

Singing for Joy on Our Couches
Sunday, September 6, 2020
Psalm 149

The last time your worship leaders were together in the sanctuary leading worship it was Friday, March 13, 2020. We recorded a podcast of the Sunday service because the session had voted to suspend worship. We had worshipped with all of you on Sunday, March 8, cautiously, not shaking hands at the door, not passing the peace. We were aware that the world was turning, but we had no idea that New York City was about to become the epicenter of the pandemic. We were not imagining that that Sunday, or frankly, that Friday would be our last together in-person gathering for almost six months. I think often of that day, sitting on the couches in the concourse, unmasked. I remember the sinking feeling in my gut realizing that it could be a long time before we were together again, but none of us could have imagined it would be so many days, so many weeks, so many months.

Even now, we stand in an empty sanctuary, liturgists and preachers turned YouTube evangelists. We miss you! Missing you all is a grim reminder that things are not truly normal, in fact, not even all of your worship leaders are here. Hannah Faye is still in quarantine in New Jersey after being in Texas with her mom. You will not see all your worship leaders here at one time, you will see us rotating leadership on different Sundays. Michael, who has been here at the church leading worship for the last month on zoom, is no doubt grateful for some company. And today, on the oddest of Labor Day weekend Sundays, we also welcome Greg among us for the first time. What a beginning!

And there you are, maybe at your kitchen table, maybe with your furry friends at your feet or in your lap, maybe sitting on your couch, watching, finally getting a fuller view of the sanctuary here at Old First. Gone are Audrey's books in the backdrop, Hannah Faye's stained glass in her stairwell, Mark's gorgeous flowers, the background noise of the BQE, and Michael's nomadic journey through the southeast with his keyboard. Gone are Hallie and Nicole behind the scenes helping us with transitions.

Isn't it funny how five and half months have come to define so much? If I were talking to you this past February, asking, where have we been? What should we tell Greg about who we are? The answer would have been entirely different, wouldn't it?

What would you have me tell Greg today about who we are as a community? I could, and would happily, cede the floor to those of you have been around for more years than I have, and there are many of you. This congregation is and has been in all the years I have been here, a congregation of generations. Folks who came at some point during Jack and John's ministry with us, folks who came with Barrie, folks who came during Jon Walton's time with us.

Perhaps I should tell Greg how resilient you are. Resilience is a quality that you as a congregation embody and inspire in the staff. On the morning of September 11, 2001, with those high blue skies, as the tragedy beyond words unfolded in lower Manhattan, in

Washington D.C., in the fields of Pennsylvania, so many of you sought refuge here. Yes, for services later that day, but just for space and presence. This church building was an easy spot to meet up with loved ones, and for some of you, to painfully wait and pray that they would find their way here safe and sound.

You were resilient during Hurricane Sandy when we had no power for almost a week. Alice Wade, who worked as our communications person at the time, created the bulletin at home that week and had it printed near her home in Washington Heights, eventually dropping it off with Jon Walton's doorman so we would have bulletins that following Sunday. With no organ, Rick Bassett offered to play the piano, and when I asked him what he needed, he said "just a candle or some kind of light so I can read the music." He reminded me that he played often for church services in Ethiopia where he had previously lived where the power went in and out. What a reminder of what we take for granted.

Or maybe we should tell Greg about the snowstorm that Saturday of the weekend in January when we were to launch our year of 300th Anniversary celebrations. The clergy had practiced on Friday with the communion silver on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The guest preacher had arrived and was staying blocks away. Contingency plans were made with the usual New Yorker's suspicion of the weather forecast. By 2 pm on Saturday, I was shoveling the seven steps up out of my basement apartment every hour so I had some hope of getting out of the apartment on Sunday morning. Jon Walton called me at 3 pm to cancel a gathering at his home that night. At 5 pm we convened a call with staff to decide about worship for the next day. It was decided, we would gather, whoever could make it would make it. The communion team launched into action, already by Friday the stores didn't have much bread on the shelves. Miraculously, Meg Harper found a sourdough round at the corner deli near her home in Brooklyn. We knew that Primerose, who normally prepared the individual pieces of bread for serving, would not be able to make it in the snow. We rallied, the then chair of the worship committee, Alyson Grunder, was in touch with Meg and me via text. Between us, we had enough loaves of bread from our freezers, from the drug store to make communion happen. We arrived early Sunday morning and cut the bread into cubes in the kitchen. It was the most powerful feeling of discipleship I think I have ever felt. Three hundred and sixty-five of you found your way in over a foot of snow for worship that Sunday.

But resilience is not the only thing I want to tell Greg about you all. I want to also tell Greg about your reverence. Because, while a congregation's character may be defined by how it responds in crisis, a congregation's character is also about how you live the most ordinary of days. Let's tell Greg what it feels like to stand after the benediction on communion Sundays while the choir recesses and singing Psalm 150. Let's tell Greg how wonderful it feels when we baptize bright-eyed and sometimes wailing babies and walk them down the center aisle with their proud parents, as the clergy recite the story of our faith. Let's take Greg to the columbarium and let him touch the nameplates of people we love, the listen for the whisper of their stories in this space. To see the prayer notes tucked around them, or in some cases, the stickers remembering children lost to us. Let's tell Greg, how robustly you share the peace, for Presbyterians who are locked in your pews.

Let's tell Greg how it feels to stand outside along Fifth Avenue in the earliest hours of Christmas Day after the 11 pm Christmas Eve service, sometimes under a lightly falling snow, as we wish each other a Merry Christmas. And these are just the things that happen in this part of the church. I could go on and on about events, like the Tartan Fair, and programs, like Bible Study, justice work, like the Pride Water Table, and yes, even meetings. Greg should know about your compassion and caring for each other. How you know when someone hasn't been in church for a while, how you ask after each other, how you visit each other in the hospital and in hospice, how you take care of one another. There is so much to be proud of our community. As the Psalmist proclaims in the verses Audrey read for us today, "let them sing for joy on their couches!"

How wonderful is that verse for these times?

Yet, we would truncate this Psalm too abruptly if we just stopped at that verse. Along with the idea of singing for joy on our couches today, I want to also lift up the double-edged sword mentioned by the Psalmist. If we are honest, we also would need to say out loud that these times singing for joy on our couches has not been easy. It is hard *not* seeing our community in person. It is hard not to be in the sacred space that we love. It is hard not to be able to gather in the simplest ways around the ordinary things of our lives, to share a cup of coffee, to chat together spilling out of the lobby into the north lawn. You would like to meet Greg face to face without a screen in-between you and partake of James Hollander's delicious food while you mingle with other church friends and talk about your dreams. We may be encouraged to sing from our couches, but how do we do something new in a time like the one we are in? How do we open our hearts for what is coming when we have no idea what is coming? To say it is a difficult time for our community, for our country, for our world, is to drastically understate the problems we being called to address as a community of faith.

It is in the midst of the intersections of these problems: pandemic, racism, political division, loneliness, isolation, schooling challenges that we are called to open our hearts to new possibilities. The challenge sounds, well, Biblical.

I wrote a few weeks ago in our church newsletter about how we are people of beginnings. Our faith roots us in beginnings. Here though is the double-edged sword of being a people of beginnings: we want more control. When something is beginning, we want the possibilities to include all the things that we had been dreaming about that could be different. We want *our* vision to part of what emerges. We want the change that we can already envision. But that might not be exactly what we get. In fact, and don't be angry with me, but let's hope it is not. Let me clarify.

My question for us today is *not*, "how can we open our hearts to the beginning that you have already imagined?" My question for us today *is*, "how can we open our hearts to the beginning that is coming?" It may not, it *will not* unfold exactly as you imagined it. Paul puts it more eloquently, "who hopes for what is seen?" We hope for what we have not yet even imagined!

Spiritually, how are you going to stay open to the possibilities? This openness is the hard spiritual work we are called to right now. This openness means putting down old patterns. This openness means praying, without ceasing, for clarity and strength. This openness means listening and having tough conversations about change that we might not want. This openness might mean that we are called to shed tears and grieve together. We will lose things in this beginning. But this spiritual openness challenges us to continue to find ways to sing for joy from our couches, or pews. This spiritual openness reminds us that the change of new beginnings is not all one way or all one feeling. But even if every moment is not joyful, we are still called to sing.

Melissa Faliveno uses an example from an essay she wrote called "Motherland."ⁱ Ms. Faliveno grew up in rural Wisconsin and lives now in Brooklyn. The book in which this essay appears, *Tomboyland*, expertly plays with, among other things, what she calls the "shifting idea of home." She tells the story in this essay about an old sugar maple tree that her parents had to cut down from her childhood yard. Of all the trees that they had lost— ash, spruce, birch — this tree was one of kind. She describes it as "a beautiful tree, with a perfect canopy of leaves – dark green in the summer and fire-engine red in the fall."ⁱⁱ The process of losing this tree was not a simple one. She describes what happened:

"Its root system became tangled. No longer able to receive nutrients from the soil, its leaves started to fall. Its branches turned brittle and began to crack. Rot worked its way up from the roots. My parents waited a long time to cut it down, their hearts broken to do it. And the last time I went home, it was gone."ⁱⁱⁱ

Ms. Faliveno decides to get a tattoo of a sugar maple tree, as a reminder in her words, "that wherever we go, whatever shape our lives and loves and families may take, we carry our grief along with us. But whatever it is we've lost, we carry the potential for new growth too."^{iv} We are at a new beginning as a faith community, we are living into a new beginning as a country, as a global community. We have already lost a great deal. We are already grieving. That we might lose more is scary. That we might lose more is sad. That we might be called in this new beginning to remove things that have tangled roots, things we hold near and dear is sad. Yet, here we sit, a double-edged sword in hand. The newness we crave comes with choices, the newness we crave will come with loss. The newness we crave comes with possibility, it comes with joys that we will sing about on our couches for years ahead.

ⁱ Faliveno, Melissa. 2020. *Tomboyland*. (Little A/Topple Books: New York, NY.) p. 187-226.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 122.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*.

^{iv} *Ibid*.