

HAPPY NEW YEAR, CHURCH! A LOOK BACK AND A LOOK AHEAD

Isaiah 65:17-25

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
31 January 2021
(online worship only)

Imagine with me the day we all feel safe coming back into this sanctuary. Hear the buzz as people chat with each other, so happy to connect with one another again. I see that the Passing of the Peace is taking longer than usual...much longer. People are crossing the aisle to hug each other. The hugs are long. Tears are flowing.

When the music starts, we are singing with gusto. We've missed it so much.

Beau calls the children to come up and sit on the steps and I go down and sit in the front pew. I want to see each face. Some of the children have grown and changed so much I barely recognize them. The children are wiggly and excited and when it's time to go to Sunday School they run down the aisle, and...let's follow them for a minute. Let's walk back to our Education Wing and give thanks to God for this new space. We have dreamed for so long about having a safe space for all of our children on Sunday morning. Our Safety Team talked about it for years. It's a sad fact but it's necessary in these days - we have to make sure our children are secure. You see the new Welcome Center near the back entrance, a place

where parents and guardians check their children in. It's especially comforting for new families, of which there are many. They don't know this church well yet, so they feel grateful that the church has thought of their needs. You'll see that all of the rooms for children and youth are behind the security doors, from nursery through 7th grade.

The rooms have furniture that fits each age group and the technology that supports the curriculum. Our Christian Education coordinator, Eileen Zakel, has an office so that she can stay in the Education Wing and be on call for all of the teachers but also have access to her materials. Next door to her is a small sensory room, a place she can take a child who needs a time for quiet, especially a child who has a diagnosis on the autism spectrum.

All of the rooms have fresh paint, they look welcoming, they are age-appropriate, and they communicate to the students, to the teachers, to all of us - that faith formation is both important and fun. This is a place where students will want to spend time.

Let's leave the students there and come back into the sanctuary. We'll allow plenty of time, on this first Sunday back, for silent prayer. So many prayers of gratitude, giving thanks for the ways God has shepherded us through the months when we were physically apart from each other and

from our beloved sacred space. We'll give thanks for the ways our congregation has grown in this time. We've expanded beyond our local congregation; we now include an extended family of those who watch our services and participate in our ministry from several states. We give thanks for the new members who have joined us, because they see in us a church that is laser-beam focused on mission, that cares about people of all ages, that intentionally includes people of different political leanings. And we pause to remember the people we have lost since the last time we were together.

Our musicians share their talents and we are delighted to see the faces we know and have missed but also new faces, and we hear new instruments. We sing old songs that we love but we also sing new songs, because there are new messages for this post-pandemic world - and new voices. We have learned to invite those members of our community who have hidden their musical talents, and they are now willing to share with us from time to time, including our youth.

When I stand up to give the sermon, I can hardly wait to share with you this news. Imagine with me that because our congregation advocated tirelessly, wrote letters, made phone calls, sent emails and conducted zoom meetings, we put pressure on our Lorain County commissioners to

reverse their decision to withhold funding from our mission partners who help those who are most vulnerable. I make that announcement and then I join in the applause. Maybe it's even a standing ovation - a moment of joy for all of us.

After the service, we gather for refreshments and honestly, no one wants to leave.

What else do you imagine? Hearing more details about the work that we have done with our mission partners? I think it will be fun to introduce people who have been sending cards with people who have received them.

Friends, this day will come! I don't know when...but this day will come. And it can be the day we imagine because every day during this pandemic, we are focused on being the church. And we will keep that focus.

Every week we focus on creating worship that is meaningful to as many people as possible. We keep in mind that every Sunday someone is tuning in who is feeling overwhelmed, anxious or burdened by grief. Every Sunday someone is tuning in hoping for a word of wisdom about how to live in this divided, polarized time. And every Sunday someone is looking for encouragement as we try to build a world free of racism and all forms of

bigotry, a world free of violence, including violence towards the planet, and a world free of greed.

On this Annual Meeting Sunday like no other, I can confidently say that every single day during this pandemic, this church has engaged in acts of caring. We are sending cards to one another, checking in, making phone calls, dropping off Doorstep Dinners. We have delivered Easter lilies, coffee mugs and Christmas Eve candles.

Our Mission Team has been in close contact with our mission partners every month, sometimes weekly, sometimes daily. Because of your donations to our food drives, because of the ministry done at the Good Neighbor Thrift Shop, because of the way you responded to the Christmas giving tree, we gave away over \$227,000 in 2020.

As I began each day in prayer and meditation, many days over the past year I have thought about those for whom the pandemic has been especially difficult. One of the persons my heart has gone out to is our Director of Youth Ministries, Nate Taylor. Nate is an extrovert - if you know Nate, you know that that word really doesn't quite capture his energy. So the loss of so many in-person gatherings has been especially hard for Nate. The experiences that form the foundation of our youth ministry relationships weren't able to happen last year - the Junior High and Senior

High mission trips, the dog wash, church camp, sports camps, retreats...almost everything was drastically changed or cancelled. Yet thanks to Nate and others, we were able to provide support to our junior high mission partner in Cincinnati, Washington United Church of Christ - and our senior high mission partner, Hosanna Industries, in Pennsylvania.

Another group of people I pray about often is our musicians. I believe the first time I heard the word “super spreader” was in reference to a choir in the state of Washington. After a choir practice in March, almost 90% of those in attendance contracted COVID and two died. We learned, through this tragedy, that singing was one of the most dangerous activities. I have talked to all of our music staff and many of our music volunteers and I know that they are deeply grieving the ability to share their talents in the ways they always had enjoyed before. Music isn’t just a hobby for them; it’s a passion and also the way they connect to the divine.

I’m grateful that we have found ways for many instrumentalists to participate in our online services, and we have enjoyed vocal solos, duets and other small ensembles.

Isaiah 65, most scholars believe, was written when the people of Israel returned home, after their long exile. For decades, Israel’s poets and prophets and songwriters had been dreaming of the time when they would

return home, and now the time has finally come. So now the prophet paints this gorgeous picture of abundant life - a community of peace and joy, where people are treated justly. Israel will live out the commandments and values given to them by God. There will be justice, compassion and neighborliness. Did you hear the hopefulness in the words as Beau read them? "Look!" (God says). "I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth...be glad and rejoice forever in what I'm creating,...people will plant vineyards and eat their fruit...children will be born into a world free of horrors...wolf and lamb will graze together"... a symbol of peace.

Songs like our passage for today keep our spirits lifted and our gaze fixed on the kind of future we want to build together. But we do the work of building one day at a time. We build this kind of world, this kind of church, this kind of neighborhood brick by brick, day by day. Every time we donate funds, every time we invite someone to volunteer with us or to watch worship, every time we pick up the phone to check on a neighbor, every time we encourage someone or thank someone, every time we write our elected officials, we are creating this kind of world, this kind of church, this kind of neighborhood. It's what we've been doing and it's what we'll continue to do.

I am so proud of the ways we are living out our mission. I know it's not easy. I know some of you give sacrificially. I know how many volunteer hours are given. I also know you don't always agree with everything the church is doing, with everything we on staff or in leadership say or write. There have been times over this past year when some of you have communicated with me your disagreement or displeasure. After the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent riots, and during the presidential campaign, some of you told me you thought the church was talking about race and politics too much and expressing a partisan opinion. Others of you told me you thought our church should speak out in a more activist way. As I was researching Isaiah 65 for today's sermon, I found this note in a commentary: "This portion of Isaiah is concerned with internal communal life and the tensions that must have arisen among the parties that we might label 'liberal' and 'conservative.'" So God's people have been living with this tension for at least 2500 years. That doesn't make it any easier.

I want to make two comments. First, while our church is not diverse in many ways, we are politically diverse. And that makes us rare. It is especially rare for a **growing church** to be politically diverse. Personally, I'm glad we are. I think it's part of our strength. It also means our

congregation can be a place where we practice speaking the truth in love among people with whom we sometimes disagree — and that's a skill we all need!

I welcome your comments, I welcome your comments when you disagree. It's healthy for us to be in dialogue together. I want you to know that I try very hard to not express **partisan** opinions. I try very hard to base all of my comments in my biblical and theological education, not my own political leanings. What is not helpful or healthy is when we make assumptions about each other, assuming that because we see one post on social media or hear one word and not another, that we know exactly what someone else is thinking. I hope we ask more questions, and listen to one another openly. I believe we all have something to learn from each other's stories, especially when it's someone we disagree with.

As you all know from your own families and neighbors and circles of friends, it's the easiest thing in the world to get along with people who share your same opinions. Working side by side with people with whom we disagree is harder, but it's what Jesus did, as he shared meals with the Pharisees and the tax collectors. Those are the conversations that will help us build a beloved community where we all share the abundant life together.

So, thank you, Avon Lake United Church of Christ, for your generosity, your perseverance, your dedication, during this pandemic year which is not yet over. But it will be. It will be, and until that day comes, we will work together to build the church we want to come back to, invite our friends to, and where truly all are welcome. Thanks be to God.