

## **The Year That No One Wanted: Let Us Rejoice And Be Glad In It**

About three weeks ago I was watching couch church as I often do on Sunday mornings. I was enjoying the word of our Lord and the lessons of the day when Lorinda issued some homework. Now, she was wise enough not to call it homework, but as someone who thrives on assigning homework during our Bible Study get-togethers, I know homework when I see it.

Lorinda put out the challenge for us to list the things that we missed since this pandemic started and then list things that we learned during the pandemic. I thought that was a wonderful sentiment and definitely something I would like to partake in. So I started to give it some thought. And over the next three or four days I really worked on it in the back of my mind whenever I was doing tasks that didn't require much mental engagement. You would be surprised at how many of those there are these days, or maybe you wouldn't ... we all have our daily and weekly chores that need to get done, I suppose.

The more I thought about it, the more that I realized how much easier it was to list the things I missed compared to what I learned. I also realized that it was easier to list the things that I missed rather than what I was grateful for. And that saddened me a little. Surely, there is plenty to be grateful for, even now. The Lord, my God, the creator of life has blessed me with the gift of a day, daily, and no matter the circumstance, God has allowed me to live in this day that He has created. Shouldn't I be grateful for that? And it's not that I wasn't grateful, it's just that it was a heck of a lot easier to list out what I missed.

I miss walking into church on Sunday morning and being greeted at the entrance to the sanctuary with a warm smile and handed the bulletin by that week's greeter. I miss strolling down the aisle to my normal seat and stopping along the way to talk with everyone, passing pleasantries, discussing sports, catching up on the week that happened and planning the week ahead. I miss the friendly exchanges that I would have with several church members as I settled into my pew and prepared for the worship service.

I miss the welcome and announcements being done by the worship leader. I miss the church choir. I miss the chime choir. I miss the little lights children choir. I really miss seeing the kids surround Lorinda's piano to get their lesson of the week, which sometimes taught me more than the sermon. No offense, Pastor Brian. I miss us all being together to worship in the sanctuary. I miss three hymns and complaining if I didn't know two of them. I miss looking around to see who made it to church that Sunday. And I miss fellowship hour after worship.

Yes, I miss the routine and regularity of a Sunday morning inside the walls of First Presbyterian Church of Hackettstown. And to be completely honest, it has taken its toll on me. When this lockdown first hit some 16 years ago (just kidding, it only feels that long), I was angry. Angry at the way our worship had been disrupted and angry that there was a change to my routine. Shocking for a Presbyterian to be upset about change, I know, but there it was. And then I started to ponder how I could overcome this anger.

The book of Joshua says "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord, your God, will be with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9)

Second Corinthians reminds us "Therefore do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Yes, change is tough, especially unexpected and forced change that upsets massive portions of our daily and weekly routines. And while church and Sunday morning rituals are a big part of my life, they aren't all that I miss since the start of this madness. There are plenty of other things that I miss as well. I miss sitting at a baseball game with a hotdog and a soda. I miss going to the movie theater with my daughter and taking in whatever summer blockbuster had been released that week. I miss the big summer backyard gatherings that someone was always having. I miss driving to work. (That one surprised the heck out of me, but I realized I did a lot of thinking during that awful commute). I miss the whole indoor dining experience and eating out on the weekends. I miss going down the

shore and grabbing a slice of boardwalk pizza. I REALLY miss concerts, especially Dave Matthews Band in the summer. I miss all of that and more. I realized doing Lorinda's homework (that she didn't call homework) I miss a lot. And compared to a lot of people out there, I've been relatively unscathed by the lockdown. And for that I am thankful.

There's a reason this is happening. Just because we don't like it doesn't mean that it isn't part of God's greater plan. And we are going to get through this. Our faith will see us through. Hebrews 11 states "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) First Corinthians says "Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong." (1 Corinthians 16:13) And the book of James proclaims "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind." (James 1:5-6)

There are lessons to be learned here. Which brings me to the second part of the homework assignment; what have you learned during all of this?

That question required me to meditate a lot longer than I did on listing what I missed. Because while it is easy to identify what you feel has been taken away from you unjustly, it is harder to quantify the lessons that come from the loss. Just as it is easier to wallow in self pity than it is to praise God for the things that you do have. And while it took me a while, I was able to understand what I learned during all of this madness. One of the things I learned is that too much media will only deflate me. I wasted way too much time watching governor and presidential speeches during the start of this pandemic. And the speeches didn't help me or comfort me they only reminded me of what I no longer had. They only served to anger me even more. So I learned to turn the news off and step away. I learned that strolls around the neighborhood and the sounds of nature are much more calming than the tragedies the news portrays.

I learned that I didn't miss baseball (or sports in general) as much as I thought I would. I used to spend a lot of time consuming sports, baseball in particular, and when they were taken away I thought it was going to destroy me. But I managed to get through my days and go on with my life just like before. And when baseball

finally came back, I realized that I just wasn't that interested anymore. The time I was spending with family or outside with nature, or working on my lawn was much more rewarding and valuable.

I learned that streaming concerts on the internet was almost as good as being there in person and I have seen a LOT of Dave Matthews Band concerts this summer that I would not have otherwise seen. 16 and counting for those of you wanting to know the score.

I learned that there are a lot of great books I hadn't yet read. I learned that there is a plethora of valuable information on the internet about yard work and how to maintain a healthy lawn. I learned how to properly dispose of weeds and the right time to seed and fertilize your lawn. I learned that five minute meditations in the morning and afternoon are great for the soul. And I learned most of all that I've been viewing this pandemic the wrong way for far too long. This isn't a wrath that has been reigned down upon us by an angry God that has had enough. In a way, this is actually a gift that we have been given. This is a gift of time that we have been granted. This is the year that no one wanted, let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Have you ever sat and said to yourself, "If only I had more time, this is what I would do." Or, "There just aren't enough hours in the day!" Well, guess what? 2020 is the gift that keeps on giving. All those extra hours you've been looking for? SURPRISE! Here they are. Whatever it is you've been waiting to do, well, you won't get a better opportunity than now. I mean you can't even eat inside a restaurant in this state these days, so we all have some found time. The big question is what are we doing with it? Are we going to finally take action on all those things we've wanted to do? Is now the time that we execute our plans? If not now, when? If we aren't going to do what we've been meaning to do now, will we ever do it? Now is the time for there will never be a better time than today.

It's okay to mope. It's okay to feel sorry for yourself. It's okay to pout. I've done it and I'm sure just about everyone has. But we can only pout for so long before we have to take action. When this all started, I swore it wasn't going to last more than a few weeks. We were being told to quarantine for 14 days, so how long could the pandemic possibly go on? Oh how naïve I was back then! So yes, I

pouted and I shouted and I might have even yelled a few words that aren't very Christian, but I got it out of my system which was necessary.

I know that this is tough. I know that this is confusing. I know that the times are unprecedented and that 2020 has been the equivalent of the tax collector taking away everything you have worked so hard to earn. But we will get through this and we will come out stronger in the end. Our Lord will carry us through and our faith will keep us together. I know that it's hard to be full of good cheer when it seems like the world is falling apart all around us. But we can be cheerful. We can survive. We can thrive if we choose to. It's all just a matter of perspective and prayer. And maybe turning the television off and going for a walk instead of watching the news. You can afford to lose a day or two. Take all the time you need for as long as you need it. 2020 isn't going anywhere until December 31st.

Things are going to be different for the foreseeable future. The old normal may never be again. And I could sit here and cry for it, I **want** to sit here and cry for it, but that wouldn't accomplish much. Instead, I need to make new plans and figure out new ways to enjoy myself. We all do. It's called going outside your comfort zone, or GASP, some might even call it change. And again, you all know how we feel about change around here, but it's exactly what we are going to need to do. The old, comfortable ways just aren't going to work for us. I don't like it any more than you, but it is the hand that we've been dealt. We can hide in our room and stay under the covers until this is all over, but that could be a while. We do have other options. Like get out there and live. Things may have to be different, but that can be fun and exciting. You may not have card night with your pals anymore, but you can have drive night instead. You may not get to be at a concert, but you can have "cook a meal you've never made" evening instead. There are always possibilities and potentials. We must be strong, stand tall, be proud, and be proactive.

These are unprecedented times! We hear that a lot these days and in most ways it's true. When you break down the root meaning of the word – it means never been known or experienced – it is very true. And unprecedented times lead to unprecedented actions. It leads to doing things you may never have done before. It leads to having feelings you may never have had before. And that's okay. It's okay to be angry. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to be depressed. It's okay to have all of these emotions wash over you all at once several times a day. No one knows

for certain how we are supposed to act or react during a pandemic, because none of us have ever been through one before. It's all right to feel however you are feeling. If you want to be positive and believe that we are going to get through this, that's fabulous. And if you want to be sad and uncertain about what is going to happen, that's okay too. Just don't let yourself become isolated. Don't shut yourself in and don't forget about your support system. There are many of us here at the church who would welcome speaking with someone, even if it's just to catch up.

A lifetime ago, when we had regular, indoor bible studies, I remember reading a page in one of our study guides that talked about the need to make time for people. I don't remember exactly how it went, but I can paraphrase. Basically, the gist of the message was that if you could even take an hour a week to make time for someone, anyone, you just might make that person's day. Think about it, how often have you called Mom or Dad during this pandemic? Probably not enough. Siblings, friends, members of your church family – have you given any of them a ring lately? If not, and if you are feeling up for it, maybe you should. The sound of a familiar voice going through similar struggles can do wonders for your soul and it's a great way to be a Steward of God's love and compassion.

The church is going to reopen soon. And while we will welcome in house worship once again, it is going to be a LOT different than the last time you sat in a pew. You can't even claim your own pew for the time being. And I know that it's going to drive some of you bonkers to come to church and seeing someone sitting in "your" spot. That's something you are going to have to work on and pray over. I do not want to see any arguing or fighting over seating arrangements. Please! And who knows, you may determine that you like your new vantage point better than your old one.

And if you aren't comfortable coming back to the church even with all of the precautions being taken, that's okay too! We will continue our live streaming services for the foreseeable future. Do not feel guilty if you aren't comfortable coming to worship. Unprecedented times, remember? None of us know how we are supposed to feel in times like these.

Just know that this too shall pass. We will be together again someday. Life will go on. Things will get better. And until then, what will you do with your gift of time?

How will you rejoice and be glad with this gift given to you by the Lord? Will you use it to learn something new? Will you use it to help those in your neighborhood? Will you reach out to family and friends? Will you find new ways to involve yourself? What will you do?

As someone who loves to assign homework (ask anyone who attends my Bible Studies) I leave you with this challenge. What will you do this week to make the world a little better than it was before? If not now, when? The future is no place to place your better days. You can live your best life right now! Use your gift of time to go outside your comfort zone. Reach out to friends and family. Take a walk. Take the first step to learning a new language. Clean the house! Spring cleaning can be done in the summer if you want it to! And above all, continue to pray. Pray that we will be together again sooner rather than later. Because we will and we will be stronger and we will have learned a lot from all that we have been through and we will rejoice together. And that, my brothers and sisters, is the good news for today. Amen.