



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“A Promise to Celebrate”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Joshua 1: 1-9; Matthew 6: 25-34

June 14, 2020 – Evening Drive-in Worship Service

First and foremost, I want to take a minute to just say ‘welcome.’ For those of us who have been coming to this building every day throughout the shutdown, these recent weeks have been a meaningful recovery of the experience of being part of a church family. We have worked extremely hard, both staff and members, to truly find ways to continue to ‘be the church’ over the course of the past 13 weeks – and I’m tremendously proud of the life of faith and service that has been exhibited by our members and staff. No matter how much we did, and what successes we had, however, we can’t deny that there is something about being together that matters. There’s a spirit and a joy from being in the presence of one another that warms the heart. So, despite it looking a bit different, there has been a certain rejuvenation that has stemmed from beginning to see your smiling faces once again. So, it truly is wonderful to see so many of you this evening.

Leading into these moments of regathering, however, I’ve been thinking a lot about what was ‘supposed to be.’ I think that phrase, ‘supposed to,’ has been used more in the past few months than in the decade that preceded them. That has been the shared experience of this pandemic since day 1.

- I was supposed to go on this trip...
- I was supposed to start that new job...
- I was supposed to be getting married...
- I was supposed to be at this concert...
- I was supposed to play in this tournament...
- I was supposed to have my prom...
- I was supposed to have my graduation...
- I was supposed to be visiting my parents...
- I was supposed to be going to work...
- I was supposed to be going to school...

I could stand up here for 15 minutes doing nothing but outlining the seemingly endless ways in which these past few months have been a constant experience of things not being what they were

supposed to be. And, that experience carried right on into the question of what this service, tonight, was going to be all about.

You see, the initial concept of our gathering this evening was to take the place of what was ‘supposed to be’ our Celebration Sunday worship last week. At the end of the program year, each year, we have our Celebration Sunday with special worship, great music, fellowship, and our communal recognition of God’s blessings in and through the many ministries of our church.

- We were supposed to have staff and volunteers who work with our children in front of the sanctuary to be thanked.
- We were supposed to have our choirs lifting our hearts with their music and receiving our appreciation for their gifts and service.
- We were supposed to have the Hosanna Mission Team being commissioned for their trip to Pennsylvania.

We were supposed to be celebrating all of these people, and all of these things, but the choirs can’t sing...the team can’t go to Pennsylvania...and we can’t gather groups in front of our sanctuary. What was ‘supposed to be,’ isn’t...can’t...so I found myself questioning – if this service is meant to echo the joy of Celebration Sunday...and Celebration Sunday really can’t happen this year...what exactly are we celebrating? If things aren’t what they were ‘supposed to be’ for our celebration, what is it that brings us to a point of rejoicing today? And that question is was brought to that moment that Julie shared from the first chapter of Joshua.

Many of you know that the wilderness journey of the Israelites has been something of a reflective theme, for me, throughout these past few months. The parallels of the angst, the worry, the listlessness, the frustration and the seeming interminability of it all has had my mind really wrapped around that journey of the Israelites. Because they, too, were laden with what was ‘supposed to be.’

- They were ‘supposed to be’ heirs of the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the promise that they would live in the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. Instead they were increasingly subjected to the harsh oppression of Pharaoh.
- They were ‘supposed to be’ delivered from that Egyptian oppression through God’s hand. Instead, they faced impassable waters, dire thirst, panging hunger and years of wandering.
- They were ‘supposed to be’ led by God’s servant Moses – and he disappeared to the top of a mountain for days on end.
- And now, at the brink of the Jordan River, with the Promised Land on the other side, Moses was ‘supposed to’ lead them into the promise towards which they had been striving for generations, but suddenly it was going to be Joshua instead.

The Israelites had spent generations, centuries, waiting from that first promise to Abraham to the moment of crossing the Jordan. They had spent decades in the wilderness with Moses. And now, finally at the brink of that for which they’d been waiting, the trajectory changes again, and things, again, were not what they were ‘supposed to be.’ It’s in that moment, however, in the face of another shift in what would be, that God issues those words that echo from their generation to ours... “Be strong and courageous.” God says. “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” The more I thought

about our gathering this evening – the more I asked myself to consider that which we would be celebrating as we gathered – the more those words echoed in my heart... “The Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

You see, when you look back upon that wilderness journey of the Israelites, the one constant was that, no matter how things that were compared to how they thought things were ‘supposed to be,’ the one thing that always was, was God. As a guiding hand to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... As a listening ear to the plea of the Israelites in oppression... As a calling voice to Moses in the burning bush... As a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night to show the way... As a force to part the waters on both ends of the journey...

I could go on and on but, the thing that stood out to me in considering the wilderness journey of the Israelites is that, no matter how things compared to what they thought was ‘supposed to be,’ God always was!

“Do not worry,” Jesus says, “about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.” At first blush, that’s a pretty tough standard to meet. ‘Do not worry!’ Really? At all? Ever? Jesus goes on, “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” I actually caught a comic about this while I was preparing this message for tonight. The image showed a therapist seated in her chair and a man lying on the couch. The therapist proclaims, “Worrying doesn’t change anything!” To which the man quickly replies, “It does for me! 98% of the things I worry about never happen!”

That’s the worry in question here. I think we sometimes equate worry with what I might rebrand as ‘thoughtful reflection.’ I think we sometimes equate worry with playing our part in the active engagement we have with God’s work in our lives. I think we sometimes hear, ‘do not worry,’ and somehow, in our minds, that equates with the phrase ‘let go and let God.’ But, those are two very different things.

I am convinced that, when Jesus speaks about worry here, he’s not talking about throwing the baby out with the bathwater as we a mindlessly turn everything over to God. I am convinced that, when Jesus speaks about worry here, he’s not saying that we shouldn’t be thoughtful and considerate about how we move forward in our lives and faithfulness. Scripture makes that point repeatedly – this is not about throwing caution to the Godly winds. I am convinced that, when Jesus talks about worry here, he’s talking about that engrossing mental exercise that constantly waits for everything to become not what it was ‘supposed to be’ and that forgets that, even when things aren’t what they are ‘supposed to be,’ God is!

That’s the crux of the point. It’s the key phrase that comes out in verse 26. “Look at the birds of the air...Are you not much more valuable than they?” That’s the point. It’s not that Jesus is calling out for us to walk mindlessly through life assuming that God is going to manufacture and manipulate our every step towards some Utopian end. It’s that we have to walk through life remembering that we matter to God. We have to walk through life remembering that God is there in all things. We have to walk through life remembering that, even when things aren’t as we thought they were ‘supposed to be,’ God is! And that, my friends, is a truth worth celebrating.

Over the course of the past three months, the list of that which hasn't been what it was 'supposed to be' is mind-numbing. The one thing that has been, however...without exception or equivocation...is God.

- When we made stress-inducing decisions about shutting down businesses, practices, and even ministries here at the church – God was there with us.
- When we fretted over the implications of changes in school or work – God was there.
- When we cried over lost opportunities and cursed over decisions with which we didn't agree – God was there.
- When our graduates graduated without getting to graduate – God was there.
- As we come back together in unusual ways – God is there.
- As we return to workplaces with newfound awareness and, perhaps, some consternation – God is there.
- As our graduates begin the next chapter of their journey – God is there.

No matter what has happened that was not as it was 'supposed to be,' nor that which will happen in the weeks and months ahead that still aren't what they are 'supposed to be,' God will be. In all things, in all times, in all places, in all ways – God has been there! God is there! God will be there! It's not that we don't need to be thoughtful, considerate, or actively engaged in playing our part in God's work in our lives. No – it's that we don't need to worry about the things that won't turn as we think they are 'supposed to be.' Because, even when they aren't, God is! Yesterday... today... tomorrow... always... God is! That, my friends, is a reason to celebrate!