



Theme: Restoration and Renewal – Live and Pandemic

“Learning as we Go...Grow”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber on...

August 28-29, 2021

Weekly Memory Verse:

⁵ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. –Romans 5:3

VIDEO Sermon Bumper

SLIDE “Learning as we Go...Grow”

SOS Children’s Villages is a non-profit that builds families for children in need, helps them shape their futures, and shares in the development of their communities. They envision a world in which every child belongs to a family and grows up with love, respect, and security. Their ministry in Morocco interviewed children about what they have learned and how they have changed during the pandemic. Let’s check this out.

VIDEO SOS Children’s Villages Morocco

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTH8OX5sjq4&ab_channel=SOSChildrensVillages

One of the realities of Covid is that it has been an international

experience. Every community throughout the world has experienced and had similar learnings and challenges. As we begin a new school year, I find it powerful to hear from children and young people what that experience has been like as we were reminded by Wade last week that they don't have as much perspective as we do who have lived a few decades.

In this series, we are remembering something developed by Walter Brueggeman, a professor of Old Testament theology at Columbia seminary. He captured the life experience of the Israelites in the Old Testament in a way that resonates with every human because it is our life experience and is especially appropriate and helpful during this time of pandemic. Here is how he describes it.

GRAPHIC Orientation Circle

Orientation is when life is good. In terms of the weather, it's sunny and warm. But that never last forever for anyone. A time of disorientation comes when life gets hard. Eventually, that also subsides, and we have a reorientation for life. That also never last forever and the cycle begins again after the new normal sets in.

GRAPHIC Orientation Doodle

I appreciated this doodle drawing of this cycle. During orientation we, like the Israelites, praise the Lord because God has saved us and made a strong. Then life happens and there is pride, greed, anger, fear, hatred, violence, disappointment, and we cry out to God, "Where are you?" We are disoriented and confused. Eventually, we experience reorientation when life becomes good again and we again praise the Lord! We experience God's help when we are weak, and we trust in God again! After we settled into that time of reorientation, we move through the cycle again.

GRAPHIC Orientation Circle with RED X just after disorientation

I think we are today on this graphic just after disorientation and moving towards reorientation in some form. We have started to make that turn and we are hopeful that we can see a light. We begin to feel hope already, but I also remind us that this is a marathon and Sprint when it comes to working for something like a pandemic. Even though we are not clearly out of the woods yet, we know that Sunday is coming.

Over the past few weeks, we have talked about what we can be thankful for even during tough times like the last 18 months; how it is that we will all fail during disorientation and the hope is that we fail forward; and last week Wade did a great job helping us think about our perspective during times of uncertainty. Today I want us to focus on something that happens to ALL of us in times of disorientation and it's something we MUST recognize before we ever find reorientation.

SLIDE During disorientation we will be changed.

We will be different after going through times of disorientation and we will have to choose how we want to be different. While we don't believe that God causes things like a pandemic or pain or hurt, we do believe as people of faith that God can take these moments and mold them and shape them and do something with them.

GRAPHIC Pope Francis - Let Us Dream - The Path to a Better Future

I've read several books about the pandemic from different religious and spiritual leaders over the past few months, and one of the ones I found very inspiring was by Pope Francis who wrote a book, **Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future**. It was released last fall as a response to COVID and many of his words are helpful. Here is one of the things he wrote.

SLIDE

"In the trials of life, you reveal your own heart, how solid it is, how

merciful, how big or how small." –Pope Francis

Those words are profound because crises and trials in life do reveal who we are. They take away the mask and lay bare what is underneath. We have seen during this time of Covid over the past 18 months some people's hearts be enlarged. I have been so proud of you as a congregation to see how many ways you have stepped up. You may have had to stay home but you still found ways to serve your neighbor, to help others by providing food and resources. You went to the hospitals to cheer people on from outside their windows. Many of you called and donated your government stimulus checks to help those who were truly in need because you were doing okay. As a congregation, you were more generous than you have ever been at any point in our history over the past 12 months.

This was true for Americans in general, who if they weren't in financial stress, gave away more than they ever had before. Many did more and serve more than they ever had before because their hearts were enlarged through this crisis. Pope Francis recognized in his book this truth that we are talking about today, that in the midst of crisis we are changed, and we come out either better or worse, and that depends on our attitude and our faith and what we value is most important. Let me ask you this question that I believe every one of us must ask as we move out of this time of disorientation and towards a new reorientation.

SLIDE Will we come out better or worse?

We won't come out the same and so we need to choose. As I have been reading about people going through times of crisis, it's clear that there are several things needed to come out better after a time of crisis.

SLIDE Intention

We must be intentional about how we live in the midst of difficult circumstances. It's an intentionality about how our lives will be better as

we go forward. How can we do things better moving forward? We need time to evaluate, reflect, and trust that God will carry us through these difficult moments.

As we have struggled as a nation with things unfolding in Afghanistan, one of you sent me a video featuring Travis Mills, one of only 4 American service persons to survive being a quadruple amputee after being injured by a bomb during his tour in that country. I found his story, AND his words to us after the withdrawal we have seen inspiring and profound. Let's take a look.

VIDEO Travis Mills

You can't watch something like that and not be inspired and reminded that our attitude and intention will most often determine how we respond after tragedy or crisis. Travis now is one of the first to meet with service members who have lost limbs, and he was one of the first to go to Boston after the bombing at the Marathon. He now is making arrangements to see how he can serve the Afghani people and US military members who were wounded in the most recent bombings. That takes courage and it takes intention and faith that there is something bigger at work in the tragedy.

SLIDE Faith

Another key component to growing and become better in times of crises is faith. One of the reasons we started this series of sermons with the idea of being thankful, is because it changes our internal orientation and forces us to be intentional about how we move through a time like this pandemic or any other time of disorientation. Faith is trust during the crisis that God will work through this, and God is still calling us to be faithful. As people of faith, we believe there is a mission for us to fulfill even in the midst of crisis. No matter what is going on in our lives, there is a purpose for us to fulfill and God is with us no matter what. We believe

the worst thing is never the last thing and disorientation forever. This faith compels us to move forward and pushes us to be better and not worse as we come out of any time of disorientation.

The apostle Paul writes about this in his letter to the Romans as he reflects on a time of disorientation for Christians in Rome who are being put to death at an alarming rate because of their faith in Jesus Christ. He writes these words from prison to encourage them in chapter 5.

BIBLE

³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.

SLIDE

⁵ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

This last line is our memory verse for the week, so let's say it together out loud. I love that idea of God filling our hearts with his love. The idea is that if we are paying attention, God is at work in the midst of the crises. God doesn't bring the crises or want the difficult moments, but God is always at work in those challenging times if we will allow God to fill our hearts. Paul reminds us that God is working within us, through the crucible of suffering, to bring about something good and beautiful and this hope will not lead to disappointment. There are opportunities for us to learn and grow and become better.

Maybe you've heard this phrase before, that is credited to Josh Shipp.

SLIDE *"You either get bitter or you get better. It's that simple. You*

either take what has been dealt to you and allow it to make you a better person, or you allow it to tear you down. The choice does not belong to fate, it belongs to you. –Josh Shipp

As a result of something like this pandemic, we can become more negative, narrow, and inwardly focused, in the way we think, act, and live our lives; or we can become bigger, broader, and filled with endurance and character as the apostle Paul puts it.

This happens by faith, trusting in the role of the Holy Spirit. The season is that we find most difficult are also the growing seasons in our lives. We can become changed the likeness of Christ and become what God longs for us to be. The seasons challenge our faith and our life, but in the midst of those times of challenge, God's work. We can see a concrete example of how our lives are changed and how God is at work through something like this pandemic is some of the research which has been done, asking people about their perspective on this pandemic.

There have been many surveys done over the past 18 months, some of them asking people about their faith and how they are experiencing this time of Covid. In one study, people were given 17 choices about how they felt during this pandemic, and more than 5000 people responded. It's enlightening to look at the top three responses given by age. This is especially interesting given that people in their 70s and 80s have been the most at risk with serious complications from Covid if they were to contract the virus.

VIDEO Emotions from 20s to 80s

20s – Anxious, Uncertain, Overwhelmed.

30s – Anxious, Overwhelmed, Uncertain. Overwhelmed I would imagine comes from having children during this time of uncertainty.

40s – Anxious, Uncertain, Overwhelmed.

50s – Anxious, Uncertain, Frustrated.

60s – Anxious, Uncertain, Hopeful.

70s – Hopeful, Loved, Anxious.

80's – Hopeful, Loved, Lonely.

How interesting that we go from anxious in our 20s through our 60s and then a shift happens towards hopeful in our 70s and 80s. I looked at several studies which showed the same kind of movement. I heard from a number of people in their 70s and 80s who felt more care for because people were paying more attention to them during this time. We might think that would be more of a top emotion for those in their 70s and 80s since they are most vulnerable, but instead they were hopeful. This is consistent with surveys which have been done throughout the last century on how people feel as they get older in life.

As the pandemic was in full swing in April 2020, a clinical psychologist and researcher at Stanford University did a comprehensive study of people aged 18 to 76 and found this same trend. She summarized her findings with these words about how people express they were feeling during the pandemic.

“The findings showed that older people report better emotional experience than younger people, even during the pandemic which placed them at greater risk than any other age group. They were more likely to report experiences of positive emotions such as calm, hope, and appreciation, and less likely to report experiences of negative emotions like anxiety and fear.”

Research has been consistent in finding that even though when we are younger, we worry about getting older and being fearful, the exact opposite is true. Those who are least fearful and anxious are our older

adults, typically over 70. Research studies have investigated why this is the case and there seem to be two primary answers.

SLIDE As we age, we think about the now.

As we age, we become more focused on the present and worry less about what might happen down the road, or what could happen. We become less concerned about the future and more content on living in the present moment. When we live in the present moment, there is less anxiety. When we focus simply on today and do not assess about tomorrow, we have less anxiety and less fear. Jesus talked about this as he shared in his most important sermon, the sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6.

BIBLE

³³ Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.

³⁴ “So don’t worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

SLIDE As we age, we have perspective and realize crises don’t have the final word.

The second thing researchers have found is that as we age, we have more perspective, and we realize that crises don’t have the final word. Do you know that we have lived through 8 economic recessions since 1940? If you are in your 70s or 80s, you have this perspective. You’ve gotten to the other side of each one and you have seen a rebound and you know it’s going to be okay. Our oldest adults in today’s world have lived through polio, smallpox, and 50 to 60 different variations of flu across the course of their lives. They have learned that we will come out on the other side and God walks with us. Somehow, it will be okay, and even if it’s not okay and I physically don’t make it, I belong to God. That gives us a certain

wisdom and a certain perspective on life. This is literally what Paul talks about as he says that our problems and trials produce endurance which produce character which produce hope.

Here's another way to look at it in these surveys which have been done over the past 18 months about how people have experienced the pandemic and their emotions.

GRAPHIC Anxious by age

In the 20s and 30s we find almost 60% have anxious as one of their top emotions, but over time, that feeling is less prevalent. By the time we get to our 80s only 25% of the people felt anxious as one of their top emotions.

GRAPHIC Hope by age

Looking at hope, we find people in their 20s had a bit more hope than those in their 30s, again this is most likely because they had children and they were navigating schooling from home and childcare and work. As we get older, we see more people feeling hopeful as one of their top emotions in this crisis. This is wisdom graphed. It's a recognition that God has carried us through much in the past and somehow God will bring me through this as well. I trust that God will bring something good from this and meet me through on the other side because the worst thing is never the last thing.

I was visiting recently with one of our members who decided that faith needed to be part of their life and wanted more of a relationship with Jesus Christ by watching their father-in-law, who were both people of faith, deal with cancer. As he was reaching the end of his life, he was at peace. What was just as powerful was that his mother, who was in her 90s, also seemed to be at peace as she watched her son be overtaken by cancer. It changed this young man's heart to see his father-in-law and grandmother in law live out this text from Paul where suffering produced

endurance which produced character which led to hope.

What we believe as people of faith the problems and trials which come our way can change us and shape us if we will let them. This time of disorientation can lead to a new orientation and the new way of living with new insights and a different perspective which can help us be the people God wants us to be. The problem is that when a crisis like this pandemic is over, we often think we will just go back to normal, and we forget to look back and remember what we have learned. We miss out on the chance for these things to positively form us and shape us.

Pope Francis was serving in Argentina and love the work he was doing, but then he got a demotion. He was sent to a mountain area called Cordova, serving a small community of people where life was hard. He felt like he was being punished but didn't know why. I love these words from Pope Francis as he reflects on those difficult to years.

SLIDE ***“What is the greatest fruit of personal crisis? It gave me greater tolerance and understanding, with the ability to forgive and fresh empathy for the powerless. I’d say patience, sprinkled with a healthy sense of humor, which allowed me to endure and make space for change to happen...”***

SLIDE

“I learned that to come out of crisis better, I needed to see clearly, choose well, and act right. It became a period of new growth after a harsh pruning.” –Pope Francis

Will we come out of this crisis better or worse? Are we willing to see clearly and choose well and act right by looking back over the past and remembering what we have learned? We have all been through times like this when we lose a job, experience a divorce or broken relationship, go through an economic downturn, are diagnosed with an unexpected illness. These times are hard and feel like a pruning because we lose things. While

those moments are not what we would choose, are we able to see more clearly and invite God to use those moments to help me be better instead of worse? What's clear in reading the book by Pope Francis is that he eventually became Pope because of those moments of hardship, a demotion which felt like a harsh pruning.

Can we look back at those difficult and painful moments and invite God to work with them and do something powerful to bring about healing and restoration? I have talked to before about this idea of sanctifying grace, which is the grace of God which works in us and through us during difficult and painful moments. It's with that grace that God develops endurance and character and hope.

If we are not careful, we will miss out on the opportunity and the power of the past 18 months and what God can do in the midst of this difficulty. With the survey that we gave you before this sermon series started, you had the opportunity to tell us what you learned. In that survey, and in listening to others over the past few months as well as reading surveys and watching video interviews, there seem to be for things which jump out.

SLIDE Don't take anyone or anything for granted.

Many of us learned that we were taking the people in our lives, and some of our basic freedoms, for granted. It is why we began this series of sermons talking about thankfulness, because we forgot to be grateful when things are in a time of orientation, and everything is going well.

SLIDE Do things which bring joy.

I heard many people talk about the pause which the pandemic forced making them reassess work and life and finances and recognizing there were simple things which could bring joy. Some of us had a chance to slow down and take a breath and others of us were working harder than ever, like in the medical or grocery store business. This forced us to

think about what really brought us joy.

SLIDE Make more time for relationships.

When we were not able to be in relationships, we realized how much we needed that and even craved it. Even introverts and those who enjoy time alone recognized a need for human companionship and interaction with other human beings that was not on a screen. Many of us had more time to eat meals together which we began to cherish.

SLIDE We are more resilient and adaptable.

There were many other things I found as we look to the surveys, but another common theme was a recognition of how resilient and adaptable we are when we are forced into it.

Professor Amy Oden teaches religion and spirituality in several seminaries and is from Oklahoma. Her husband Perry was diagnosed with early onset dementia during the pandemic. She wrote this about the challenges they have experienced during the past 18 months as she described this time as a wilderness.

GRAPHIC Amy Oden

I'm in one of the most difficult seasons of my life, moving my husband into memory care facility due to his decline with dementia. After years of grief and the always-changing landscape of dementia, I thought I was prepared for this next transition, but I was unable to go to the facility due to Covid rules. I finally was able to go inside and hold his hand, but he could no longer recognize my face, my voice, or my name. I'm walking through the unknown with no predictable map or sense of what will happen.

But I have learned this in between time can be fertile. Anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss names this, "the liminal phase." Liminal means transition from one thing to the next, from disorientation to

reorientation, and to a new normal. Former ways of life no longer work. New ways of life are not yet established. That's true for us as a society and as a world today. In liminality, we are the most open, most available to God, and what God might be up to.

Here, before new routines take root, before things become fixed again into new patterns, we are beginners. As I walk with Perry through this time of loss and stripping away, there is also at least sometimes a sense of wonder. I am a beginner, knowing that I don't know. I am eager to learn from that Holy Love that holds our lives. I gaze in awe and wonder at the beauty and mystery of life that is both fragile and whole.

Amy is walking through something so hard and yet she sees something powerful in the midst of the transition for herself and her husband. She knows she is held by that holy love which won't let her go and anticipating that something new will be revealed in the time had. In the midst of all that we have been through during this time of pandemic we are meant to cling to an attitude of wonder and all, with a willingness to listen and learn, to become better instead of worse. This kind of faith is what made possible for James to write these words from the opening words of his letter.

BIBLE

² Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

Or as Paul says in our memory verse with these words that I invite you to say together as we close.

SLIDE

⁵ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

We are in a liminal phase, this time of transition between disorientation and reorientation. The truth is that we will not come out of this the same, but we will be changed. Will we be better or worse as we move through this time together? What will we have learned and how will we be changed? My prayer is that we will be intentional about clinging to our faith that can mold us and shape us into the people God wants us to be.

Let's pray...

SLIDE Prayer

I would like to invite you in the silence to whisper to God and give thanks for God's presence in your life with words like,

God thank you for walking with me through this crisis... Help me to trust in you... Change how I think... Change my heart and help me to live as your child... In this season of new beginning, guide me and lead me... Help me to be the person you want me to be, being better and not bitter... To learn the lessons you want me to learn... And to go forward from the seasoned with hope... In Jesus' name. Amen

August 28-29 Order

1. Ely Welcomes people and says, **“Today we are going to talk about how we are changed by something like the pandemic and if we will come out better or worse.”**
2. One Song, followed by prayer
3. Welcome and invite people to wave and be seated.
4. Remind parents we are in Fall Schedule and kids start out in Fellowship Hall with Summit Kids OR they can stay in worship.
5. Announcements by Jeff (Check News Section on Website)
 - Offering Baskets at tables
 - Offering Focus – Backpack Tags and Key Chains
 - River Baptism and All Church Picnic
6. Invite congregation to prepare their hearts for the message.
7. Video bumper plays.
8. Sermon
9. Prayer after sermon
10. 2 Songs of Worship
11. Prayer and Lord’s Prayer
12. Meditation Moments reminder by Jeff
13. Offering baskets
- 14.

SLIDE

⁵ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

15. Closing Prayer