



I've been thinking about the things I'm missing because of the pandemic. The theater, live music, the majority of a college softball season. The Indians, Memorial Day picnics, a bunch of Wednesday night group rides. Trips to civil rights monuments and museums with the men of New Covenant. Graduation parties with fried chicken and rigatoni. Zoom has replaced in-person family gatherings. We haven't been together since Christmas. A wedding we were supposed to attend in Dallas for my wife's godson was pared down to immediate family. The summer is already at least one-third over and I'm feeling kind of cheated.

I'm sure you are too. No touching, no hugging, no kissing. Mask wearing, hand washing, social distancing. Add to that the uncertainty of when we return to a new normal, and the social unrest in our country, and you have a recipe for frustration. Our nerves are getting frayed. We're just plain tired of not being able to live our lives the way we were accustomed to.

Biblical scholar and theologian N.T. Wright, among others, has used a biblical lens to describe the present time as a modern day exile. It's like we have had a particular way of life taken away from us with no say in the matter, and replaced by something that could be compared to living in a foreign land. Just like the Israelites who were overthrown by the Babylonians and carted off to become slaves and outliers. Plunged into an entirely unfamiliar culture, God's people had to learn how to survive while maintaining their own religious customs and practices. It wasn't easy.

Maybe that's a helpful frame of reference for us. Perhaps what we miss most is being together as the body of Christ. We miss the fellowship. We miss worshiping together, praying together, singing together, and joining together at the Lord's Table. And what, no coffee and donuts? It's discouraging to try to be a community of faith when the members are scattered about with no particular place to meet.

And even when we are able to get back together, things will be different. We will have to wear face masks and be screened before entering the building. The sanctuary will seem much emptier with a maximum of only 50 people in worship. We won't be able to sing because singing is an activity that spreads the virus

very quickly. So, no band or choir, no hymn singing. There won't be Communion either, at least not right away.

But familiar elements of worship **WILL** be present: the liturgy of the Word, weekly scripture readings, prayers, a sermon, and at least a portion of the people of God will be present with each other. It will be different for sure, but we will adapt and evolve just as we have since the pandemic shut us down in March.

However, one thing will certainly be the same. God will show up and will be present with us. God has not abandoned us during this time. God has been with us in our homes and families even though we are separated from loved ones. God has shown up at our jobs whether we are working at our usual desks or at our kitchen tables. God has been around for phone calls and Zoom chats, at nursing homes and senior apartment buildings, at hospitals and doctors' offices. Just because other things have changed doesn't mean God has.

I doubt if things will ever get back to the way they were. What's more probable is our lives will be permanently altered and a new normal will evolve. None of us can yet say what that will look like, what it will mean, or how it will impact our lives in the long term. But I do know this: God will be there to give us hope and to nudge us ever closer to the reality of God's kingdom.

Psalm 103 says, *"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him."*

Be patient people of God. Our lives are in His hands.

In Christ,

Pastor Chuck

Let us pray. Lord God, we give you thanks that your love is steadfast and that your mercy endures forever. As we continue on this uncertain journey, help us to know your presence and trust that your grace is ever present in our lives. Amen