



***Theme: Restoration and Renewal – Live and Pandemic
“Thankfulness and God’s Power to Restore”***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber on...
August 7-8, 2021

Weekly Memory Verse:

***¹¹ You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing.
You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me
with joy –Psalm 30:11***

VIDEO Sermon Bumper

SLIDE “Thankfulness and God’s Power to Restore”

Several months ago, we planned this new series of sermons that was going to be called, “Life After Pandemic.” We thought it would be a great way to move into the fall this year as it felt like the pandemic was receding. That turned out to not be very good timing on our part! The pandemic had other plans clearly. So, we simply shifted the middle word from “after” to “and.” The truth is that the pandemic is better than it was even though we are dealing with a small resurgence. It’s clear we still have a ways to go and everything we had planned to do in this series of sermons is still very appropriate because we have learned and we have grown and we have been changed. We are different and we are still

people of faith and not people of fear.

GRAPHIC Dying Christmas Cactus

I was thinking about that when it comes to this Christmas cactus I have in my office. When I first arrived here 19 years ago in Durango to be your pastor, I found this in the trashcan as someone was getting rid of it in our dumpster. I annoy my wife and that I often have been found dumpster diving when something catches my eye. It's especially troubling when I go to the back of our Thrift Shop because there are certain things, they can't sell but I think seem really worthwhile, like this little dog bed I found and washed up and now my Papillion Jasper uses every night.

GRAPHIC Jasper on his dog bed

He is probably not very happy with me that I have his bed right now. Anyway, back to the Christmas cactus. After nurturing it back to health it looked like this.

GRAPHIC Blooming Christmas Cactus

And now it blooms every Christmas and every Easter, until the Easter of 2020, the pandemic! I noticed it was not very healthy and it had the small flies all over it. There were lots of dying ends and no blooms insight. Insecticide soap and repotted the plant but it still was struggling as it had too much moisture and some rot was setting in. It made a bit of a recovery and did bloom some at Christmas and then again, this Easter. It seems to be making a pretty strong comeback this year but about half the plant on one side still is struggling.

GRAPHIC Christmas Cactus today

Feels a bit like life to me these days. Looks great on one side and then you turn it to the other side, and we see that there is still some recovery which needs to happen. During this series of sermons together we are going to explore how it is we can experience renewal and

restoration even as we still have pandemic to work through. This plant represents those beautiful moments and those difficult moments we still experience in life. I find it especially poignant that this plant blooms around Easter because we remember there is a Good Friday where Christ was crucified but on Sunday Easter is coming. This plant seems to embody that reality of our faith and life.

This is a powerful picture of what we will do in the sermon series which is to ask some questions. Where do we go from here? We still have a ways, to go but we can start to see the light at the end of the tunnel. How do we live now? What lessons have we learned? How have we changed?

We know that we are seeing a resurgence of infections and hospitalizations across the country because of the Delta variant. Many of you have seen these numbers, and I don't want to overwhelm you, but helpful to see that in this chart new cases each day are rising. We also see that new deaths are increasing as well as hospitalizations.

GRAPHIC **New Cases Per Day**

GRAPHIC **New Deaths Per Day**

Research by McKinsey as told us that we can expect a functional and to the pandemic by the third or fourth quarter of 2021, but that timeline shifts as variance emerge and not enough people are vaccinated. We are told that we need 75% of people or more to be vaccinated for her immunity to kick in which is why I hope as many people as possible will get vaccinated.

GRAPHIC **McKinsey Graphic 1**

GRAPHIC **McKinsey Graphic 2**

One of the ways we can love our neighbor to get vaccinated so that we can develop that immunity as a community. We have many places

where they have lots of vaccine but not enough people to take them so I hope people will continue to do what needs to be done so we can be safe.

How do we live in the midst of a time like this? There have been more deaths related to Covid than all the other combat deaths from all the wars we have fought in the past 120 years. I have known many people whose funerals I have done who died of Covid related causes. There has been much pain in the last year and ½ around loss. The economic impact has been huge, some estimating as much as \$16 trillion over the next 10 years. Some have lost businesses, and some are still struggling with employment realities. Communities like Durango are seeing an influx of people which has changed the real estate dynamic and the ability for many people even live or rent a place which is affordable. Many people's priorities have shifted in life has changed dramatically for some.

Last year, in the height of the pandemic, I shared with you 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.

The Bible contains story after story of the Israelites spirit enhancing slavery, oppression, and many hardships. We have stories of individuals like Job where life is going well for him at the beginning of the book and then everything falls apart. He loses his business and his family and his health. Life is hard, but throughout the book of Job, we find him holding onto his faith even by his fingernails. Eventually, he experiences reorientation and life becomes good again as his health returns and he finds a new business and new family. It is not the same and Job is different, but we recognize that God has been with him, and the worst thing is never the last thing.

I was able to play Moses during Vacation Bible School a few weeks ago and we reminded the children who were here about how the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. They crossed the Red Sea and moved from disorientation to reorientation in the wilderness. While in the wilderness, they experience moments of disorientation and cried out to God. We see this throughout their story, where they are captured and overrun by foreign nations, eventually being slaves again in a foreign land. They find a new normal in a foreign land, but eventually are able to return to Israel and life is good again.

We see this cycle in the New Testament, with Jesus and the disciples. Life is good for them, and they believe he is going to be king in a way that will drive out the Romans. But Jesus is arrested, beaten, and crucified, causing intense disorientation when the disciples all the and everyone

feels the end has come. For three days is dark, but reorientation happens on Easter Sunday.

We see this cycle in the Bible and we see it in our own lives, which is why the Scriptures are so powerful because they speak to our human experience. Life is going well, and it feels like everything will be great forever. But then we lose our job, or the stock market crumbles, or national disaster strikes, or we find ourselves being served divorce papers, or we get the diagnosis of cancer, or one of our children is injured or even killed. We move into a period of disorientation, and we have moments like Job where we wonder if life will ever be the same again.

While disorientation might last for a while, we can find reorientation from our faith in the midst of the most challenging moments. Eventually, we find a new beginning with new opportunities and joy comes to us once more. We read these powerful words in Psalm 30.

BIBLE

**⁵ ...Weeping may last through the night,
but joy comes with the morning...**

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.

The challenge is how we respond when it feels like the disorientation will never end. This last month I have met with three different families who have lost children tragically and traumatically, the most recent one being Jadah Willmette whose funeral I did Saturday and who I've known

since she was around three years old. In the wake of such tragedy, as I meet with parents and family, we wrestle with very deep feelings. The darkness feels overwhelming and like it will never end. Will the light ever come? As I meet with people who struggle with clinical depression, there are similar questions and struggles. Throughout this pandemic many have struggled to see any light that will come.

What I say in those moments, because I have been there, is that we will get through this. We won't get over it. We won't ever be the same. We will be changed. But light will come again. We will laugh again. We will move from disorientation to a new time of reorientation which is different, sometimes for the better and sometimes just different. Moments like pandemic, the loss of the child or loved one suddenly or tragically, the loss of a job, the loss of a marriage, the loss of health, all taketh into a time of disorientation and they change us. What I tell people is to hold on because it will get better. Does it suck? Of course, it does, and there are no quick and easy answers, but joy will come again in the morning. That is the promise of our faith and why we hold onto it even though we feel like ditching God and faith altogether.

Sometimes we experience grand slam, out of the park, homerun miracles, but most often what we have is the promise that God will walk with us through anything and everything. God promises to be there whether we feel it or not. Sometimes, we can't even sense or feel God's presence, so we trust it. God's promise is never that we will not experience hurt or pain or heartache or disorientation. The promise God makes us is that we will not be alone, and that God will walk with us. God also promises to take and mold and shape and force the moments of darkness and bring about something beautiful. God won't miraculously take pain away because as part of what it means to be human. God promises to work through those moments of disorientation and bring us back to reorientation we will let God mold us and shape us.

The apostle Paul says these famous words in Romans 8:28 which we can carry with us in these times of disorientation.

BIBLE

²⁸ We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. (CEB)

As we look out over the last year, are we able to see any places where there were unexpected gifts in the midst of the darkness? I think if we are willing to, we can see God working in the midst of difficult moments. Unfortunately, that is often where God does God's best work. I have often found myself asking, "God, I wonder what you are going to do through all of this?"

This last week we have asked many of you what lessons you have learned from Covid and for what are you grateful. We had responses that talked about how special times with family had been. One person shared with the personally about how the pandemic had helped them to reassess their career and make decisions about traveling less and being home more with their kids. Many people told me they worshiped more often, even though it was online, during the pandemic, and our numbers show that when we looked at how many people were joining us on livestream early on. I had people share with me they read the Bible all the way through for the very first time.

(OTHER RESPONSES HERE.)

The Barna Institute surveyed people and found that 74% of practicing Christians shared they grew in their faith during Covid. I also want to acknowledge that for some this was a hard year on faith, and they drifted away for different reasons from following Jesus. 65% said they read their Bible more during Covid. 63% said they participated in prayer and meditation more regularly during Covid. 52% said they participated

more in a small group or a support network using zoom or some other online networking tool. People grew deeper in their faith in so many ways during this past year and ½ and it reminds me that **while we cannot always choose what happens to us, we can always choose how to respond.**

I was visiting with a church member several months ago who shared they were forced to take a pay cut and work remotely for their company and at first it felt overwhelming and disorienting and painful. But, during Covid, his mother received a terminal diagnosis of cancer. Because he was working remotely, he spent the last four months of her life with her, caring for her in a way he never could have if his job hadn't slowed down. He talked about being grateful for Covid in a way he never expected.

I want to be clear that I don't believe Covid, or any painful and disorienting circumstance, is sent by God. I do believe God can use these moments of adversity and disorientation and even pain to bring about changes in our lives and change the way we see the world. These moments can draw us closer to God and to one another. These moments can move our hearts to be more compassionate or we can let them make us bitter and angry. We can learn to show mercy in these moments or react out of spite or begin to blame others for our misfortune. We get to choose. **What will we choose in these moments?**

How we answer that depends on our frame of reference. Can we look back on this time of disorientation and see God at work? Can we be grateful, not for the virus or pandemic, but as a result of what happened and how we can be changed and shaped for the better? I am constantly amazed at those who experienced tremendous pain and suffering during the past 18 months and yet are still able to see where God is at work in their hearts and lives.

I remind you that the apostle Paul was in prison, having been beaten

for his faith, when he wrote most of his letters. We're going to do an entire series of sermons after this one on his letters to those in Thessalonica because we believe they are some of the first he wrote. He is writing to a church that was being persecuted for their faith. I remind you of these words that we talked about as we were in the midst of the pandemic almost a year ago from 1 Thessalonians 5.

BIBLE

¹⁶ Always be joyful. ¹⁷ Never stop praying. ¹⁸ Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

Paul knows what it's like to experience disorientation and yet he stops in the middle of those difficult moments to remind us to be joyful always, because it changes our perspective. He encourages us to not stop praying, because in doing that we realize we are not alone. I love this graphic that's been going around lately reminding us of this truth.

GRAPHIC Pray for each other

And, when we give thanks in all things, we are reminded that one day the light will come. One day there will be restoration and renewal again, and we can always be thankful that the worst thing is never the last thing. We don't thank God for the pandemic, but what God can do in us and through us during and after.

One of the emails I received during the pandemic, after I had reminded you all in a sermon of this Scripture we just read, about always being joyful and never stopping praying and being thankful in all things, was inspiring. A family in our church bought a gratitude journal for each member of their family and every day they would keep track of things for which they were thankful and then shares him that night before they went to bed. This had never been possible for them with mom and dad both working and often traveling for their jobs, but now they had time each

evening to do this ritual. They talked about how it changed their entire perspective during the pandemic and help carry them through some very difficult moments. If you have never done this, I invite you to begin a gratitude journal either on your phone or the old-fashioned way with pen and paper. It is simple and yet profound.

On Wednesday our staff meeting, Janelle who works in our office had the devotional and gave us each one of these Scripture cards to pick out of the pack and carry with us. She invited us to share if the one we picked had any meaning for us and I share with the group that this was a text I had actually already chosen and put in my sermon for this weekend. It was a bit freaky I must tell you. I'm not too surprised because God often does this, but it was profound and mysterious. It is the Scripture which describes in a poetic way this movement we find throughout the Bible, and throughout life, of orientation to disorientation to reorientation. They are words from Psalm 59.

BIBLE

**¹ Rescue me from my enemies, O God.
Protect me from those who have come to destroy me.**

**⁴ I have done nothing wrong,
yet they prepare to attack me.
Wake up! See what is happening and help me!**

**¹⁶ But as for me, I will sing about your power.
Each morning I will sing with joy about your unfailing love.
For you have been my refuge,
a place of safety when I am in distress.**

**¹⁷ O my Strength, to you I sing praises,
for you, O God, are my refuge,**

the God who shows me unfailing love.

I am reminded that one of the first things people do in the Bible after coming through a time of disorientation and being reoriented, is to worship God and give thanks, recognizing that God is our refuge and that we receive unfailing love. When Noah gets off the Ark after the flood, he doesn't throw a party but builds an altar to worship. When the Israelites escaped Egypt and were in the wilderness, the first thing they did was put up a tent where they could worship. When the Israelites were brought out of slavery in Babylon, they set to work on the Temple so they could worship, and before that they were singing as they returned home. When the early church gathers and huddling homes because they were persecuted, they would start by giving thanks to God and worshiping and singing.

The first Scripture we read today was from Psalm 30 and we returned to that as we close. Verse 11 is our Scripture memory verse for the week so say it together with me out loud, would you?

BIBLE

¹¹ You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing.

You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy...

¹² that I might sing praises to you and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever!

Disorientation never lasts forever and we do survive it because God walks with us through those moments. God forces those dark moments to accomplish something good in our lives and we remember that when we give thanks in all things, knowing that is the will of God in Christ Jesus. I have known thousands of people in my life and I have discovered the most steady and joyful people are almost always people who have been

through some of the most painful circumstances I can imagine and yet they find a way to give thanks in all things. Not only do they give thanks to God but they are grateful for the people around them and they bless them because they have been changed and they have allowed God to mold them and shape them.

And that brings me back to my plant. One of the keys to my Christmas Cactus beginning to come back to life has been a trick I discovered when I was looking online about how to heal a Christmas cactus. They suggested that it be put in the darkness for periods of time to allow for healing and restoration. I thought that sounded crazy but then I tried it for a few days at a time and sure enough the plant began to come back. Sometimes, it takes the disorientation of darkness for us to experience restoration and renewal and change which leads us closer to the person God wants us to be. I don't believe God wants us to experience darkness or pain or hurt, but I do believe God can take those moments and bring about something beautiful, and it begins with being thankful for what we have, even in the times of disorientation.

That's the first lesson we learn as we try to do life in pandemic. This is how we move from disorientation to orientation, filling our hearts with gratitude and remembering that even in the dark places God is at work. I want to invite you as we close to get out your phone and pull up whatever app you used to take notes. If you don't have a phone, you can use a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. If you don't have that, you can just take this time to do mental notes in your head, but I hope you will write them down. I want to invite you to make a list of ways you have been blessed during the pandemic.

SLIDE **Dear Lord, thank you for...**

Pour out your heart and praise to God. Let's pray.

SLIDE **Prayer**

I invite you to whisper to God...

“Thank you for everything... Thank you for being with me... Thank you for forcing good to come from hardship and pain... I give my life to you God... Help me to walk in your joy... Help me to live in your love...”

Lord, for everyone worshiping in this moment, I give you thanks and praise and ask that you would pour out your Holy Spirit upon them. I pray for those struggling with depression and anxiety, for loss that feels deep and permanent, like it will never end. Lift up their spirits and hearts. Help them know you will walk with them no matter what, that you will take even this pain and difficulty in their lives and bend it to accomplish good and beautiful things. Help them to not give up but hold tight and fast to you.

Help all of us as a nation and a local community and a church body to live lives of hope and gratitude. Use us, we pray, so we might be a part of transforming this disorienting time into something beautiful. Help us to move towards reorientation with hope and gratitude in our hearts. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen

August 7-8 Order

1. Ely Welcomes people
2. Two Songs, followed by prayer and Lord's Prayer
3. Welcome and invite people to wave and be seated.
4. Invite children to go to Summit Kids.
5. Connect bag.
6. Announcements by Jeff (Check News Section on Website)
 - Offering Baskets at tables again
 - Spreading out and wearing masks
 - River Baptism Service
 - Unstuck Team in September
7. Invite congregation to prepare their hearts for the message.
8. Video bumper plays.
9. Sermon
10. Prayer after sermon
11. 1 Song of Worship
12. Prayer
13. Meditation Moments reminder by Jeff
14. Offering Focus – Eagle Lake Camp
15. Closing Prayer