



Beverly Heights
Presbyterian
Church

scattered seeds.

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 2021

Reflections on

2020

A year we won't soon forget.



Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

BY NATHANAEL DEVLIN



One highlight of 2020 was our six weeks of outdoor services from Aug. 2 until Sept. 6.

I've come to appreciate my full given name, Nathanael.

Few ever spell it correctly, since it is the biblical spelling, slightly different than the more familiar "Nathaniel."

The unusual spelling has often caused me to go back to the few biblical references of the man after whom I am named.

The main but short reference is found in John 1. 43-51. Nathanael is at first a skeptic and says of Jesus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But Jesus recognizes him as a straight shooter, in whom there is no guile. Nathanael then becomes an early adopter of Jesus and His ministry, calling Him the son of God.

I like the biblical Nathanael, and have come to believe that not only his name but his character flow through me. That's why when Tom asked me to write for this month's newsletter and consider what good has come out of the tribulations of 2020, my immediate (albeit internal) response was that of my namesake: "Can anything good come out of 2020!?"

But, having listened to Tom's vision for this issue and reflected on the question, I've become a quick convert and so I'd like to share three reflections from a personal, congregational and communal perspective.

Personally, 2020 has taught me the invaluable lesson of resolve.

I watched a Netflix series a few months ago about coaching called "The Playbook."

It focused on one coach who shared some insight about what she learned during a time of upheaval in her soccer program. The changes were significant but she believed necessary if the team was going to be successful in the future.

Not everyone shared her optimism and her job security was in danger. That's when she remembered the motto she learned from a Navy Seal: "Hold fast, stay true."

In a storm, sailors tell each other to "hold fast," meaning to grab on to rigging or something secure to prevent being swept overboard.

"Stay true" was the direction to the helm, to stay true to the compass heading to avoid being blown off course.

Paul said something similar in times of trial: "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong." (1 Corinthians 16. 13 ESV) And in another passage: "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm." (Ephesians 6. 13 ESV).

Without the raging winds of 2020, I would never have learned what it meant to hold fast and stay true to the Lord.

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”

Corporately, I believe 2020 has taught our congregation the necessity of reintegration.

We've all seen the signs that read, "In case of emergency break glass." When things are going well, the natural temptation is to live with a measure of distance from God. In good times, there is the temptation to come to church and observe beautiful things or hear wonderful words as though we are looking at exhibits behind glass, as we do at a museum.

We look but do not touch. In 2020, however,

we had an emergency. The armor of God couldn't just stay behind the glass. As a congregation, we had to break it and put the armor on.

This year afforded us an opportunity to reintegrate faith into our regular and daily lives in a way that I suspect has been unlike any other year. I have seen that reintegration among our staff, in our Session and in our congregation.

Thanks to 2020 we are living out our faith in ways that are richer, more faith-full, humbler and more dependent upon God. It's just how God likes it.

Finally, I believe that 2020 has given Beverly Heights Church a reputation.

I have said before, and continue to believe, in what I call "Beverly Heights exceptionalism."

I believe we enjoy such exceptionalism because God has been exceptionally gracious to this congregation. As a result, we have enjoyed distinction as a congregation fully committed to Him and His kingdom.

We showed God's exceptionalism during a difficult church split in 2003. We showed God's exceptionalism when we left the PC(USA) in 2006. And we showed that exceptionalism during this past year.

Such exceptionalism will by necessity make us different than other congregations. I'm not suggesting we're better, just different.

Some will see this exceptionalism and rejoice; others might call it into question.

But in the end, I believe in our mission. We as a church exist to be a living witness to the glory of God in Jesus Christ by which men, women and children will find the fullness of life in Him.

This is our purpose: to point to Christ in all we think, say and do. This is why we are here in our community.

I believe 2020 has allowed for new opportunities as a church; none greater than to clearly show forth Christ and His kingdom. And to all of you I say: Well done! What great things have come out of Beverly Heights Church in 2020!

2020 TIMELINE

January

March for Life
in Washington,
D.C.



March

← Ugandan mission
trip to tour our
water wells.

GLOBAL COVID-19
PANDEMIC HITS AND
QUARANTINE BEGINS.



February

← New organ
console
installed.

Rick Wolling
visits Thailand
to celebrate
Prai Bible
translation.



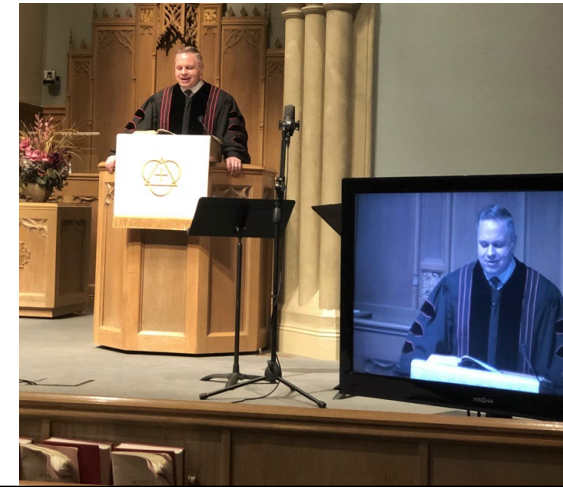
← Live stream
only services
commence for
nine weeks.

First of 20
O'Bservations
reports in
2020 on
pandemic.

April

↑ Easter services
conducted via
live-stream only.

Pastor Nate starts
Pastor's Study
video episodes.
Musical Musings
debuts.



May



June

Vacation Bible School
cancelled.

↑ GROW Living Stones
shredding fundraiser.



Live-stream ACE class starts
on John Bunyan's *The
Pilgrim's Progress*.

↗
CORPORATE WORSHIP
RESUMES IN
SANCTUARY MAY 24.

2020 TIMELINE

July

Children's Wednesday programming begins.



September

Services move back indoors.

↓
Fall picnic on our parking lot.

Preschool resumes and Sunday school for all ages.

Remote Learning Together starts as well as Fusion and Wednesday Night Heights.

See You At the Cross.

2020 TIMELINE

November

Thanksgiving service.

Organist Alex Buiel arrives.



August

↑
Pool party.

←
Six weeks of outdoor services start.

Outdoor concert on our parking lot.



October

↑
Pumpkin Patch.

New Century Club reconvenes with marvelous food and indoor concert.



December

Peter Chace approved as new director of Next Generation Ministries.

←
Nativity with Live Animals and Congregational Carol Sing.

↑
Hallelujah! Christmas Eve Candlelight Service.



Katie Parrish on her Revelation Wellness retreat. Those are not tattoos on her arm!

Eating squash – and liking it.

BY KATIE PARRISH

short workout that was all done on-line at home. As this opportunity spoke to both of my weak areas, I signed up immediately.

This was the first time I invited the Lord into my physical health and wellness journey.

I’m not sure why that hadn’t occurred to me before, but it made total sense. He cares about our whole being – heart, soul, mind and strength. The vision of Revelation Wellness is to use fitness as a tool to spread the gospel.

The more time I spent with the Lord and moved my body as an act of worship, the more connected I was to Jesus. The Lord was bringing me back into intimacy with Him.

Let’s get back to the squash. For as long as

I can remember, my dad has always loved steamed butternut squash mashed with a little butter, salt and pepper for every holiday meal. If he was a guest, he brought his own.

I do not like this kind of squash. It’s too much like baby food and quite frankly, makes me gag.

Obviously, I’m not talking about how I learned to eat squash in 2020. Rather, I am learning how to eat spiritual squash. I am doing things that make me gag on the inside to grow in my faith and stretch me.

“Eating squash” forces me to give up control and let Jesus lead. He calls us to step out of our comfortable and get uncomfortable doing the work to share His love with others.

For me personally, 2020 was probably one of the best years I have had in a while. Was it because we finally remodeled our kitchen or enjoyed an overabundance of family time? No, but those were pretty great. It was because I learned to eat squash.

A year ago, I was pretty empty spiritually and physically. Don’t misunderstand; He has never been far from my thoughts, but I was getting stale and lazy. My affections were suspect, and I knew it.

Additionally, over many decades, I have gone through several cycles of obsession and neglect with my physical body. Caring for my physical body has always been a struggle.

Enter Covid-19. For the first time in decades, I had time. Time to reflect, examine and reconnect with Jesus again. I knew God had given me this time for a reason and I wanted to make the most of it.

Not too far into quarantine, the Lord reintroduced me to a ministry called Revelation Wellness through a longtime friend.

They were having a 30-day challenge, a daily devotional and a

I’m eating squash as I write this! I’d much rather be reporting numbers from a spreadsheet to you.

Over the summer, Revelation Wellness started advertising Instructor Training. While I dismissed it initially, the Lord wouldn’t let it get out of my head. I ate the squash and signed up for training.

After 10 weeks of work at home, I participated in a four-day retreat and now I’m a Certified Revelation Wellness Instructor. Do I know how all this will play out and how He will use my training? No way.

But I am trusting the Lord will show me the way if I’m obedient. I’ll eat all the squash I can to glorify Him. Will you join me in eating your own squash?



Sheila Hutchison with her 3-year-old daughter, Annie.

Practicing our faith when we need to.

BY ANNIE WHITEHEAD

For the weeks and months that followed, I went deep into God’s word. Never in my life had Scripture been so real, so tangible, so “effulgent.”

And, as Bonar so perfectly expressed, every verse seemed to “contain a sunbeam,” and every promise stood out in “illuminated splendor.” My soul was enriched and grown in ways I had never known and my understanding of a Creator who not only loves us, but is WITH us was deepened.

The experience at the time certainly didn’t look good, absolutely didn’t feel good ... but it was good.

And so, I found myself like all of you in March of this year watching the news in complete disbelief and horror as bodies were rolled

into makeshift morgues. People cried for their loved ones dying alone, struggling to breathe in bulging-at-the-seams ICU units.

Doctors, covered head to toe like they were handling uranium, shook their heads incredulously as we all silently pondered, “Is my loved one next? Am I next?”

The anxiety for weeks was crippling. No one could tell us when it would end. Again, I found myself deep in the Word, poring over meanings and finding comfort in every promise. I’d felt this torment before and knew the only balm for my disquieted soul could be found in those sacred pages.

But as in all storms, God is on the throne. He is good and he is sovereign. And what better time to gain a more meaningful

“How fast we learn in a day of sorrow! Scripture shines out in a new effulgence; every verse seems to contain a sunbeam, every promise stands out in illuminated splendor; things hard to be understood become in a moment plain.” Horatius Bonar

In 2007, I was 27 years old and had graciously been shielded from some of this world’s greatest “sorrows” until I received a phone call from my father.

His voice hushed and quaking, he informed me that during my healthy 59-year-old mother’s routine gallbladder surgery, the surgeon had found three-fourths of her liver decimated by cancer.

I was physically overwhelmed by what he’d just told me, gripped by grief I hadn’t yet known in my lifetime. We knew our time was short with her, and we knew with certainty that time would include watching her suffer.

Having been raised in a Christian home, I was well aware of God’s sovereignty. My own dying mother reminded me, freshly vomited blood drying in the corners of her lips, “This doesn’t look good, this doesn’t feel good ... but it IS good.”

This reality was always easy for me to accept up until that point. Of course, God is sovereign. And, of course He’s good and of course “goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” But, this? THIS is good?

understanding of finding joy in trials than we find ourselves in now?

As believers, we can’t practice our faith if we don’t need to. Storms like 2020 will only continue to roll in and out of our lives, but learning how God wants us to respond is something that must be honed.

I’m grateful for the opportunity to press into the Lord and be reminded yet again, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Take heart, we know the ending to the story! Blessings for a 2021 full of perseverance and trust!



Cara, Charlie and Mae observing lawn ornaments on Hoodridge Drive.

The majesty of slowing down.

BY CARA WEBSTER

“Cherish every moment. They grow up so fast.”

It’s a phrase often directed toward me or any parent toting little ones back when such encounters were routine.

“Cherish every moment?” I recall thinking with a polite smile. “I’m just trying to survive here.”

It goes without saying that life during Covid has been different. The hustle of everyday life – preschool, play dates, extracurricular commitments, social engagements, even errands – was instantly replaced with an open calendar.

Both the March shutdown and November surge have also coincided with my part-time work stalling. Charlie, age 4, Mae, 1, and I suddenly and unexpectedly had something those nostalgic parents long for: time.

Our habit of walking around the neighborhood didn’t start with the pandemic but it surely intensified into a daily routine. Originally, I was looking for

a way to create habits, a strategy to manage uncertain situations. And getting some fresh air and exercise? Bonus!

I’ve always relied on exercise as a therapy of sorts.

As I often say to Charlie, “Exercise is just as good for the brain as the body.” Running, in particular, helps me clear my head and focus on the present, something I struggle with.

At some point, I grew to love hiking as well. I reveled in the quiet beauty of the natural world, along with the opportunity to challenge myself and still my mind.

I’ve hiked mountains on all four of the continents I have traveled to and have never felt closer to God than on the peak of a mountaintop, awestruck by the majesty of His kingdom before me. Mountains drew me to the Pacific Northwest for graduate school and provided a frequent respite from my studies. Since returning to Pittsburgh in 2012, the difficulty level of my hikes has eased quite substantially, but the draw to get out remains.

The pandemic gave me a precious gift, something I haven’t had in quite a while: time to roam. A chunk of our day every day is devoted to “seeing our neighborhood,” as Charlie likes to say. An hour of our day every day where we actually interact with neighbors, wave to the garbage man, or marvel at the array of construction vehicles on Hoodridge Drive.

We tell riddles, sing songs, and play “I Spy” or word games. We ponder about where people are headed or delight in their holiday decorations or take in the beauty of the season or warmth of the sunshine. We pray for people we know. We pray for people we don’t know. We say hello to strangers and make friends. In short, we slow down.

The walk sets the pace for the day and reminds me to take it slow and enjoy this time. And while the scenery cannot compete with the grandeur of a mountaintop, there’s plenty of godly majesty right here in Lebo. You just need the time to see it.

Employee OF THE Moment

AWARDED TO:

Tom O’Boyle

FOR the RELATIVELY THANKLESS TASK OF:

Battling Covid 19

IT
TOTALLY
MATTERS!

Your Efforts Are Not in Vain

ON THIS last DAY OF Staff 2020

BY: Nate Penli

“Battling Covid 19” was the commendation each staff member received from Pastor Nate for 2020.

Aiming at Heaven.

BY TOM O’BOYLE

One year ago, if you’d asked me how I liked working for this church, I would have said: I love spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. I love working alongside Pastor Nate. I love the work. I love serving the people of this church.

But did I feel like one of the “guys” on the staff? Not so much. Which made sense, as there weren’t many guys. Just me, Bob Kelley and Nate attended the weekly staff meetings then, with me being an entire generation older than my boss, the “senior” pastor.

Truth be told, there were days when I felt like a thorn among roses. The staff was everything I was not. Young. Women (mostly). Moms. Cute. Hip.

Then a global pandemic descended on us. Would the old man measure up? Would it be every woman and man for her/himself or would we jell?

Almost a year has passed and I am pleased to report that we did jell, marvelously so, in ways that only God could have orchestrated. He had brought us together and used our unique gifts in miraculous ways.

When Pastor Nate handed out “Employee of the Moment” certificates at our final 2020 staff meeting in December, the inscription thanked

each of us for “battling Covid-19.” He then mentioned that when you suffer together, you build esprit that is borne of common hardship.

I’d call it the “Band of Brothers” principle, from the great wartime HBO series of the same name. Though we weren’t parachuting into Normandy and defeating Hitler’s Third Reich, I have surely witnessed heroism this year. And it’s valor of the best kind: soldiers who were battling for Christ and “Aiming at Heaven.”

The list of items that make up the 2020 timeline, starting on page 4, illustrates what I’m talking about. Every item on the list represents sacrifice by a staff member.

One sacrifice was physical risk. The medical profession has lived with this daily, but as “essential” workers we, too, were put in harm’s way. So were our families. Yet not once did I hear a word of complaint from anyone over being potentially exposed to an unknown pathogen.

The risk was also psychological. We had to learn how to pivot in ways that were way outside our collective comfort zones and job descriptions, taking on new and sometimes overwhelming activities.

There was no doubt my colleagues stepped

up and Nate had led us courageously. But surveying the past year, what strikes me most is God’s great sovereignty over what has occurred. He had brought us together for this exact purpose, at this exact moment in time, to serve Him and His church.

Indeed, the items on the timeline occurred because this band of sisters (and brothers) put their unique gifts and skills to godly use. As a group, we aimed high. While we weighed the risks and what precautions we should take, we weren’t consumed by considerations of personal safety.

We instead followed the instruction of the great C.S. Lewis. In *Mere Christianity*, he advises that Christians must “Aim at Heaven” to accomplish anything worthwhile on earth.

“If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next,” Mr. Lewis writes. “It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this [one]. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”

What great privilege it’s been to have served among fellow soldiers for Christ whose gaze and aim were firmly fixed on heaven.



Lisa Tyger among friends during the outdoor service last August.

Making a deliberate choice for Jesus.

BY LISA TYGER

While I'll be quick to state I'm no fan of the rock band Rush, a line of theirs is one I've pondered this year, on the subject of choices.

"You can choose a ready guide in some celestial voice, if you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice" is the lyric from the song, "Freewill."

Choosing not to decide is still making a choice.

It's clear to me that accepting something by default is not the same as making a deliberate choice, as the song says. And, this is what I have been pondering: are we as Christians following society's lead and choosing by default?

As I've talked to the children here at Beverly Heights about missionaries, I have told them that the freedom of religion we so often take for granted is a privilege that many believers

in the world do not enjoy.

In many countries, to "choose who you will serve" is not a decision lightly made. The consequences of that choice may be arrest, imprisonment, torture or death for you and your family.

In the past, I could never imagine in any scenario a U.S. citizen being hauled off from worship in handcuffs ... until it happened this year. Part of the clarity of 2020 is that choosing Jesus carries a cost, even in this country.

Increasingly often, and perhaps accelerated by the pandemic, standing up for our Christian belief is a choice we have to carefully consider and be prepared to face the consequences.

We must guard ourselves from following society's lead and choosing complacency

A little over a month into Covid, Tom asked us to consider writing a piece for Scattered Seeds reflecting on what the global pandemic was teaching us.

I began my piece quoting a wall hanging in our living room. It says, "If in the end you haven't chosen Jesus, it will not matter what you chose."

I noted that for me, most days during Covid were exercises in making positive choices over negative ones, all the while recognizing that I had already made the one and only choice that mattered.

It would seem that with the vaccine, the end of the pandemic is coming into clearer view. As the end comes nearer, I find that I'm still contemplating the subject of choices.

This past year, the staff has often discussed how Covid has given us the gift of clarity. The clarity to really live in the knowledge that Jesus comes first – in everything. I find this clarity to be true corporately at Beverly Heights, as a member of the church staff, as well as for myself and my family.



Jen Tan, with her "sous chefs," preparing the magnificent meal which preceded the New Century Club concert in October.

Learning in war-time.

BY JEN TAN

The negative aspects and outcomes of 2020 have been all too apparent. Sickness. Pain. Death. Loss of income. Loss of freedoms. Uncertainty. Division. Isolation.

But what of the good? Can there be good from such a year as this?

I recall what seems like a lifetime ago, back in March, when we as a staff were considering what our next steps as a leadership team might be.

In that meeting, Nate said something that resonated with me then, and still does today: "Nothing has changed!"

He was referencing a masterful sermon C.S. Lewis preached in Oxford, England, just after the Nazis had invaded Poland, the opening salvo for World War II.

The sermon was entitled, "Learning

in War-Time."

In it, Mr. Lewis, who fought in World War I, asks: "What does war do to death? It certainly does not make it more frequent; 100% of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased. ... Yet war does do something to death. It forces us to remember it."

In the same way, Covid hasn't accelerated the fact that we are, and always have been, an eyelash flicker away from eternity.

It has merely plucked away the carefully constructed illusions we have erected in modern living.

This is what we are witnessing: the crumbling of the tower of Babel that is the monument to our perceived control over our own safety.

On its face, this might appear to be yet another source of despair. Instead, inexplicably, it fills me with HOPE.

You see, we who are followers of Christ tread where he has trod. We do so in full knowledge that we walk toward our own death each and every day.

In other words, we know how the story ends before we reach the final page. The hope that this certainty brings is, for me, the most positive result of all that has occurred in 2020.

To that end, I exclaim, with Keith and Kristyn Getty, the lyrics from "O Church Arise":

*When faced with trials on ev'ry side,
We know the outcome is secure,
And Christ will have the prize
for which He died –
An inheritance of nations.*

Friends, plagues will not reign. Our outcome in Christ is secure. Rest in that.



Chad Winkler and his horn-blowing mates as they give glory to God during an outdoor service.

Choosing not to participate.

BY CHAD WINKLER

Several years ago, during the financial crisis around 2008, I was listening to a conservative radio talk show when the host took a call from someone who was concerned about how he and his family were going to approach the news of the financial collapse.

The caller sounded around my age, so my interest was piqued. The host explained that his approach was that he would be “choosing not to participate” in the financial crisis.

I thought to myself: how can that be? How do you not “participate” in something that was all around us, something that we were told would negatively affect our lives and our financial future, and was seemingly unavoidable?

I thought about that comment a great deal at the time. It’s stuck with me ever since.

It’s not that the message of “choosing not to participate” meant that there wasn’t a financial crisis (there was). Or that some people wouldn’t be negatively impacted (there were), or that it could just be ignored (it couldn’t be).

The point was twofold: the idea of America and the strength of its people are more

powerful than any financial crisis. The caller needed to stop listening to the hysteria and the hype and get on with his life because he’ll be better off for it.

The essence was: change your thinking and perspective, and you’ll be just fine.

So, when it comes to Covid-19, I’m choosing not to participate as I lead my family through these challenging times. And I’m grateful to belong to a church with leadership that isn’t participating either.

It’s not that the Beverly Heights leadership doesn’t think there’s a pandemic, or believes that the virus isn’t serious, or that the virus doesn’t have a much greater impact on some than it does on others. We can all acknowledge all of those things.

Beverly Heights Church has demonstrated that the message of Christ via the Gospel is more powerful than any virus and greater than any fear associated with any virus. That is a message that strongly resonates with me.

Choosing not to participate in Covid-19 takes courage. It takes a church and leadership which is willing to tell the truth, that we aren’t guaranteed another day on

this earth past today.

If we thought attending Beverly Heights on a Sunday morning was 100% “safe” pre-pandemic, I can say assuredly it was not.

Pittsburgh-ers perhaps know that better than many others as we consider the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting that happened just two short years ago.

As I consider this past year, I think of how often the Bible says to have courage and to not fear.

This instruction to rejoice in our sufferings is perhaps no better represented than in James 1. 2-4: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Beverly Heights Church is a steadfast, noble and courageous church. The last 10 months have been challenging and difficult, but also clarifying and revealing.

I couldn’t be prouder to be part of a church that is choosing not to participate in Covid-19.



Andrew Marcinko (1936 – 2020) went to be with the Lord on Dec. 28.

Wednesday Night Heights with Andy.

BY BOB KELLEY

Some of the most intense conversations and meetings I’ve ever been part of in my 16 years working on the staff of this church have occurred during this year of trial.

What have I learned through this process? Our unified leadership has been won through consensus, by sweating the details and by seeking the mind of Christ.

One particular example comes to mind.

When autumn arrived, the staff wrestled greatly with how we would safely and responsibly conduct our Wednesday Night Heights dinners and programming and whether we’d even have it.

In the end, the consensus that emerged was that we had been called to be courageous leaders for those who might come.

There are many reasons to be grateful that God led us to that decision: we enjoyed the children’s choir rehearsals, tone chimes, recreation and crafts, great food and most importantly, the sweet fellowship of believers who gathered together.

As it turned out, these Wednesday dinners were also the last chance we had to be with and speak to Andy Marcinko.

Andy passed on Dec. 28 of an inoperable brain tumor. He was 84 years old.

The Marcinkos came to Beverly Heights in the beginning of 2020, then joined the church formally just a few months ago in September 2020.

Andy and Joan engaged with their church family and the church leadership. The call to gather that God put on our hearts and

directed us through His Word, also brought Andy and Joan to several weeks of those dinners up to the day before Andy went to the hospital and was diagnosed.

Andy’s passing grieves all of us. We pray regularly for Joan and her family.

But amid this trial, I am grateful that God blessed our faithfulness as a church. We were provided this great opportunity to get to know him better and better minister to him since we learned of his diagnosis.

I am thankful that by God’s grace and His spirit, Andy and Joan were drawn to a simple dinner to be with their church family. And I’m thankful that, even in the midst of a global pandemic, we heeded God’s call to be there for them.

BETWEEN | SUNDAYS

BY RICK WOLLING

Did you experience joy this year?



Our outdoor services last summer were filled with joy.

Many things believed and confessed by Christians are counterintuitive, both to the unbelieving world and even to those of us within the household of faith.

That is, they are contrary to common-sense expectation yet nevertheless true. That Jesus was both man and God is one example. The doctrine of the Trinity, one God existing in three Persons, is another.

So, too, is the notion I expressed in a recent sermon here, that as difficult as Covid-19 has made our lives in 2020, there is great joy to be found in the journey we have been traveling.

To consider school closures, the prohibition to gathering for worship, to say nothing of fear of catching the virus – to think of those experiences as somehow joyful is, perhaps, beyond counterintuitive. It's ludicrous.

Maybe, but it's joyful too.

Of course, it all boils down to one's definition of joy. The common understanding of joy places great emphasis upon gladness, happiness and glee. We watch a child open a birthday present she longed for and her excited, giddy response is labeled "joy."

But at the heart of joy, at least as we understand it biblically, is an appreciation for the fact that God's plans are being worked out in our lives.

Since God is infinitely good, gracious and

kind, we believe, as the Scriptures teach, that His will is perfect. In reality, we would not want anything else to occur in our lives apart from that perfect will.

So, when we recognize that His purposes and plans are being sovereignly worked out in our lives, our reaction is joy – joy because His will for us reveals His great mercy, grace and love for us. That is not to say we can always understand how what we experience demonstrates that grace and love.

Which takes us back to the "joy" of this past year. Can you see anything good coming out of these past 12 months? You may have to think about it for a moment. But if you do, you may have been surprised by the joy this year brought. I was.

From my sermon on the third Sunday of Advent, here are some of the things of 2020 that we might "count all joy." Not because they filled us with glee, cheerfulness or ecstasy but because we know that nothing in our lives transpires outside the good and perfect will our heavenly Father has for us:

- We've learned to trust the Lord more.
- We've learned how to persevere with God's help.
- We've gained clarity on what's most important in life.
- We've identified all for which we can be thankful.
- We've seen evidence of answers to prayer.
- We've come to appreciate how much the

church means to us.

- We've been reminded of the virulence of sin in the world.
- We've been reminded that the Lord Jesus is the only source of our hope.

The Apostle James speaks directly to our situation when he says: "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you are surrounded by many-colored trials for you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1. 2-3).

The joy of which the Bible speaks is sometimes difficult to bear. It was for Jesus.

His journey to the cross was called joy by the writer of Hebrews (12.1). It was a joy characterized by pain, shame and death. Yet, as Isaiah reminds us, "It was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief" (Isaiah 53. 10).

It was the perfect will of the Father for Him and for us.

I pray for all of us that 2021 will contain more glee and happiness and less difficulty and pain. But most of all, I pray that we might have restored to us the joy of our salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ and in that joy, we might worship and serve Him until our life's end.

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