

## Current Message (2 Corinthians 1:3-7)

We've been looking at Paul's letter to the Ephesians for the past few weeks, and we'll pick this up again going forward, but today I sensed the need to speak to us as a people wearied by the pandemic and frustrated by its endurance. We've adjusted to new routines and practices, our children's classrooms are now the kitchen table, there has been some relaxation of restrictions, but in the back of our minds, many of us are still anxious about the possibility of a spike in infections, or certainly getting infected ourselves—that coupled with loads of information that isn't always consistent makes us wary of fully engaging in life as we knew it. And so, despite the fact that most of us remain well, we're still caught up in the abundance of caution approach which is getting old. To be clear, I'm not disparaging that approach or dismissing the severity of the crisis—I'm right there with you in this. On the other hand, I am also not criticizing or disparaging those who are comfortable living with a higher degree of risk.

I am saying that, generally speaking, our society is reaching a change point in our perspective, one that suspects the things we reluctantly tolerated at first are shifting from temporary annoyance to something of a more permanent nature. Unwelcome as that is, we're also facing the prospect that our return to life as it was before all this began is not likely. Life and many of its dimensions are morphing into something different, but the final form of this is yet to be determined. So we are weary and wary and that combination can generate toxic outcomes. Even people of faith are susceptible—in fact some of our weariness is multiplied by the absence of practices and fellowship that sustain us in times of challenge.

In recent months we have talked about the opportunities this malaise has allowed like the opportunity to draw near to God in ways our rush hour lives prevented. We've learned to use technology to remain in virtual touch with one another. The general slowdown has allowed some to develop new hobbies or learn new skills, like cooking at home, or sharing the responsibilities of the home in new ways. For some, there has been a new appreciation for family as parents and children suddenly have lots more time together. Of course, there have been challenges in this as well—parents and children suddenly have lots more time together, and how to fill that time meaningfully and in ways that are equally beneficial is challenging. And while all of this and more has been useful, much of our focus is on occupying ourselves with stuff to do and less about reflecting on what this all might mean in the big picture.

In many respects, this is why fatigue is gaining traction, because the big picture isn't back yet—and we're at the point of wondering if it is coming back the way we hoped it would. What if we had a different perspective on the big picture? What if we learned to accept whatever is developing, and not see it as a negative or positive per se, but, as Richard Rohr suggests we see this transitional development as a universal pattern of change and transformation? He defines this pattern as order, disorder, and re-order—this isn't necessarily unique to Rohr; other writers have offered a similar model. But Rohr's terms are helpful to people of faith because they help us to think big picture allowing us to find ourselves in our moment of history. They also help us to consider what God is up to in this process which causes us to see how we fit into God's idea rather than demanding that God fit into ours.

When you think about it, you innately know the truth of Rohr's pattern because it has always been operating in and around you causing growth. Sometimes it's been welcome and intentional, sometimes not. But in both cases you developed, you matured, you grew in ways you otherwise would not have. What's true for individuals holds true for groups or communities. The early followers of Jesus found themselves in a disordered world—it had represented order to them prior to their commitment of faith in Jesus, but having decided to follow Jesus, they sought a way forward amid a disordered world. They weren't looking for a different reality, but for an alternative way of living in light of a disordered world. They believed in a re-ordered world, that the resurrection of Jesus had made this actual, and its effect in the world possible, but as we've noted before, this is a work in progress. Whatever sense of order we settle in, is a temporary oasis in the place of disorder. But over time—and God alone knows the timing—the temporary oasis of order eventually displaces the desert of disorder to the place where the renewal of re-order becomes the eternal constant. This, as we discovered

in our time last week, is the goal towards which God is moving, but where we are in the scope of things is an open question. Most of the time, progress is incremental and hardly noticeable. As a community we adapt and grow. But there are also catalytic moments where shifts occur in a rapid and tangible manner.

These catalytic moments are what some have called “necessary falling” in order to move ahead. That is, until something happens to capture our attention, we are content with where we are and growth is assumed rather than pursued.

I think it’s safe to say that this global pandemic is a necessary falling in the disorder of our world that can result in growth for humanity as a whole if we’ll pay necessary attention to what it’s saying, and that the followers of Jesus—as a community of faith—are also experiencing this necessary falling prompting growth as we likewise attend to it. Let me also quickly qualify this by saying that I don’t believe God intentionally sent this plague as a judgment of sorts or to capture our attention. I believe it is a natural occurrence in the course of life—it is unwelcome and pernicious, as is Ebola, or smallpox, or the Spanish flu that broke out in the early years of the last century, and like them the particular coronavirus that leads to COVID-19 is a nasty piece of work that’s emerged in our world.

It’s impact in the world is tragic to which the loss of so many lives testifies. That number is staggering by itself, but to appreciate the full impact of it we must add to it the grief of those who love the ones who’ve died—there’s an enormous amount of sorrow in our world over this amplified by the loss of support we typically receive from those close to us because of social restrictions put in place to stem the spread of infection. We are social beings meant to be together, to interact with each other, but by varying degrees we are isolated amid this that deepens the injury. If we’re paying attention, we’re joining in the chorus of groaning to which Paul refers in Romans 8, where the world is longing for relief and renewal. The groaning is our longing for what’s better—it is the prayer of seeking re-order in disorder.

Growth for followers of Jesus through this causes us to think beyond our own discomfort. This isn’t necessarily easy because that discomfort is so immediate. Living in this moment finds us reflecting on issues of control, security, self-determination, meaning for life, and our convictions. We’re realizing that we can’t control ultimate outcomes as we imagined. The security we’ve built up around ourselves in terms of finances and future is elusive—a pandemic puts these in jeopardy and the petition: give us this day our daily bread as it refers to what we require for life and well-being takes on new importance—upon what or whom have we placed our security for life? Learning to earnestly believe God for what we need is actually quite new for many Christ followers in our day—we’ve become fairly self-sufficient, our pantries are generally full—perhaps, though, in light of this catalytic moment, it’s time to re-think our dependence upon God. Is life still meaningful when we’re incapable of engaging in it as we did? What’s left when you’ve binge-watched all of what Netflix has to offer? Have we become a people for whom entertainment and amusement has come to define life’s meaning? Some have seen faith convictions challenged; perhaps this signals the need for a shift away from Why is this happening, to where is this leading and how can God use me in this?

Here is where we want to listen to Paul in 2 Corinthians 1 that Melissa read for us today. This necessary falling drives us back to consider the God who has claimed us in Christ. This God is the Father of compassion—a word that means to suffer with, meaning that in all of this, God suffers with us in the throes of malaise. God is not distant or unconcerned, but together with us in this necessary falling reminding us that God is the source of comfort—a word that means strong together indicating that as we draw near, God’s strength becomes our own; our weakness is overtaken by God’s strength—the circumstances in which we find ourselves don’t necessarily change, but we change amid them as our focus shifts from what God does for me to what God does through me. This leads us into a cycle of service where we are both giving and receiving. We become the means of God’s comfort to others and as we serve we find ourselves receiving God’s comfort from others serving us. Perhaps this gains traction among us as we pray for opened eyes to see who is suffering near us. That becomes the place of our service—we become to them the presence of the compassionate God who suffers with them providing strength in that presence with resources that lessen their suffering. The kind of

resources needed may be material—food delivered, medication purchased, maybe help with rent or the mortgage payment. Maybe it's providing assistance with childcare depending on people's comfort level with that, or assistance with their child's education. Maybe it's as simple as a phone call that simply says "I miss you—how are things?" You may not be able to provide the level of help someone needs, but you may be the one who can help find it. And undergirding all of it is the prayer for God's purpose to be realized in this moment, in this person, in this situation even when you're unsure of what that exactly means right now.

This cycle of mercy and service is a means of finding order in a disordered world groaning for re-order, that brings the very thing longed for. AMEN