

“GOD’S NEW NORMAL”
Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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“Live from New York, it’s not Saturday night!” In the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, the hit TV show “Saturday Night Live” is the latest program to halt production indefinitely out of concern for its cast and crew. Other TV staples impacted by the pandemic include daytime and nighttime talk shows, which are normally taped before a live audience. A week ago last Thursday, the guest host on “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” was the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, who until recently had been a candidate for President of the United States. It was weird enough that a politician was subbing for a comedian. What made it even more surreal was that Pete Buttigieg delivered his monologue to a nearly empty studio. Jokes were followed not by laughter from a live audience, but by inserted footage of famous people cheering and clapping. Buttigieg commented wryly, “When you don’t have a real audience, you have to fake one.”

Friends, I know the feeling! It is stranger than strange to lead a worship service and preach a sermon in a sanctuary that is almost totally vacant. I miss the sight of your faces and the sound of your voices; I miss your first-hand involvement which brings energy to the worship experience and makes it more than just a performance by a group of actors. Still, you are not a fake audience; you are a real one. I trust that you are there, behind the eye of the camera, watching and listening and participating in your own way from the comfort and safety of your homes. As bizarre as it is, this is the hand we have been dealt as individuals and as a church family. We’ve accepted it, and we’re going to play our hand as patiently and skillfully as we can.

A remote church service is just one example of today’s “new normal.” If I’ve heard that term once, I’ve heard it fifty times over the last couple of weeks. The “new normal” has become an over-used cliché, but we wouldn’t use it so often unless it fit our circumstances to a T, which it clearly does. This past week I got interested in where the expression originated. The “new normal” was coined by business and economic leaders to describe conditions in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the global recession which followed. Since then, the term has been used in a variety of other contexts. It implies that something which was previously abnormal has become commonplace.

In our context today, the old normal was the smug assumption that human beings have infinite mastery over the natural world, that science and medicine can quickly conquer any threat to our health and well-being. The new normal is the realization that novel illnesses can still arise for which we are woefully unprepared. The old normal was that we can go where we want, and gather with whom we want, whenever we want. The new normal is that we go and gather at our own peril. The battle with the Coronavirus is akin to the war on terrorism. People all over the world are dealing with an enemy they cannot see – an enemy that strikes swiftly and indiscriminately, producing fear and suffering for everyone in its path.

What makes the current “new normal” so unique is that it is constantly changing. The writer of Ecclesiastes said, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 3:1:9b) – which he would never have said if he had been living through the winter of 2020, when we wake up every day to a major new development and have to make yet another new adjustment. First, it was the cancellation of public events; then it was the closing of schools; then it was the shuttering of businesses and the warning to shelter at home. The ripple effect of the pandemic has become a tidal wave. It’s not just that we’ve had to endure minor inconveniences during this crisis; some folks have lost their livelihoods, and some have lost their lives. All of us have lost our freedom of choice to move about and socialize with others as we please. We have lost the confidence that our everyday environment is a safe and secure place. And all of this has happened with the speed of a terrible, swift sword. Conditions which we couldn’t even imagine a month ago are now becoming a routine part of our daily lives. It may be a tired cliché to say it, but this state of change and uncertainty is the new normal.

Today’s designated psalm on this 4th Sunday in Lent is the familiar and beloved 23rd Psalm. To the untrained ear, the “Shepherd Psalm,” with its lovely cadence and melody, sounds as lyrical and soothing as a Chopin sonata. To the untrained eye, the psalmist’s vision of “green pastures” and “still waters” looks like a scene in a Monet landscape. But listen more closely and read between the lines, and you will recognize that the psalmist has been in a dark and dangerous place, both physically and spiritually. The Lord “restores my soul,” he says (Psalm 23:3a), which suggests that his soul has been in dire need of restoration. “He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake” (v. 3b), implying that he has been going down the wrong paths. Before the psalmist writes this song of praise and trust, he has been like a lost sheep in need of a shepherd.

What’s more, the threat he experiences is not just in the past tense. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil” (v. 4a). Note that the verb “walk” is in the present tense. For the moment, he has come to an oasis of beauty and safety, but he is not yet out of the woods. His life is still in peril in some unspecified way. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (v. 5), he says. This psalm is attributed to David, so perhaps Israel’s king is being hunted down by his political and military foes. We don’t really know the details, but what we do know is that this is the psalmist’s old normal – a life moving forward without a compass, a life precariously perched on the brink of death.

But then, juxtaposed with this old normal is the new normal that comes from the Shepherd God of Israel, whom Christians know as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. The 23rd Psalm is often read at funerals because it reassures us of God’s steadfast care when we journey through the travail of death. But, like a good funeral service, this psalm has a message for the living as well as for the dying and the dead. The message is simple and even predictable, coming as it does from a person with a strong faith: whatever our circumstance, whether we walk beside still waters or through a valley of dry bones, God is there to offer care and comfort, protection and guidance. God’s love is like the constant and dependable love of a good shepherd for his sheep. Because this is so, you and I may confess to God our momentary fears, but we are ultimately confident. We can say to God, “I fear no evil, for you are with me” (v. 4a).

What strikes me about this scenario is that the psalmist’s old normal and God’s new normal co-exist; they are operating at the same time. You and I tend to think of our lives in either-or, black-and-white terms – you know: the worst of times today followed by the best of

times tomorrow; all darkness one moment, all light the next. But ours is a God who is with us at all times and places, and especially in the shadowlands, where darkness and light overlap and compete with each other. “Sometimes mid scenes of deepest gloom, sometimes where Eden’s bower bloom, by waters still, o’er troubled sea, still ‘tis [God’s] hand that leadeth me.” Friends, many of us have sung those words a hundred times to little effect. Now we have a chance to sing them like we really mean them.

Yes, you and I have lost our normalcy over the last few weeks, but we can replace it with an awareness of God’s normalcy – which may be new to us but has always been there. It is normal for God to be “an ever-present help in time of trouble” (Psalm 46:1). It is normal for God to take the old creation, which is still dominated by darkness and death, and infuse it with a new creation, which offers us the glad option of light and life.

In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us that we constantly have to make a choice between these two created orders. Which new normalcy will we embrace – ours or God’s? Will you and I choose to be children of darkness or children of light?

Make no mistake about it: during this time of global crisis, the children of darkness are on the loose. Out of sheer panic, some people have stockpiled enough toilet paper to last them for a year – never mind that this leaves others scrambling to find even a shred of toilet paper for themselves. As fear mounts, the sale of guns and ammunition has skyrocketed in our country over the last few weeks. A gun store in Atlanta had lines that were six and eight people deep. A gun store in Los Angeles had lines that stretched around the block. Apparently, people want to be ready and waiting if anyone tries to come and steal their toilet paper. And then, some folks are simply oblivious to the danger they face and the danger they pose for others – like the college students frolicking together on the beach in Florida last week.

But thanks be to God, alongside these children of darkness, there are those striving to be children of light – to make choices that not only protect themselves but also protect others, choices that involve personal sacrifice in order to achieve a greater good – the common good. This is what John Wesley was driving at when he established the first General Rule of Methodist societies: do no harm. In our context, this means: don’t do anything thoughtlessly or selfishly that would put others at greater risk. And then, on the other side of the coin, there is Wesley’s second General Rule: do all the good you can. Look for ways to be helpful to others, to be agents of healing and hope.

Friends, I cannot think of a better job description for children of light during this season of darkness. Do no harm; do all the good you can. Embrace God’s new normal of love as your own new normal. Don’t just make the best of this situation; make the most of it; let it bring out the best in you.

It seems that poets are uniquely able to capture what it looks like to be children of light for such a time as this. Again, I thank my daughter Kate for sharing this free verse poem from Laura Kelly Fanucci:

When this is over, may we never again take for granted a handshake with a stranger, full shelves at the store, conversations with neighbors, a crowded theater, Friday night out, the taste of communion, a routine checkup, the school rush each morning, coffee with a friend, the stadium roaring, each deep breath, a boring Tuesday, life itself.

When this ends, may we find that we have become more like the people we wanted to be, we were called to be, we hoped to be, and may we stay that way – better for each other because of the worst.

Friends, if you and I do this, we will have discovered God's new normal and made it our own.