



First United Church of Oak Park

Finding Peace and Returning to Normal

Isaiah 43 and 2 Corinthians 5

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August 2, 2020

We have entered the last section of our six-week sermon series through which we have sought to reflect on and speak to how we are experiencing life in the midst of a pandemic. This sermon series was born out of what we heard you were struggling with: lacking connection, lacking purpose or meaning, and struggling to make peace with this new “normal” as well as anxiety about returning to “normal.” So for the first two weeks we focused on our struggle with lacking connection, but also how to feel connected and find healing; the second two weeks we focused on our struggle with lacking purpose, but also acknowledging that we each have a purpose and a call. For these last two weeks, we will explore finding peace and returning to “normal.”

It has been difficult to make peace with the situation at hand. If you have been able to make peace with the current situation, you may be feeling some anxiety about going back to the way things were. But often I feel the tension between all of these things — trying to make peace, feeling anxious, wanting to return to normal, fearing going back to normal, getting comfortable and then being uncomfortable. This is not an either/or kind of experience, it’s both/and, it’s complicated — I find I am riding a roller coaster of emotions daily. Are you experiencing something similar? We are constantly trying to navigate the present while anticipating the future. It is a difficult place to be, to say the least; I don’t think we were built for this, but here is what I know ...

- Finding moments of peace is not the same as making peace with your situation. For it is not easy, nor should it be an expectation that you will make peace with a situation that you have no control over, especially one that is negatively impacting you and those around you.
- It is difficult to imagine returning to normal. Because what is normal, anyway? It’s an arbitrary concept that society has created to divide us — to label us, to sort us into “us” and “them.”

Wherever you stand on what normal is and how you feel about returning to it, we all agree this is not normal. We are living in a new reality — no matter who you are, your life has been affected by this pandemic in some way or another:

- Have you lost your job? Do you know someone who has?
- Have you had to file for unemployment? Have you become a client at a food pantry for the first time?
- Have you had to do online learning? Teach online learning?
- Maybe you have had to adjust to working from home.
- Are you having to work full time and be a full-time caregiver?
- Maybe you have had to continue to work outside your home to make ends meet at great risk to yourself and your loved ones.
- Maybe you are an essential worker on the front lines, seeing the tragedy of this pandemic up close.
- At the very least, you have had to adopt face masks into your essential accessories, your daily routines have probably been disrupted, travel plans have been altered or more likely cancelled, your social life is not what it used to be, and things that previously required little forethought now involve more preparation.

And to top it all off, we have no idea when this will come to an end. We are facing and living with unknowns and uncertainty with no end in sight — it's chaos! Life feels chaotic — there is disorder and confusion. Many would categorize chaos as a negative thing, but just as God is able to see all of the potential in us, able to do something amazing with ordinary things, I encourage you to see the potential of chaos. Think of chaos as an agent of change. When there is chaos stirring, I believe it means change is coming.

And this brings us to our scripture for today. From Isaiah 43:

“Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

And from 2 Corinthians 5:

“Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

We are creatures of habit; change is not easy and can be scary. But I do not think this time of living in the world of COVID is the new that is *springing forth*.

Life in a pandemic has meant we have had to adjust to a lot of new things, but we are still in the thick of the chaos.

Some matter of peace needs to be made with where we currently are and with the fact that things must change, if we are to move forward, but there is so much more to come. This strange time has brought to the surface many of the issues we face as a country, there is righteous anger, cries for justice: Chaos is stirring. Perhaps the Spirit is saying, "I am about to do a new thing."

We can't actually go back to the way things were. So much has happened, so much has been brought to the surface. To return to "normal" would be to continue burying our heads in the sand. That doesn't mean we shouldn't look forward to when we can hug our loved ones, smile at strangers as we walk down the street, gather with friends without restrictions, travel, and sing together in church and greet one another with God's peace; but we are called to be a part of this new thing.

We find this calling in our scripture from 2 Corinthians, which is titled the ministry of reconciliation. In it we are called God's ambassadors entrusted with the message of reconciliation. Restoring of relationships. The aftermath of this pandemic is not going to be easy. There has been so much death, hardship, struggle, and grief. It is understandable if you have concerns or anxiety about what the future holds, whatever your reasons may be.

So how do we move forward? Where do we start the reconciliation?

During these last several months I have struggled with all of the things we have been reflecting on in this sermon series: connection, purpose, meaning, finding peace, and how to move forward. I can't say that I have or will ever make peace with the current situation, but I have been able to cultivate and enjoy moments of peace, and in this somewhat extended pause I have found the opportunity to examine and ask questions of myself and our world. I wonder if you have found the time and space to do so as well. I think it's important, so let's take a moment to do this now. You can close your eyes if you wish as I invite you to reflect on and answer silently to yourself some questions that I have wrestled with myself. Know that there are no wrong answers and there is no judgment. Take a couple of deep breaths ...

- What are your priorities in life?

- Does the way you spend your time reflect this?
- What do you value most?
- What are you passionate about? What brings you joy?
- What does the world need that you are called and able to give?
- How can you make a positive impact?
- Are you living with intentionality?
- How can you live more intentionally?
- How are you doing physically? Mentally? Emotionally?
- What do you need to maintain good health and overall well-being?
- When or where do you feel most at peace?

We are God's ambassadors, called to the ministry of reconciliation — we must begin by restoring our relationship with ourselves. I believe asking and exploring these questions is a good start. Only then can we be truly ready.

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

Chaos is stirring, change is coming. Cultivate your moments of peace, say goodbye to normal — the former things. Get ready to help usher in a new thing. Amen.