

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 23, 2020

Back to Normal

Isaiah 51:1-8

"Normal." It's often a relative term, and especially now during the coronavirus pandemic. At present, we're living in a new "normal." We anticipate that once the pandemic is over, we'll return to what we used to consider "normal." Or, with the possibility that COVID-19 could be with us, in some form or another, to some extent or another, for years, perhaps the presence of the virus will become part of what we consider "normal."

Last Sunday, an article was published on the web with the intriguing title, "Here's When Fauci Thinks the Coronavirus Pandemic Will End and Life Will Go Back to Normal."¹ When the nation's leading health expert speaks, most people, though not all people, listen. Ironically, some people's rush to return to normal life, including ignoring protective measures like masks and social distancing, is part of what makes it hard to return to normal. This type of behavior fueled new outbreaks that has worsened the situation. Dr. Fauci's bottom line: Between reducing the transmission rate and rolling out the first vaccines, it will take more than a year for the United States to get back to normal.

Though I know opinions differ, let's assume Dr. Fauci is correct. A year from now, when we're gathered here for worship, we may be doing so under more normal circumstances. But what will that "normal" look like. Will it mean no more masks and no more pews blocked off? Will it mean that we have our hymnals, Bibles, and bulletins back? Will it mean that we're passing the offering plate, or maybe even grabbing a plate to enjoy a fellowship meal? Will it mean a return to hugs and handshakes? No one can say for sure. And even when the rules change, will everyone want to, or be willing to, go back to doing things exactly the way we used to?

Back in early April, author Ariel Dorfman wrote:

Everything is unsettled.

Whatever you thought was steady and predictable has now turned out to be alien and dangerous. You can no longer interact with your family or friends or other members of your community face to face—never mind hug or touch them. Your routine and habits have been upended, and you face new deprivations, a reversal for which you were unprepared....

That's a description of life for countless millions in the times of the coronavirus. Yes, but it also captures the daily experience—from the very beginning of history—of vast numbers of exiles and migrants as they discover how to survive a journey into the unknown.²

In today's text from Isaiah, we hear the prophet preaching a message of comfort and hope to a community that has experienced a journey into the unknown. It wasn't a journey they chose. It was forced mass migration to Babylon. Israel's exile has left God's people disrupted and disoriented. They were taken out of their patterns of life and moved into conditions that generated a great sense of loss, joined with confusion, remorse, and anger. You can hear some of their lament in our earlier Scripture passage from Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs

of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? (vv.1-4).

In the midst of their pain and disorientation, as they try to rebuild their lives under new conditions, the people receive a word from the Lord. They're told to open their eyes and ears, so they can see and hear some of the essential pieces of their story as God's people. Remember your original call to follow God. Remember how Abraham was summoned from the known to the unknown. Remember how he and Sarah demonstrated the confidence to follow God in the midst of disruption and disorientation. Remember how Sarah's aged and tired body, her barren womb, became the place from which God sprung forth his people.

All of this testifies to the solidness of God's promises, like a rock from which you were mined. In fact, God is your rock. His power is to be trusted. His word can be counted on, especially in the midst of disruption and disorientation. Remember that exile isn't the end of your story. God is faithful and righteous. Deliverance will come.

Though our present circumstances are very different from Israel's forced migration to Babylon, we too are experiencing a time of exile. We've been displaced from territory that was familiar to us, and forced to inhabit a different kind of landscape where our ways of living have been disrupted and altered. COVID-19 has taken us captive and dictates so much of our daily lives. Life was going along pretty normally up until the middle of March. But then everything changed, and since then we've had to exist and operate under the terms set by a novel pathogen.

Thankfully, at this point we're able to be back together at our place of worship. We've gotten a renewed sense of how important it is to have a physical space, a literal place, where we assemble, in-person, to meet with God and with one another. God certainly isn't confined to this space, but his presence here, among us, is essential to our identity and our purpose. This is part of what made the early stages of the coronavirus shutdown particularly hard, that we were cut off from our place of worship. We couldn't make the journey to the Lord's house each Sunday. True, we could access the word of God electronically through the sermons on the church website. We could share praises and prayer concerns via email. We could mail our offerings to the church office.

But at the same time, we experienced a sense of dislocation. We were together, yet apart. We were connected, yet disconnected. We felt spiritually uprooted. As others have pointed out, we were like the Israelites longing for Zion. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" "How can we know the joy of Christian fellowship when the video keeps buffering?" "How can I partake of the bread and the cup while sitting in front of a computer screen." "On Zoom we sat and wept when we remembered how we used to turn and greet one another with hugs and handshakes."

In mid to late June, some deliverance came. The doors of the church reopened, and some of us were able to make the pilgrimage back to the house of the Lord. Not everyone in the congregation has been able to rejoin us, for understandable and legitimate reasons. In some ways we're still God's scattered people. The sense of exile brought on by COVID-19 is still a long way from over.

So like the Israelites, we look to the Lord and his solid promises to get us to the future. But those promises also sustain us in the present. And that's where we still live. Whatever the "new normal" looks like after the pandemic is over, for now, we're called to inhabit this strange, exilic territory, with all its disruption and disorientation. Faithfulness doesn't mean pretending things aren't so bad, or ignoring the realities that are right in front of us every day. Faithfulness means facing squarely and lamenting deeply all the suffering, death, and devastation that has happened, and is still happening, in our nation and in the world,

