

Together for Joy

I was thinking about life since the pandemic hit us in 2020. I wanted to remember the time line of the things that affected us as a congregation so I went back to Facebook to see what I had posted and what we had experienced since March of 2020.

I remember Anne, Janet and I had just decorated the sanctuary for our Lenten theme of "Enter the Story" where we would put ourselves in the narrative of the story of Holy Week. So we had built pillars, and had Palm Branches everywhere. We built a huge frame that was put down the hallway where you would literally walk through to get into the sanctuary. We were ready.

We were going to paint with ashes on a canvas and then turn it into a work of art for Easter Morning. But we had a blizzard so Ash Wednesday service was cancelled. So we did ashes after church on Sunday and painted with ashes on the canvas.

And that was the last time we were in church together as a whole congregation. The Pandemic hit Michigan. So Anne and I talked and decided the safest thing to do was to close the church down for two weeks and we would re-evaluate it.

So I learned how to record my sermon in the sanctuary using my ipad. That was just awful. I felt like I couldn't breathe and it was so awkward. But Anne taught me how to upload and even schedule the post to go live on Sunday morning. Anne uploaded her own children's time for families to check out for those two weeks.

And then the Bishop closed the churches through the end of March. And then the city closed down and so we didn't have any income from our parking anymore. In April, the governor closed the schools for the rest of the year.

So we began to wrestle with how will we do church and how will keep our community together and so I heard some people were doing facebook live but because so many people were doing facebook live it kept crashing.

And then I heard about zoom which seemed to be a miracle at the time. So we tried zoom worship. The first week was about 20 minutes and it was all I could do to not break down crying seeing everyone's faces appear on the screen, even shut ins who couldn't make it to our sanctuary appeared on the screen.

We lost George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, John Lewis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Think about what we have been through these past almost two years now. Both globally and locally, we have been hanging on by a thread. Think about the losses, the grief, the uncertainty, and the anxiety. It's been hard, so very, very hard.

People of God have repeatedly faced difficult, harrowing times; think about that for a moment. The ancient Israelites enslaved in Egypt, their exile in Babylon; the Jerusalem Temple, which was at the heart of their community, was destroyed by the Roman armies. Think about the heartbreak and disorientation, the grief and the doubt, the suffering and the loneliness.

And yet, God's Spirit never left them. God guided them through the "valley of the shadow of death." You know that phrase is from Psalm 23, the most famous song in the Book of Psalms, which have been called the hymnbook of the Bible.

The 23rd Psalm is a song of comfort, read a lot of times at funerals. But if you read it closely, it's also a wilderness song, a song of difficult days: "The valley of the shadow of death," "evil," "enemies" even the "rod and staff" signify troubles, since shepherd's rods were for warding off predators and their staffs were for helping rescue lost sheep trapped in crevices or brambles. In other words, Psalm 23 is a song of comfort in the midst of difficulty, hope in the midst of despair.

Our ancestors found – even in the throws of enslavement, exile and what felt like defeat – new ways to sing to God, new ways to stay together as a community, new ways to praise God, who never promises to shield us from the valley of the shadow of death, but does promise to be with us, to give us strength and to shepherd us as we move through it.

So what did they do? They sang new songs, songs of comfort and hope, praise and thanksgiving. All of which brings us to Psalm 98, our scripture text for today.

Psalm 98 says "Sing a New Song to God, who has worked wonders!" When we praise from our hearts, our doxology lifts us up out of the mire of circumstances and struggle, so we can remember who we really are: beloved children of the God of Love and Grace.

We are made to praise – and not just in the good times! Praise is a ladder for our spirits, a gift to help us climb up out of the shadows and into the light to get a new perspective on things, if only briefly. Praise brings us back in touch with the truth of our situation: Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

We can and should sing the old, familiar songs, of course, like the Doxology and so many others. But in times like these, we have to sing them in new ways, just as our ancestors did. We have found new ways of singing, “new songs” to sing, new forms of praise and thanks and delight – new ways of being the church of being God’s people, together for joy!

Think about how we have found new songs to sing: on line worship, worship in the parking lot with our radios and our car horns for the passing of the peace, Noah using the Swords into Plowshares Art Gallery and peace center for serving lunches, hand washing stations set up in our lobby. Caroling on zoom, surprising shut ins showing up on their lawns for prayer and fellowship. Joining together to read scripture in front of our sign as a protest to Donald Trump using a church sign and a bible as a prop. Getting Tattoo ashes in the mail!

Doing Vacation Bible School on zoom with Anne dropping off all the kids will need for all the crafts. Getting a new sound system so we could worship outside sitting in chairs in the midst of the chaos of a Tigers and a Lions game on the same day! Taking in a new family seeking asylum in the midst of a pandemic! Figuring out how to do worship in the sanctuary safely, but also live streaming it to people in Ohio, Chicago, Florida, Brazil, Nicaragua and Uganda!

We came together to create art as a community and had a virtual choir singing O Holy Night. We had book studies outside in the park as the children played.

This is who we are, and who we’ll continue to be and become. God has turned our ashes of two years ago into a beautiful song. Here is what those canvasses look like now thanks to my daughter, Hannah.

Now more than ever, we need to reach out and lift each other up. Now more than ever, we need to find new ways to be “together for joy.” Now more than ever, we need to be the church!

The church was made for times like this: not for times of ease and tranquility but times of difficulty and struggle. We are not called to take a stroll along a sunlit sea coast, but a pilgrimage through the valley of the shadow of death. And not a whimper or a whisper of silence, but a new song sung out loud, in harmony with all of creation, as the seas roar and hills sing together for joy!

We are moving forward in our plans for re-development of this building and of new buildings that will get more than 50 unhoused people into their own apartment. We will house the agencies that will be in place to help them be able to stay in their apartment. We will have an apartment for refugee families and a law office of Justice for our Neighbors that will help those who need legal assistance.

We will have Sunday School classes for all age groups. This and so much more. Who knows where God will lead us! Almost two years ago, we didn't know how to do zoom, we didn't know how to live stream worship, we didn't know how to do worship in the parking lot with the car radio, but guess what? We figured it out and we kept our community together as we learned how to "sing new songs" in our community. We figured it out as we moved forward in the midst of a global pandemic with different forms of joyful praise and thanksgiving. Who remembers our first full zoom service where we ended it with a dance party! Different forms of joyful praise and thanksgiving!

And this is why all of us, as a community, ask each other to share our treasure and invest in our mission as a church. That's why we sent you pledge cards for your giving for next year. So that we can see how our offerings can be used to sing a new song in this community. Now more than ever, your generosity can and will make an enormous difference. In a time of difficulty and despair for so many, we are a community of song, of new songs and new ways of singing, new ways of being God's church for God's world, together for joy. Thanks be to God! Amen.