, Zoom folks. We're writing y'all down, too. Because how you're here now is very much a part of our body. And because I hope some future priest's gonna sit at their desk and get a kick out of how we managed to keep going when the world closed its doors.

In Peter's Letter, there's a line I'd never quite caught before: we should always be ready to give an accounting for the hope that is in us. We're pretty well used to accounting for all sorts of stuff, but accounting for our hope, that's a new one. It shouldn't be. It's been in those pages for a little while by now, but it only just sprung out. And you know, given the years we've been having, it's a tough one to think about. An accounting of hope's likely to come up in the red. If not now, it sure would've a year or two ago. I was having dinner with a dear friend the other night, and we talked about how hard hope is to foster. I told him about that Nick Cave line from Easter Sunday about hope being "optimism with a broken heart." There's something really valuable in the claim that hope is not naive. Hope has lived, hope has seen snowy days and acts of war. Hope has lost and broken and decided to stand back up anyway. Hope has come to places like this after waves of grief washed the walls clean. But an accounting of hope, well, what do we do with that? And more to the point, what do we do when the bottom line gives little reason to hope, when our hope reservoirs run dry, when we feel the last hint of hope wither, what then?

Well, you could turn to Google. A quick search turns up millions of articles on how to cultivate hope, and while some are fine, many amount to telling a sad person to smile more. We can lean on this place for a refill of hope. For many of us it's a never-ending flood just waiting to flow into our hearts. But it isn't always. We can proclaim "Christ is risen" all we like and still feel the hurt of his death in the first place, and, maybe, even worry for the hurts that will come because of it. Our story is not a tale of simple optimism. We know this. From the first book of the Bible to the last, it's a hard set of stories. There's beauty in there, but there's also deep realism. But in spite of all that has happened, in spite of all that humanity is, there remains God and God in relationship with us, and because of that, there remains hope.

Doing an accounting of hope for St. Thomas', I'm one happy priest. Realistically, our Sunday morning numbers are a little low, but that's ok. We're a dedicated bunch. There's a fair number of folks that'll come back yet. But there's also a whole village and then some that desperately need some hope of their own, and we just might be able to share what we've got. I'm hopeful, not naively optimistic, but hopeful of what the years ahead hold. We leave the lights on, hoping someone'll find rest here. We make coffee, hoping someone sneaks into a church they wouldn't set foot in otherwise. We open scripture, hoping wisdom two thousand years in the making'll pop out. We fill folders, hoping a new person'll be interested in learning more about who we are. And we gather every week, with some of y'all setting the table, some of you putting out flowers, some of you warming up your voices, some of you tidying the bulletin stack, some of you weeding the gardens, some of you practicing your welcoming smile, some of you looking for your own place to rest. We gather every week and do all that work hoping someone'll be moved by what they find here. We gather every week with the hope that what we do matters. That belief matters. That God holds us tight. And that hope grows here. And we write it all down.

The world outside our doors is a wild place. There's pain and disappointment in spades, so much that hope has a hard time competing. But here, we do hope, stubbornly, realistically, gratefully. Here, in community, in love, in God, here we hope.