

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**September 6, 2020, The 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost/The 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

Psalm 137: 1-4, Psalm 56:8-13, I Peter 2:9-10

### **GRIEVING TOGETHER IN A WORLD PANDEMIC**

This past Monday, the city of Detroit found a powerful way to remember the 1500 residents and first responders of that city who have died from Covid19 since the world pandemic began. Belle Isle is an island, and a state park, in the Detroit River between the U.S. and Canada. On Monday the roadways of Belle Isle were lined with nearly 1,000 very large poster-sized pictures of those who have died between March and August of this year.

At 8:45 a.m. the bells of churches around the city of Detroit began to ring and then at 9:00 a.m. the day-long socially distanced memorial service began. Led by one of the fifteen empty hearses, each hearse representing 1,000 residents of the city, a procession of cars filled with family and friends and community members drove through the park to remember and honor the lives of their loved ones.

Like people around the country, most of the family members had not been able to sit with their loved one when they died, they had not been able to attend a visitation, and in many cases, there had been no funeral. Monday was a memorial service for them and for the entire community. The day was organized by Rochelle Riley, Detroit's Director of Arts and Culture. She hoped the unique memorial would help people to understand not just the lives that have been lost but the scale of the losses.

She said: "I think that some people are having a hard time seeing this (pandemic) because, unlike the Vietnam War where there were flag-draped coffins coming off of planes every day, they're not seeing it happen. People are dying alone in hospitals or in their homes, and they're just gone. They're just going away."

<https://www.npr.org/2020/09/01/908222933/detroit-memorial-honors-the-citys-victims-of-coronavirus-pandemic>

<https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/detroits-belle-isle-transformed-into-memorial-for-citys-covid-19-victims>

<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2020/08/31/belle-isle-memorial-honors-1-500-detroiters-lost-covid-19/5675698002/>

This story caught my attention, not only because of the beautiful way the city of Detroit came together to remember and honor those good lives, but because of something one of you said at our Sunday Gathering a few weeks ago. One of you had read an article that talked about part of what makes this season of the world pandemic so difficult, is that we are living with near-death experiences every time we go out of our homes. It may be at a subconscious level, but there is a feeling that our lives, and the lives of those we love, are threatened by death.

There is an undercurrent of grief that is flavoring our days. We don't know how long it will be until we can begin to look back, and tell the stories of what it was like for us and our loved ones, to live through these days. We are in the middle of it. It will not always be like this, but for now, this is our reality.

So, it is important for us here in the midst of these days to take a look at the grief and anxiety and uncertainty we are facing and feeling.

It is important for us to name it with people who can support us.

It is important for us to feel it now, as best we can.

If we bury all the feelings of this season now,  
those feeling will be waiting for us in the future.

This week I was sitting in my dentist's chair and talking about all of this. She grew up in Beirut Lebanon in the 1970's and she said that as the pandemic spread here and around the country, she told her family: "now you know what it felt like for me to grow up in Beirut; life was unpredictable all the time."

I must say that these days remind me of the unpredictability of life I felt during the year I lived outside of Belfast, Northern Ireland in the late 1980's. Each time I drove into the more dangerous areas of Belfast to visit church members in the hospital or hospice centers, I knew that there was the potential for me to be killed in a bombing or drive by shooting. Life was very unpredictable, every single day I lived there.

It takes courage and faith to live through days like these we are living, that are so unpredictable. It takes paying attention to not only what we are doing day by day, but what we are feeling.

But most of us have never lived like this before. Or maybe it's better to say we haven't lived with this kind of unpredictability for such a long period of time. Those of you who have been in war zones, or waited for someone who was away at war, or those of you who have lived through seasons of unrest and uprising in Togo, or other places in the world, have lived through the unpredictability of life. You already know some of the emotions of these days.

But for most of us, this is the first time.

Thinking about the experiences and emotions of these days reminded me of a seminary class on "Death and Dying and Grief" I took back in 1989. Our professor, the Rev. Dr. Christie Neuger, spend one three-hour lecture talking about corporate grieving.

She talked about what happens when a nation, a region or a large group of people share the same grief.

It was the first time I thought about my own grief being part of something so much bigger than myself. I'd experienced grief in my family, but I'd never thought about the way a nation of people grieves. I was only 3-1/2 when President Kennedy was assassinated. And this was years before Oklahoma City or 9/11.

Dr. Neuger started by asking for stories from those who remembered President Kennedy's assassination. She then asked where we were when we heard about the Challenger explosion and what we felt. Then she moved to the threat of nuclear war which was a big undercurrent of grief that many people were feeling at that time.

The movie "The Day After" had come out a few years before with its story of full-blown nuclear war between America and the Soviet Union. (1983) She showed a clip of that film and then walked us through learning activities we could do with our church members to help them get in touch with their own feelings about the nuclear threat.

If she was teaching that class today, I'm sure there would also be a discussion of where we were when heard about the first plane going into the World Trade Center Tower on 9/11, and our reactions and experiences in the days that followed.

The Rev. Dr. Christie Neuger, Lecture, 4-17-89, "Other Losses and Cultural Sources of Grief", PT25, "A Pastoral Counseling Approach to Dying, Death and Grief." See notes on "psychic numbness."

As Americans we have these one-time events that are touch stones for us. We as a people hold memories of those, and many other events that shaped our country and our lives. But now we are living in a season of world pandemic, and our personal grief is joined with that of our country and our world.

Instead of a one-time event, we are living through months that have changed how with gather with loved ones, how we worship, how we shop, how we hug or don't hug those we love, how we

gather for weddings and funerals and other life milestones.

We look into the faces of loved one, friends and church members through phone and computer screens.

Our economy has changed. For some our jobs have changed or disappeared. Daily living has changed

And for some of us our understandings of who God is, and what God does is changing as well.

Our sense of what the future will bring has changed.

Uncertainty and grief are all around us.

So, what do we as people of faith do and feel, as we pay attention to this undercurrent of grief, and the undercurrent of the fear of death for ourselves and those we love?

And let me say sometimes it may seem less like an undercurrent of grief, and more like an overwhelming flood of grief that you are experiencing.

But, with whatever we are feeling, we are not alone on this journey.

This morning we heard the words of our parents of faith in the Psalms. They understood living through long years of uncertainty, in ways that can help us.

In Psalm 137 we hear them naming the sorrow of being strangers and slaves in a strange land, and a strange time. While in exile in Babylon for nearly 70 years they were taunted by their captors who asked them to sing the religious songs of their homeland. Their haunting lament echoes into our days.

They had hung their musical instruments on the trees, no longer wanted to play the songs of home. They asked: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

At our Zoom Presbytery meeting on Saturday they played a video of a trio singing in a church service. The sound of organ music and a hymn being sung in a sanctuary brought me to tears. I miss singing together and worshiping together so much. Truly we are living in a strange land, where even singing can threaten us.

The author of Psalm 137 invites us to name our own Psalms of Lament in these days. Part of living through these days is feeling all that we are feeling, and naming it before God and with each other.

An article I read this week was put out by the Harvard Divinity School at the beginning of the pandemic. It is entitled: *That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief*. What I realized as I read the article was that I could either preach for 30 minutes this morning, or I could talk with you about this this week and next week. So, you'll be glad to hear that when we gather to worship next week, I will share some of the more specific teachings from this article with you. If you'd like to read it yourself, the link to the article is in the sermon, in your bulletins.

This week, I want to share just one quote from the man interviewed for the article, David Kessler. He is a death and grieving expert who co-wrote with Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross who is known for teaching us about the "five stages of grief."

When he was asked how we are to live through these days he said:

"Keep trying. There is something powerful about naming this as grief. It helps us feel what's inside of us. So many have told me in the past week, "I'm telling my coworkers I'm having a hard time," or "I cried last night." When you name it, you feel it and it moves through you. Emotions need motion. It's important we acknowledge what we go through.

[HTTPS://HBR.ORG/2020/03/THAT-DISCOMFORT-YOURE-FEELING-IS-GRIEF](https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief)

"Emotions need motion." While the authors of our Psalms may not have put it exactly like that,

they did sing and pray and speak their laments, their sorrows, and their griefs, over and over again. Or as a young friend who is a hospital chaplain says: “Feel the feels.” Feel the feelings of these days.

And let us remember that our mothers and fathers of the faith sang and prayed and named their sorrows and griefs together. They relied on each other in the community of faith. While we are not currently able to do that face to face, we have the gift of Zoom, and phone calls, and emails, texts and letters to walk beside each other through these days.

Being part of a community of faith is one of the great gifts of these days. We need each other. We are called to continue to find ways to be connected to each other.

The people of Detroit showed us a beautiful picture of this, as they gathered on Monday on Belle Isle.

Another gift of the Psalms is that we are reminded that as a community of faith we are not alone when our emotions are in motion and we are “feeling the feels” of this world pandemic. When we are overwhelmed by the grief, we are loved by our God who walks through these days with us. We do not worry and grieve alone. Psalm 56 says that God keeps track of our tossings and turnings at night when we can’t sleep. God collects our tears in a bottle and keeps a record of each tear wept in sorrow, in grief, in uncertainty.

We are each intimately known and loved by our God who knows that these are difficult days. We are not alone in the living of these days.

Our ancestors of the faith who fled Egypt to walk 40 years to the Promised Land knew that God is the God of long journeys.

Our mothers and fathers of faith who spent 70 years in exile in Babylon knew that God is the God of long journeys.

The Israelites who longed for the Messiah, until he surprised the world and came as a tiny baby, knew that God is the God of long journeys.

God is with us for the living of these days and the days ahead.

God is the God of long journeys.

God will be with us in the living of these days.

Next week we will continue to explore more about the living of these days. For now, in the words of the article, it is enough for us to name that: “*That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief.*”

We don’t know what the future will bring, but we know Who holds the future with great love. We don’t know what the future will bring, but we know that we as a community of faith are called to walk beside each other, and listen to each other, as we walk through these days.

Let your “emotions have motion” as you remember who you are as a child of God, and an essential member of the Family of Faith:

“...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous Light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people;

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9-10)

God is the God of long journeys.

Thanks be to God, Alleluia, Amen.