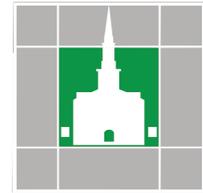


# Joy, Forever

Scripture text: Isaiah 61:1-11

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Center Church on the Green, December 13, 2020



On Friday I came home from the first grocery shopping trip I'd taken in nearly two weeks. I know, exciting, right?

As we were unpacking and putting away our supplies, I reflected on how different my life has been these past nine months.

- Nine months ago I first ran into a person in the grocery store wearing a mask and I thought, "How odd." Now I have enough masks to be able to leave our house every day of the week. Which I don't.
- Nine months ago I was on track to travel another 15,000 miles in my truck, commuting to the various places in my life where my presence was needed. Since March I have logged a grand total of 2 thousand 3 hundred 16 miles, including a one afternoon vacation trip around Connecticut of 160 miles.
- Nine months ago I was meeting with all of you and with colleagues in my office at church, in downtown restaurants, and at various other sites, face to face. Since March I've become very well acquainted with Zoom, as have we all.

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I won't continue on this line, because I know you have stories that make mine look like a minor shift. But your stories and my stories, all the things we've experienced, together add up to how things are at the end of this year of our Lord 2 thousand 20.

And there's a phrase that's been floating around in the past few months that sounds perfect to describe how we are, at least the first time you hear it. Many commentators and pundits have called it "The New Normal." The New Normal describes a way of thinking about masks and travel restrictions and isolation ... a way of considering it just "how things are."

CNN has an ongoing collection of photos on their Website that document what "The New Normal" looks like.

- This stadium shows "The New Normal" for soccer and other organized sports.
- The hats these children and their teacher are wearing show "The New Normal" for classroom education.
- These prospective Kris Kringles at "Santa School" in London show "The New Normal" for Santa Claus.
- This plaza with tables encased in pods shows "The New Normal" for a social lunch at a restaurant.

- This man behind a partition at the Western Wall in Jerusalem shows “The New Normal” for even individual prayer in public.
- This mother and daughter hugging through sheets of plastic shows “The New Normal” for relatives who are not living in the same social bubble.
- And this daughter paying respects to her late father while other relatives attend the wake on video shows “The New Normal” for mourning the loss of a loved one.

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This is a weird time, a time when we are perched on the cusp of change. And while we are waiting these photos serve to summarize our current state of normalcy. These and a thousand other images dancing in your mind right now—these might represent what things look like right now.

But you and I both know that there is nothing normal about these times. There’s nothing normal about hats, or camping in a restaurant, or taking Santa’s temperature, or praying behind a partition.

The things we are doing right now are necessary and right. The things we are doing are crucial to controlling the pandemic until a

vaccine brings true immunity to our lives. But I don't think for a minute that any of this is normal.

We know that unrest and anxiety, willingness to believe seductive words over scientific fact, boredom and restlessness over the very things that can assure our well-being—none of this is normal. And when we experience enough abnormality, we may start to look back with fondness on times that we think of as more stable. You know, the “good old days” when we could walk around without masks, or thoughts about who we were being exposed to, or whom we might expose.

Except, of course, that the “good ol' days” of last December, or February, weren't all that good, either. We have not suddenly experienced a radical change in our economy...the underlying factors were already there. We have not suddenly experienced a need for feeding programs...of all places, this congregation knows more than most how the need for programs like DESK has been there. We have not suddenly discovered racial inequity and social unrest and cars plowing into crowds of protestors...it's these abnormal times that have simply exposed to naked view what we've known has been happening all along.

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Extraordinary times like these are not all that novel. Humanity's history is sprinkled with moments where what a society considered "normal" suddenly shifted and disappeared. It is not similarly littered with complementary moments when normal suddenly returns.

Isaiah is speaking to people in the middle of one of those shifts. And Isaiah is not advocating for a return to normalcy. Far from it. It's not possible, because the former leaders have disappeared. And that's a good thing, because the people of Israel had suffered under kings who kept pushing the concept of "normal" further and further into the mud as their corruption devoured them.

Those kings were gone. And for those laid low by the callous and indecent decisions of long past, long ago leaders, Isaiah has another word: joy.

Joy does not seem to fit. The remnant people to whom Isaiah addresses God's word are unhoused, unfed, and unfit. The remnant people are walking through rubble. The remnant people are vulnerable to whatever warlord comes along next to impose another version of "normal" on their backs, on their lives.

Joy would not be the warlords' gift. But it is God's gift, delivered with a bouquet of roses. Joy is God's motivation and

energizer. Joy is recognition that double doses of trouble need redress. Joy will rebuild.

And that rebuilding will happen in a completely abnormal way. Workers will come in, AND they will be paid for their trouble. Envoys will be received from other countries, AND they will travel in safety. The experience of being crushed and robbed and exploited will be banished.

Quite a vision.

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And from our vantage point of what is right now, perhaps we can hear an invitation in that vision, an invitation to become.

It's been said many times this year that there will be no going back to how things used to be. I've said it myself a few times, and I believe it. But I'm also understanding that we can't stay in this current state of affairs. We need a vision for when we start to move out of isolation and masks and distancing.

In this pregnant moment of NOW Isaiah offers us a vision for rebuilding. It is a vision that is different and better.

It is a vision that is not satisfied with the idea of winners and losers.

It is a vision that sees "leadership" as walking alongside others rather than in front of them.

It is a vision that embraces the world rather than its political divisions.

It is a vision that does not glorify wealth as a goal, rather than a tool to make others' lives better.

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Even as the images of NOW tug at us we are hearing an invitation today, an invitation to the joy of what will be.

Don't settle for right now, for this moment becoming "the new normal."

What God offers is so much. It is so much better. It is so much much more inclusive. It is so much more sustainable.

And, it is so much more joyful that the "good ol' days."

May we aspire to the forever joy of the One who brings:

- good news
- healing
- freedom
- and release.

Amen.