

Home and Away

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II Corinthians 5:6-17 and Mark 4:26-34

“So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.”

There is so much to be said, so much. My friend Mary Ann McKibben Dana calls this a “threshold moment,” and it is, a moment between two moments. Depending on how one marks time, and I generally mark it from March 15, 2020, we have been in one moment, one season. It is true that there have been many moments, many seasons, within that time frame. At that point, however, a microscopic, invisible-to-the-naked-eye power brought the world to its knees, shut it down. It killed 3.75 million people worldwide, and it not finished. In the United States, 33 million cases and 600,000 deaths.

In shutting things down, the coronavirus impacted everything, everything. The economy. How we work. How our children learn. How we get our food. How we care for one another.

Many contradictory things are true about the last 15 months. We learned how fragile we are AND how resilient we are. We learned how neighborly we can be AND how selfish. We learned how powerful and useful technology can be AND how vulnerable we are to that same power. We found strength in community AND strength in solitude, and vulnerability in each as well. We learned many more things, and I hope that as a community of faith we will continue to reflect on those things, to remember and tell stories, and more so, to discern together how these past 15 months will launch us into an innovative and creative and faithful future.

In the midst of all of that, George Floyd died, was killed, following the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. Vigils and protests followed and the call for racial reckoning in this nation intensified, and rightly so.

This is a threshold moment, for which I am very grateful, and not a little daunted. Even here, in our little corner of the city of Philadelphia, in our little corner of the Christian church, in our little corner of humanity, it's a complex narrative. We have this shared experience, these common experiences. Yet it's been said that while all were in the same storm, all weren't in the same boat. Our individual experiences have been varied, and, if any of you are at all like me, it has not been a straight line narrative. That is to say, when you look to the masked person nearest you, you have shared some things, and you have had some unique moments. But your September 2020 was different than your January 2021, and your Wednesday of the second week in December was different than your Thursday, the next day, and one hour was different than the next.

All of these moments happened in a political climate that only heightened, it seems to me, the challenges of responding. We fought over matters – masks, vaccinations – that my simple reading indicates we did not fight over in previous moments in our history. Now, as we are gradually re-entering, that climate remains, still influencing, causing great concern, at least to me.

The church “out there” responded in vastly different ways. There is no playbook for any of this. Geography mattered. Financial resources mattered. Capacities mattered. Some churches made un-wise decisions. Many struggled. Many hung in there. No room for judgment. Here, your staff and your Return to Church Committee placed two values at the middle of the table – safety and inclusivity. Even so, those are values that have multi-dimensional meanings. What is safe for one might not be for another. What includes one might exclude another. Again, no guidebook, just the best of our communal discernment.

And here we are. Not fully and not finally, but here we are. If March 15, 2020 was a light switch, turning everything off instantly, June 13, 2021 feels more like a volume dial – remember those? – which we gradually turn, adjust. Some of us will think the volume is too soft and some too loud. We will continue to adjust, both on Sunday mornings and in the rest of our life together.

“We walk by faith,” Paul said, “not by sight.” That is what we are doing, together. Again, my friend Mary Ann McKibben Dana wrote this: “Many of us can’t wait to leave the pandemic behind and get back to regular life. Others of us want to take a breath, take a pause, and unpack words like ‘back’ and ‘regular.’ (And normal) For many people, this is...a time to get in touch with our best, most thoughtful selves moving forward.”

Our best, most thoughtful selves need to extend to our best, most thoughtful church.

What does that mean? I do hope that we can take these initial weeks, as we mindfully turn up the volume bit by bit, to discern, to dream, to reflect on what we have learned and experienced in these twin pandemics, to tell stories, and to let those stories and experiences shape and direct where we are going.

We are called to be stewards of every moment. I am hesitant to call anything a “blessing,” but there have certainly been learnings, clarifications. Even saying that, however, I am mindful that that is not true for everyone, even everyone here. So much was dependent on temperament, and circumstance. The quest to tell stories needs to be met with the call to hear stories, especially stories of people different from us, in particular those for whom the coronavirus revealed already present inequity or struggle.

That’s why when I read lists of COVID lessons, I want to say “yes, and” or “yes, but.” What was true for some was not for others. But it’s worth pausing to paint some broad brushstrokes, to make some broad observations, and then to test them, as each of us, as all of us, as a city, as a nation, as a church, contemplate what’s next.

If the pandemic forced us to slow down, to focus, to consider and re-consider priorities, to clarify, then good. Let’s not waste that, but claim it, and keep doing it, and build on it.

Families shared more meals at home, spent more time together, played board games, went on walks. Good for them. But families also experienced intense levels of stress, work at home, school at home, missing grandmas and grandpas for long stretches of time, play dates on Zoom, no proms or graduations or ball

games. How will families emerge, and how can we as a church provide support and resources?

Self-described introverts loved the initial months of all this, but even so, after a while, articulated feelings of loneliness and isolation. Self-described extroverts missed human contact. We all did. Professionals reported spikes of depression, anxiety and grief, whether you were directly affected by COVID or not. Lives were lost. Jobs were lost. The word is “trauma,” and we have a shared experience of it and individual experiences, even when we don’t know it. Most of the time when I asked how you were doing, you’d say “fine,” but there was so much embedded in that simple word. As in, “I am fine, but...” With caring and compassion as a central value, how will we as a church tend to each of us, all of us, in this season of trauma.

Even asking these questions, I realize, is a form of privilege, as many in our city and broader communities could not pause to ask them. Front line workers, families with no internet, people for whom trauma is a constant presence. Even as we dig deeper internally, I hope, and pray, that that digging can produce not only deeper empathy, but bolder action on behalf of our neighbors.

Which leads me to the church, the church, this church. Already books and podcasts and articles are being generated about the church’s response to the pandemic. I am hopeful that our Session, and staff, and all of us – in worship, in gatherings, in conversation, will keep asking these questions and pushing us to be innovative and bold and creative.

Alex Shea Will writes that we “Can’t just jump back into old rhythms.” He’s right. Christine Hides writes that we must stay grounded in our purpose, to keep asking the “why” question. She’s right.

But before we get there, we need to establish a value statement, or at least part of one. Over these last 65 weeks, it has seemed not an accident that the Bible has spoken to the moment – saying what we need to hear – whether in supporting us as we deal with grief and trauma, in nurturing us as we face the implications of the pandemic, in convicting us as we seek to heed the call for racial justice. Our task is to open the Bible, and to hear, truly hear, whether we like the word or are not so sure.

This morning Paul establishes a plumbline. “We walk by faith, not by sight,” Paul says. That doesn’t mean we don’t use our “eyes,” our literal and figurative eyes to see, to discern, to evaluate, to analyze. But at the end of the day, we apply those learnings differently, by “faith.”

The questions we ask will be different because of our faith. An article we read affirmed this: “As the church, we have to ask extra questions, not only, for instance, is it safe for most people...That’s a question that might work in other circumstances, but as the church, that’s leaving out a critical theological question of who’s it not safe for?” That’s a faith question, and not a sight question. Some of you were eager to return. Some are cautious about it, and some even anxious. Inclusivity means something at that point. That’s one reason why this livestreaming effort matters – to connect those not yet ready, to connect those who might never be ready, or able to get here, as well as college students, vacationers, travelers, and a whole host of friends we’ve made from coast to coast.

Paul goes on. He speaks of “home” and “away,” of being in the body *and* in Christ. We are “away,” you and me. We are not yet home, news which I hope is hopeful, and that doesn’t sound simply like pious avoidance, or a ticket that gives permission to neglect the here and now. Because Paul also says this: “...whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please God...” A global pandemic, a racial crisis, a locked down world, an online church, are all opportunities to please God, to worship God, to serve God. That’s not a welcome mat for suffering, but a real-world acknowledgement of the real world, and an affirmation that this is not lost time, not sunk time, but time to worship, to serve, to build community, and that ultimately, all time flows into God’s time.

Lois Malcolm writes that “Wherever we are, we are accountable to God — and thus also to one another — for what we do...whether good or evil. And God’s grace is sufficient to give us the power to please God in all circumstances.” All circumstances, even this one, this “away” circumstance unlike any of us has experienced. Heather Murray Elkins writes that “...I believe that home is Christ's kingdom, which exists both within us and among us as we wend our prodigal ways through the world in search of it.”

We take a big step today on that wending journey, a unique step, a step eagerly anticipated but also met with some measure of uncertainty. We take it together, as a community, with fellow travelers, by faith, trusting God to lead us, and even more so, trusting God to welcome us home. Amen.