

Greetings in the name of the Risen Christ,

Our thoughts and prayers have been with you all these past couple of months as Julie and I prepare and look forward to coming into fellowship with you this spring and summer. While this is not the transition we envisioned a couple of months ago, we trust God is in the midst of our efforts. I've heard several people describe the pandemic as a period of "cultural disruption," with moments that truly change and redefine our lives as a people and as individuals. For most of us, it has often felt like a time of isolation and confinement, unable to connect in the ways we would like to. At times we may feel a sense of frustration and powerlessness, and the forced inactivity may even feed negatively on a variety of our emotions.

Yet in God's hands, this is an optimal time for growth.

I find myself admiring my colleagues for preaching to cameras only, while prayerfully envisioning the people who are watching and listening, who long to hear the Word of God lifted up, especially now. I've worked to claim my own emotions and sense of loss in being limited and not able to do ministry in the ways that I have in the past. The more I am prayerful, the more I understand that while our abilities are temporarily limited, we can grow in the ways we share, teach, encourage, and empower discipleship in new ways among all of our members. Julie and I have been active at First UMC Lancaster in facilitating a Sunday School class, taking part in prayer time and Disciple Bible study by Zoom. I've worked with staff to make phone calls to church members to see how they are doing. And every week we have had Zoom calls with family to keep our hearts together. We've been able to meet with Julie's parents almost every week in a parking lot, keeping a safe distance. Being able to see each other, however limited it may be, is an important blessing.

Every pastoral transition is unique, this one will be extraordinarily so. I want to express my thanks to Pastor Monica for her invitation to write to you. We are looking forward to getting to know you all better, and to understand your faith journey. In the weeks and months ahead I'll share more about our lives and the challenges and joys we've experienced in ministry. I look forward to listening and hearing about your journeys in faith. In recent years we have all had to face constant change. As Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm shared with me, we will need to stay especially flexible and centered in grace this year. At times it can feel overwhelming, especially now. God is with us in the midst of it all. I recommend a book to you to help us with change by William Bridges called Managing Transitions. I also recommend the May 30th Pastoral Transitions Workshop for the SPRC and Church Lay Leader, hopeful they will be able to join me in the morning and afternoon Zoom meeting. It is offered by the Conference, facilitated in the morning by Rev. David Wolverton and in the afternoon by my wife Julie. I trust there will be a lot of insights that can be shared with the congregation and applied to our lives.

Devotional Thoughts: New Freedom, A Unique Lent, Passover, & Holy Week

Exodus 12:24-27 – "Keep this word. It's the law for you and your children, forever. When you enter the land which God will give you as he promised, keep doing this. And when your children say to you, 'Why are we doing this?' tell them: 'It's the Passover-sacrifice to God who passed over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt when he hit Egypt with death but rescued us.'"

With the period of cloistering in our homes being extended, it feels like Lent has been much longer than the normal forty days. This year I found myself uniquely focusing on what the original Passover must have meant, remembering God's faithfulness as death passed over families of faith staying close together in their homes. They had a great awareness of their need for God and God's guidance. It was a vital time for them as they claimed God's Covenant as the essential center of their lives and expanded their outlook on life and

creation. It was a time to prepare to leave certain annihilation, lost identity, and living in the shadows of slavery in Egypt. They did so in order to live in the fullness and freedom of faith. Passover was the start of a great transition, a life-changing, life redeeming movement of lives and hearts; it was culturally disruptive as it asserted God at the center. The people reset their priorities, leaving behind a lifestyle of confinement, to be claimed by God more deeply. They gained a new perspective, and moved into new opportunities. The ancient memory of what happened to them then, is with us today. Today as we move forward from the virus and through other dynamics of transformation, can choose to reenact or recreate that time of new freedom in faith in our own way now.

As the Israelites moved forward, the reasons for leaving and the opportunities they sought to claim were quickly forgotten as they set out from Egypt. Narrow minds with short memories cried out to Moses, "We want to go back! Why did you take us from there?" They actually longed to be back in slavery, where they knew who they were, and didn't have the challenges of freedom and the broad horizon of salvation to deal with. We too resist transformation, even when God provides and leads. Freedom often brings lots of responsibility; it can feel chaotic, intimidating, and very uncertain. We can either allow fears to take over our lives, or we can choose to live faithfully in the courage that salvation and trust in God provides. Today, we may long for an earlier time and hope to go back to what we've known. Yet there is a full life and new opportunities before us. Jesus took the Passover remembrance to a deeper level in relationship when he offered communion and the New Covenant in the Upper Room. He promised to be with us always.

And so we ask ourselves what God is asking us personally and as a community to let go of, in order to draw closer to him and in fellowship together. At this new stage of our journey of faith we want to allow God to claim our lives in new ways moving forward; God calls upon us to let go and not long for the past, the "normal" we often romanticize about. While none of us are likely to mold a golden calf, we need to learn from the Israelites and not be tempted to fill our grief and desires with an idol, a cheap substitute for real salvation and real relationships in Christ that are offered to us. Christ invites us to love him and seek to grow and mature into his likeness. We know this calling is the best way we can prepare for challenges and also opportunities to grow and mature by God's grace and love.

"If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over the place. But, when they attend to the things of God (see what God is doing) they are most blessed." Proverbs 29:18 (The Message)

The old Methodist practice of daily devotions and prayer are as important as ever to us all; they provide us with opportunities to deepen our relationship with God as we read the Word and envision our days. We may even be able to write down some of our thoughts, the concerns and joys and ideas, for further reflection and action. I pray we can focus on what *God* is doing, and not stay limited in our own narrow, confined point of view. I pray we have trusted, faithful friends to share our experiences with. Julie and I are hopeful the real estate market will open up soon, so that we can go forward with our plans and get settled and grow to know you all and the community. Please pray for us, and for the wisdom for us all as we go forward together. Thank you for being part of the global fellowship of faith in these challenging times. We look forward to sharing God's love and presence in the year ahead. Blessings, Pastor Tim