



NORTHBROOK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH | ENCOUNTER. LOVE. SERVE.

Celebration Service Sermon
Delivered by Rev. Laurie Moeller, Senior Pastor
September 6, 2020

I am so grateful for this time together! I am grateful for the staff both of Christ UMC and Northbrook UMC willing to work so hard to make sure we could pull this off in as safe a manner possible. I am so grateful for each one of you who is taking seriously the threat of this virus and the responsibility we have to one another. And, I am so grateful for the weather!

I want to remind you to please leave your mask on. Stay in your circles. It will be tempting to want to hug, but we frown upon that. No singing. You will have detailed directions for communion, and we will all take communion at one time. Offering will be at the end of the service; there will be a place for you to place your gifts and offerings. You will be dismissed at the end of the service to make sure everyone is safe.

Not one of us knew that just 6 months ago the way we did life would come to an abrupt halt. None of us knew that on Wednesday life would hold very few limits, and then on Friday we could not even go to a restaurant, or to school, or to work, or to church, or go anywhere without great fear of contributing to someone's physical demise or even our own. None of us knew that a halt would be placed on all things. And for sure, none of us would have ever thought we would not worship together until September, and that it would be outside because we would still be living with restrictions and fear. The threat of this virus is difficult to grasp unless you have seen it up close, experienced it up close. But here we are on the lawn of the church, masked, separated, and hopeful. Here we are gathered as best we can, in the safest way we know how, and we have come because we all needed to see one another, even from a distance. **We all needed to know that you are still here, I am still here, and God has never been anywhere else.**

Tonight is historic and unprecedented, though I think everything about this year feels historic and unprecedented, but tonight is different from everything happening out there. Tonight we are able to come here and say to God in a collective (although covered) voice: **"God we are ready!** We are ready to **encounter** the work of the Holy Spirit, we are ready to **love** one another with compassion and grace, we are ready to **serve** a hurting world, and we as Christ United Methodist Church and Northbrook United Methodist Church are ready to do this **TOGETHER!**"

Though the limits on our physical comings and goings continue, our spirits are ready. And, we have no limits, absolutely no limits on the power of our collective spirits working and praying together!



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We approach tonight not unlike the children of Abraham and Sarah, living in exile and yearning for something historic and unprecedented to happen to call them out of exile. I am guessing they were ready to DO something and BE something when Isaiah spoke God's words: "He who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters... [is] doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? [God is] making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland!" *Isaiah 43:16-19*

You and I are ready to see that path in the mighty waters. And, God is showing us a walkway that you and I are going to choose to walk together. Two congregations coming together, moving forward together to a future only God can create. We do not know fully what all we can do or will do as one congregation, but we look to the God of all creation to take us by the hand and lead us on.

There is a school on Hwy 92 that has this message on their sign: "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God." I know these to be the words Corrie ten Boom, the author of the book *The Hiding Place* which recounts the story of her time hiding persecuted Jewish people to protect them from the evil of Nazi power. "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God"; these are words for us today. We do not know the future, but we need to remember that we KNOW the works and wonders of God!

The words from the prophet Isaiah gave the children of Abraham and Sarah hope that from the depths of sorrow and fear and uncertainty comes new life. And, Isaiah's words offer us some advice and guidance on how we do this, and how we live toward an unknown future as a merged congregation.

As children of God, we must remember that we live toward a future which always redeems the past. **We live toward a future that always redeems the past.** As God spoke through Isaiah, the people are reminded that their past is always used for their future. We are not called to dwell on the things of the past, or live in the past, or pine away for the past, **but the sacred life.** The life that is lived for God is always a life of redemption. Our past is ALWAYS crucial to our future. I think we can agree whether you have come from Christ UMC or Northbrook UMC, we have all seen some difficult days. We have all struggled and we have all hurt or been hurt, and for sure we have at one time or another all grown tired weary of the way things are. Life has been difficult. Church has been difficult. Family has been difficult. Relationships have been difficult. The world has been difficult. God knows this. And, God reminds us, a new thing is upon us. God is building a future on the past of trial and difficulty, and actually BECAUSE of the past we can believe in a future. God is making all things new. From the stumps that have been cut down comes a future of hope and promise. The children of Abraham and Sarah did not grasp the coming of Jesus, but you and I know that it is through Jesus and with Jesus and in Jesus that



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God makes all things new! God overcame the world and God overcame our fear and God overcame the grace, so that we could with certainty be here today and say: “God is doing a new thing in you and in me and in us together.”

Corrie ten Boom also said these words: “This is what the past is for! Every experience God gives us, every person He puts in our lives is the perfect preparation for the future that only He can see.”

The first truth we need to take into the future is this: the past is essential to our todays and tomorrows. Every person, every outreach, every mission, every new member, every former member, every pastor, every trustees meeting, every hymnal, every anthem, every prayer, every argument, every hug, every baptism, every cup, and every wafer of bread are all put into the foundation of THIS NEW CONGREGATION! Today we praise God for our past! We praise God for the good times and the bad, the times of sorrow and the times of joy, the times of growth and the times of death, the times we built and the times we tore down, the times we laugh and times we cried. The past is the foundation for our future!

The second truth we need to take into the future is this: 2020 is a gift from God. This crazy disconcerting year can be redeemed and can be a gift. Maybe not one we wanted, but I am convinced that this year too will be redeemed and used for the good of the Kingdom if you and I choose to use this time and not squander it. And, here’s why. In order for you and me to follow the path of God through the mighty waters, we need to know and listen for God’s voice. And, that only happens when the children of Abraham and Sarah, the followers of Jesus Christ, take seriously the time we have been given. We must redirect our attention to the matters of faith and step back from our fascination with the matters of human discord. We are all prone to human discord; getting into the weeds with one another. There’s time for that too, but I am convinced this is NOT that time. This is a time when we have been given a moral mandate to slow down, go less, get less, talk less. And in so doing, we have more time, more energy, more attention to the presence and power of God.

As members of the new creation and of THIS new creation, we owe it to this community and to the world to be deeply and passionately fascinated by the workings of God. And, such a fascination comes with greater awareness of the needs of others and how this congregation has been called for such a time as this. The world needs us to be really interested in what God is doing. The world does not need us to be interested in what the culture is doing or saying or causing. Again, there is a time for that, but I believe we must reignite our interest in movements of the Spirit.



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The challenge for you and me in the unknown future ahead of us, is to remain open to what God is doing in the world and in us. We have to be willing to let God be God, willing to allow God's radical freedom to birth a new thing which will be fully rooted in the work and wonder God has already done in both of these churches.

May we choose to celebrate what God has done, is doing, and will do through the redemptive and life-giving power of Jesus Christ. May we choose to use this year of strange outcomes, human unrest, and a global pandemic to search and listen for God's words and presence and healing in it all. I am excited to serve with you all. I am excited to serve with your pastoral team: Rev. Dave Allen Grady, Rev. Andrew Chappell, and Rev. Ryan Young. And, I am really excited about what God has in store for bringing peace, and healing, and hope through this new thing that is happening here!

We have no limits. There are absolutely no limits on the power of our collective spirits working and praying together! **AMEN**