

***How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs for the courts of the Lord. (Psalm 84:1)***

Since 2004 we have learned to worship not in a traditional church sanctuary, but where we gather ... “*The church is wherever God’s people are ...*” A “*bloom where you are planted*” so to speak. But congregations deciding to divest of church buildings while continuing to worship together in alternate surroundings is nothing like our present-day limitations and restrictions.

I did not want COVID-19 to ruin my much-anticipated spring and summer 2020. How dare COVID-19 interrupt more than an extended “spring break” for the kids from school). Both Matthew (Corie) and Carly (Eric) have gotten engaged this spring. We have weddings to plan and venues to book, and now there will be a double cohort with all suspended 2020 nuptials crowding into the 2021 (or later?) bookings.

I tried not to be overwhelmed, and I dared not welcome any feelings of sadness or disappointment related to COVID...the closures, the cancellations, the changes. I didn’t handle it well at first at all (I admit!). My work was declared one of more than six dozen “essential” services, so I’m very grateful I was not laid-off and could still work every day. Now I don’t pretend we do work that is important like services provided by hospitals, doctors, other health professionals, fire, police, etc. (*but I was surprised to find out we were listed as #65 on the essential list and cannabis was listed as #4*) Some people have re-tooled and can work from home. Some are enjoying a sense of “freedom” and feel liberated with flexible hours and locations. Some find that unsettling and feel they have been cast adrift. Perhaps we are on our own “Emmaus road”, in this journey of life.

After wallowing in self-pity for the first month (while dressed 24/7 in mask, gloves, reeking of Lysol and raw from wipes between every file and client), I decided to fully embrace the cold reality of the new “normal” ... and I got a puppy! Now our last dog died of old age 6 years ago, and let me tell you, raising a puppy in our 40’s was much easier than it is now in our ... well, you know. And he’s a rambunctious little mutt (*The last FEMA estimate said the recovery in our house would be a multi-year project! Lol*). As the weeks have turned into months, and Zoom fatigue settles in, we are adjusting to curb-side pick-up at local stores and drive-by birthday parties. Our vegetable garden and flowerbeds are flourishing. Our morning and evening walks are longer and more enjoyable. ***God invites us to rest in grassy meadows, and leads us beside restful waters...*** We are less apt to dash off a quickie email or text, and more likely to sit and enjoy a longer telephone call with our loved ones.

I try not to imagine what it would have been like to have a COVID-free spring (and now summer). I try not to think about how long it will be until we gather again in one large group. I decide not to dwell on the parts of worship that can only be experienced in person, like the full sound of congregational singing, listening to Justin’s magic as he adds his own extra notes to the preludes, hymns, other choruses, postludes. The interpersonal interaction between Rev Cathy and ourselves, is just not the same on-line. We appreciate all the work and effort that is made to keep things going via the website, but we miss participating in the sacraments, the hope of Pentecost, catching up with one another in person. Somehow, we have maintained some intimacy and sweetness because we leaned on the values that always held us together as a congregation.

As anxious as we all are to return to regular services (Sunday and otherwise), the well being of everyone far outweighs the desire to return to normal. Even when stores and church re-open the effects of COVID-19 pandemic will linger. We will be required to expect and embrace the awkwardness, but we should also extend grace to each other and to ourselves.

We look forward to being back in the presence of God’s people. We have an embodied faith that was meant to be lived out in person, with one another. May we have Faith like Ruth! In the meantime, we thank God for our health and His mercies, that he never takes a break, never sleeps. May we recognize God’s companionship on our journeys. We are not alone.

Patty P