

“What We Learned in the Pandemic (So Far) (Part Two)”
May 15, 2022

Isaiah 43:14-21
Matthew 9:14-17

This was to be my second sermon on what we learned in the pandemic—but after the news from Buffalo yesterday it seems that we have learned nothing. Hatred and violence continue. A White man entered a grocery store in a Black neighborhood. Ten people were killed, others injured in what New York governor Kathy Hochul, who grew up in the Buffalo area, called “A military-style execution targeting people who simply want to buy groceries in a neighborhood store. It strikes us to our very hearts to know that there is such evil out there.”

It does strike us to our very hearts, even though it is a tenet of our Christian faith that something is wrong with this world that God created and called good. We fail to see the image of God in one another. We struggle, as Paul said, not just against flesh and blood, but against what can only be called malevolent spiritual forces, the principalities and powers of this present darkness.

Hatred of the other grows large in some hearts. Listen to what people continue to say—on the radio, online, on the streets. The overblown rhetoric eventually finds disturbed individuals ready to give life to words of hate. Combine this with the ready availability of guns and you have the all the ingredients for the violence that is the other plague upon our nation—a plague of our own choosing.

I wanted to talk about what we have learned.

Instead, we are faced with the mystery that is each human person. Who can really say or fathom what causes a person to succumb to violence? Who can say why Americans want so much to turn on one another? Who can say what drives someone to purchase guns and ammunition that will be used for the sole purpose of killing other human beings?

We are faced with the mystery that is God. The Old Testament scholar Carol Newsom says: “It is God the creator who made us as we are, capable of love and attachment, but also susceptible to disease, accidents, violence. In this sense it is God who gives and takes away, from whom we receive both what we yearn for and what we dread. There is a tendency to want to associate God with only what is good. If one does that, however, then when trouble comes it is easy to feel that one has fallen into a godforsaken place.”ⁱ

So, if we have learned anything in the past two years, perhaps it is just this: we cannot associate God with only what is good. Surrounded by disease and death, surrounded by racist hatred that does not abate, we are nevertheless not in a godforsaken place.

In the faith that God is with us even in the worst of conditions, what else might we have learned in these days?

A recent article in *The Atlantic* was titled: “You Were Right About COVID, Until You Weren’t.” That goes a long way in describing what we’ve known about this disease and how to live as it continues to disrupt our lives and our world.

The author, Olga Khazan, says: “Understanding when to abandon beliefs and when to recommit to them can help us ride out the pandemic and prepare for the next one.” And, of course, many are saying, rightly or wrongly, that there will be a next one.

She mentions Tenelle Porter, a psychologist who studies “intellectual humility”—the recognition that we have imperfect information and therefore our beliefs might be wrong. All too often, our ideas about things such as Covid or how to live in a years-long, global pandemic become part of our identity. And apparently, the more time we spend on the internet, the more difficult it is to practice intellectual humility.

So it is that another psychologist, Adam Grant, suggests that the best way to keep an open mind in an unclear situation is to “think like a scientist”—that is, to recognize that every one of our opinions is a hypothesis waiting to be tested. And every decision we make is an experiment in which we forgot to have a control group.

So, we need to ask: what would it take to change my mind? It’s not simply a commitment to be open-minded. It’s a commitment to the possibility that we might be wrong.

As we live through these days, many voices remind us that we can’t hold so tightly to prior beliefs that we allow them to guide our behavior when facts on the ground change. So, we might take off our masks one month and put them on again the next. We might, as we have, worship together, then separately, then together again. We might resume coffee hour, then...well, you get the idea.

This sounds a lot like the way Jesus responded when he was asked why his disciples didn’t fast: It was a matter of timing, a matter of circumstances. The wedding guests can’t mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them—and then they will fast.

Keep an open mind.

Be ready to see something new and to respond accordingly.

Jesus was speaking out of the Judaism that points toward the God who does new things, the God who is not bound by what has gone before.

The prophet spoke to the Jewish people in exile and reminded them of what God *had* done: bringing the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, making a way for them through the sea, driving chariots and horses to destruction, extinguishing Pharaoh’s army in all its strength.

The mighty acts of God—long remembered.

But now, the prophet says, something new! Stop dwelling on past events. God is about to do something new: water in the wilderness, rivers in the barren desert.

A new Exodus.

A return Jerusalem.

Through the prophet, God speaks to the people, God speaks to us: I am about to do something new...can you not perceive it?

Ah, well, that's just the problem, isn't it? Our perception is slight and usually clouded by what we think we know. Our understanding is clouded by the past—and even by the present.

The pandemic has taught us that our understanding is limited. That we are right until we aren't.

Can this be a time of mending, of restoring what is torn? Might this be a time of new wine?

And, if so, just how are we to live in these days?

Jesus gives some advice: be careful how you patch things up. And put new wine in new skins.

Jesus gives some advice, but as it so often happens, that advice requires considerable thought on our part.

Which is favored here—the new or the old?

Untreated new cloth ruins a fine old garment, right? Or is the problem that the old cloth just can't hold up anymore?

New wine destroys those, old, well-seasoned skins, right? Or are those old skins of no use for the wine of the future?

The mixing of the old and the new is risky business. Put a patch of new, unshrunk cloth on an old garment and the patch will tear away leaving an even bigger hole. Put new wine in old wineskins and the skins will burst, losing the wine and destroying the skins.

The safe option would be to reject either the new or the old. But Jesus usually doesn't encourage the safe option. And he gives us no ready formula.

The New Testament scholar, Eugene Boring, sees it like this: The Jesus we encounter in Matthew's gospel walks a dangerous line between conservative and liberal, never smugly sure that he has chosen the right way, affirming both, sometimes considered the enemy of both liberals and conservatives. This, he adds, is the life Jesus calls us to—and we are not alone in this life, for this is what following in the way of Jesus means.

So, what have we learned? What might we learn in the days ahead?

We've learned to live dangerously—to embrace the new even as we bring along the best of the old into the future.

We've learned to lament: our health and well-being continue to be at risk; our democracy continues to be at risk; the poor and the hungry and the homeless continue to be at risk; racial

justice continues to elude us. One million deaths from Covid in our nation alone. Ten deaths in Buffalo alone. We've learned to cry out in sorrow to the God who is there.

We've learned to seek understanding and with respect. I've noticed more people willing to express open disagreement with one another in the past two years than at any other time in my ministry here. So often we are a very "Iowa nice" congregation. So often we are a congregation that is pretty much of one mind. Conflicts that rip apart other congregations: how to spend mission money, approaches to social issues, the color of the church kitchen walls just don't gain much traction here. But we've had different opinions about the pandemic and how to approach it. And we've been willing to express our own views and hear the views of others in a way that creates both understanding and principled disagreement.

In the midst of all of the difficult and disturbing news this past week, you might have heard that wonderful story of the passenger who safely landed a plane after the pilot became incapacitated. Over the plane's radio, Darren Harrison told an air traffic controller: "I have no idea how to fly an airplane." That's not a good thing.

The air traffic controller, by coincidence or providence, was also a flight instructor. That's a good thing.

But he'd never flown the Cessna model that was in danger. That's not a good thing.

Talking by radio between the control tower and the cockpit, together they were able to successfully land this plane—something that usually takes about 20 hours of flight instruction. That's a *new* thing!

And it is, once again, a parable for us as we live through this pandemic. In all honesty, we don't know how to fly this airplane. And the "guidebook" isn't always clear.

We are learning to fly on the fly.

We are learning new things in the face of new problems and old problems that just won't go away.

We are learning that God, who will not let us go, is, even now, doing a new thing.

May we be those who see it and live in it.

ⁱ Carol Newsom, "Job," *NIB*, pg. 360.