

“Don’t Give Up!”—Biblical Offerings of Hope... *for a Return to Normal*

Fourth of six Lenten sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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John 5:2-9 Common English Bible

²In Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate in the north city wall is a pool with the Aramaic name Bethesda. It had five covered porches, ³and a crowd of people who were sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed sat there. ⁵A certain man was there who had been sick for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there, knowing that he had already been there a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

⁷The sick man answered him, “Sir, I don’t have anyone who can put me in the water when it is stirred up. When I’m trying to get to it, someone else has gotten in ahead of me.”

⁸Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹Immediately the man was well, and he picked up his mat and walked....

In the church season of Lent leading up to Easter, this year I’m offering this series called “‘Don’t Give Up!’ – Biblical Offerings of Hope.” This weekend marks one year since the COVID pandemic forced us to suspend in-person worship and replace it with a worship broadcast via the internet. *A year...!* So it’s appropriate that this week’s installment is called “Hope for a Return to Normal.”

If there’s one question on people’s minds these days, it’s the question “When will things return to normal?” For virtually everyone on the face of the planet, for a year now our lives have been disrupted, unpredictable, uncomfortable, insecure.

Even as vaccines are being rolled out, we still fear making someone sick or becoming sick ourselves. We instinctively cringe when we watch old movies and TV shows and see scenes of large gatherings of unmasked people. The simple idea of shaking someone’s hand seems so odd.

The global response seeking to contain and overcome the coronavirus has impacted what we all knew as normal, ordinary, daily life. We’ve been deprived of things we took for granted. Activities have been restricted. Adults feel like children when health professionals and public leaders tell us what we can and cannot do. After days and weeks and months... after a *year* of this, we’ve grown tired and anxious and impatient. We want to feel like we can exert control in our lives:

- We long to be able to gather with our *own* family members (for goodness’ sake!).
- We want to get together with friends.
- We want to meet with co-workers face-to-face instead of mask-to-mask.
- We want to congregate in public spaces with fellow sports fans or concertgoers or theatre patrons.

- We want to be able to run to the store without feeling like we have to go through a decontamination ritual afterward.
- And of course, we want to feel comfortable returning to our church...
 - returning to the familiarity of our preferred place of worship;
 - returning to take part in church-based activities and mission outreach;
 - returning to the comfort and camaraderie of fellow church-going friends and neighbors;
 - returning to welcome people who have met us through these online broadcasts!

A desire to “return to normal” is, well, normal. It’s human nature to prefer what’s familiar and comfortable. That’s actually illustrated in the story of the Israelites’ Exodus journey from Egypt to their entry into the Promised Land. Their long, long experience in the wilderness reminds us that it’s our tendency to long for “what used to be.”

The Old Testament book called Numbers reports how the Israelites reacted to the stress of (in effect) backpacking through the wilderness for several years. Even though God had sustained them by providing them with a seed-like food known as manna, instead of expressing thanks for the gift of food they complained about its blandness. Some of the complainers sounded off to Moses. They cried, “Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for free, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our lives are wasting away. There is nothing but manna in front of us.”¹

Having been so long separated from what used to be, the people wanted to return to normal, to what had been familiar. What they were forgetting was that when they had lived in Egypt their “normal” was *enslavement*! The book of Exodus describes the Hebrew people being subjected to “forced labor” and “hard service” and every kind of “field labor” that was imposed ruthlessly by their harsh and cruel taskmasters.²

That was the “normal” that the Exodus enabled them to escape. Did they really want to return to *that* “normal”? Surely they didn’t hope to emerge from the restrictions and challenges of the Exodus only to return once again to the bondage of slavery. Yes, they wanted something that was more familiar, more predictable, more settled than what they were enduring... but surely what they sought was a “new normal.”

In today’s reading from the fifth chapter of John’s gospel we heard a healing story. People suffering from a variety of conditions and diseases would gather at one of Jerusalem’s ritual bathing pools, the one called “Bethesda.” They did that because legend had it that an angel of the Lord would descend on occasion and stir up the water in that pool, and whoever “stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.”³ As we heard from John’s gospel, Jesus spoke to a man who had been coming to the pool for thirty-eight years, hoping to be healed.

¹ Numbers 11:4b-6 Common English Bible

² cf. Exodus 1:8-14

³ From a variant reading of John 5:3 included as a marginal note in the New Revised Standard Version

...*Thirty-eight years!* For thirty-eight years of his life the man had sought to be healed. After his encounter with Jesus changed his life, do you think he wanted to “go back to normal,” to his usual routine of the past thirty-eight years? Surely he wanted a “new normal” for his life because he had come to know and believe in Jesus.

Do we *really* want to return to “normal?” When I was talking about this topic with my minister friend Jenni the other day, she said, “Jon, I’m reminded of the title of that Patsy Clairmont book: it was called, ‘Normal is Just a Setting on Your Dryer.’”⁴ In other words, it’s hard to say what’s “normal.” Normal from whose perspective? Normal in what situation?

In a church meeting the other night we talked about this last year when large public gatherings were inadvisable, including gatherings for churches. We talked about “returning to normal” and wondered what that will look like for this church.

From what I’m hearing and reading, I believe that there will not be a defining moment when everyone decides that “everything is back to normal.” Rather, different aspects of our lives will ease into a more familiar, normal, comfortable situation at different times.

For instance, at some point:

- you’ll feel confident going into a store to shop;
- you’ll feel comfortable eating *in* a restaurant or going to a theatre;
- you’ll feel safe and confident *without* a facemask;
- at some point you’ll feel comfortable giving someone a hug or offering a handshake;
- and at some point you’ll feel at ease attending a worship service in a church.

While there may be governmental announcements approving the resumption of certain activities, for other functions there probably will be no specific timetable or order in which these activities will return.

What’s more, the timetable for each of those experiences will be different *for different people*. For example:

- there *will* be a time when mandates for wearing face masks are withdrawn, but some people will still feel more comfortable continuing to “mask up;”
- bars and restaurants and sports venues and theatres eventually will be fully open, but not everyone will be ready to resume what used to be commonplace for them;
- and people will return to churches (or explore them for the first time), but it will happen gradually over time and at different rates for various church activities.

The “normal” that will slowly emerge after this pandemic will be different from what we considered “normal” when we went in. We’re going to return... but we’ll “return to a new place.” What’s true for our daily activities will also be true for our

⁴ Patsy Clairmont, Normal is Just a Setting on Your Dryer. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1993.

spiritual lives: we may find ourselves wanting to satisfy a new yearning to serve Jesus through his church in new ways.

- I've had conversations with someone who has discovered a desire to read the Bible more regularly during this pandemic interlude.
- Someone else has decided that she can present Christ's love by writing brief notes of appreciation not just to relatives or close friends but neighbors and community acquaintances.
- I've seen a number of people who have found new joy in their lives by getting involved in supporting our church's mission outreach projects.
- I know of at least a half-dozen folks who have sought online Bible studies to explore how the Bible informs their world view and their response to human need.

The good news of the gospel is that God transforms us. Putting our faith in Jesus Christ changes our view of the world; faith in Jesus changes how we resolve to engage with this world. As the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, "Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come."⁵ Faith in Jesus Christ delivers us to a new place, a "new normal" for our lives.

The Israelites started in captivity and ended in a Promised Land of new opportunity. The man at the Bethesda pool had his mobility restored, giving him newfound ability to go in new directions. We, too, can discover a "new normal." Let us pray that our hearts will be moved by our pilgrimage through the wilderness of quarantine. May our "new normal" have us displaying an even more Christlike spirit of patience, acceptance, forgiveness, obedience.

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⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17 Good News Translation