

“Every Reset Begins with Jesus”

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John 6:24-35

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Wow, what a day this is! It's been 71 weeks since our last in person worship service on March 15, 2020. A year and 5 months since we last met like this. I remember March of 2020. I thought that maybe we might have to stop meeting in person for a couple of weeks, and at worst we could return to church by Easter, which would have been 4 weeks away. That Easter was to be our former music director Graeme's last Sunday. Did you know that today is the first Sunday in 28 years that Graeme has been in worship with us without being part of the music leadership? He's sitting there in the pews probably not knowing what to do with his fingers! Thanks Graeme, for so many faithful years of gracious service! We still haven't had the opportunity to celebrate Graeme, but we will.

But of course, Easter went by and any thoughts of a few weeks apart then returning soon vanished as we moved into summer, then into the fall. And it began to dawn on all of us that this pandemic was going to be unlike anything any of us had ever faced. It was, and is, unprecedented in every facet of our lives. Our work lives have been impacted, educational routines for students of all ages have been changed, jobs have been lost, businesses have been closed, relationships have been restricted, we weren't able to see family members, friends, especially the elderly, the isolated. And of course, church changed.

We went online for just about everything and zoom became the buzzword of worship. We got pretty creative with our online worship. Lots of people were involved, both in front of the camera and behind it. We began midweek meditations, started interviewing members of the congregation and community. I got to know the members of our praise band really well as we met every Thursday for a couple of hours to tape the music. I want to really thank our band members who so faithfully showed up week after week, to play without a congregation, but so that we could share their gifts in our worship to a congregation from all over the city, country and even the world. I remember Jannie, our new music director, working with our choir online to create beautiful choir anthems that incorporated all their voices. I also know just how time consuming it was to get every choir member to seem like they were all singing on time and in tune.

And we switched to online ministry with children and youth as well. Anne-Marie has spent countless hours preparing and hosting kids and youth with our faith formation time, making sure that RPC was offering some form of connection for our young people, especially when it would have been easy to do nothing, to say, oh well, they're probably so exhausted from being online all the time, why don't we just let them rest? But we didn't, we made sure that those

who wanted had some way of keeping connected and parents who encouraged their children to continue that connection need to be thanked and recognized as well.

And I remember the losses, the deaths, the people to whom we bid farewell over the course of the time we couldn't meet together. We missed being able to share the grief of those who lost people dear to them and we couldn't express our care and compassion in the ways we are used to. We missed the rituals that help us mark life's transitions that make finding closure easier and more meaningful. It's been especially difficult for those who have experienced loss, both due to the death of loved ones and also the inability to connect physically with people in our times of hardship, suffering or distress. It has been incredibly challenging.

But now, after all that, here we are, back together again. Not everyone, not yet. Some people aren't comfortable yet with coming back in person. Some families will wait to see what happens with their children, who haven't been vaccinated, before deciding whether and when to return. But it's a beginning, it's a reset.

But here's the thing, you didn't need to come back. I can't think of when the Christian church last went close to a year and a half without being able to meet together in person to worship. Maybe it was in the early 1900's when the last global pandemic, the Spanish Flu, hit. But even then, churches weren't closed continually for close to a year and a half. Over the past 17 months, you've learned to worship online. When our worship transitioned to online as the pandemic started, we had huge viewership numbers, many churches did. Some weeks we would have over 500 views of our online worship services, more than 3 times the number of people that would usually attend worship in person.

Slowly, however, those numbers have come down. That tells me that people, after the initial interest in what was being offered online, began to settle into a routine. People, after sometimes surfing through a number of different worship possibilities, began to pick the one they liked and stuck with it. And in some cases, people began to stop worshipping online altogether. After a year and a half of not worshipping in person, after months of being able to just pick and choose when you wanted to catch up on the worship services, or even if you wanted to catch up at all, some people, maybe a lot of people, came to the conclusion that they really didn't need to worship at all. That shouldn't really surprise us, after all, if people are prevented from gathering for worship for 71 weeks in a row, why would we be shocked to discover that some just chose to walk away for good?

But not you! Not us! You came back, we're still here! A year and a half is a long time and it has given us time to re-evaluate some things. Why have I longed to return to in person church worship? Why do I crave this? What is it about worshipping together that I find so important and crucial? I think for many people, whether we have returned to church or will return later,

we recognize, we know, we realize, that God is more necessary now than ever before. The pandemic has revealed the fragility of human life, not only in our mortality, although surely that, but in how easily and how thoroughly, our assumptions and routines can be upended and thrown into turmoil. Having come face to face with our fragility we recognize our need to be connected, grounded in something beyond just ourselves, just our own ability and power. Our text from John's gospel account tells of the time when Jesus had just fed the crowd and then had gone across the Sea of Galilee to the other side. The next day the crowd searched for Jesus and found him in Capernaum. Jesus knew why they were looking for him. He had fed them, he had met a need, given them what they needed. But Jesus also recognized that what the people were looking for wasn't what they truly needed. The people were in search of that which met their present need, **but Jesus was offering something more than that, something more enduring. Don't work for food that perishes, says Jesus, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.**

I wonder about our society's response to what we hope and pray will be the ending of the pandemic. I realize that we are privileged, that many other places in the world are nowhere close to the end of the pandemic, that they don't have access to the vaccines that we do, that their cases and deaths are still rising. We need to work to make sure that other countries can have access to what they need so that they too can emerge on the other side of the pandemic. But for us now, what kind of response will we have to the ending of this pandemic?

I get the sense that a lot of people just can't wait to get back to the way things were. Get back to work, get back to school, get back to old routines and relationships. I'm not saying those things are bad, but I wonder whether in just getting back to the way things were we're missing an opportunity for a reset, for a re-evaluation of the way things were and the way they can be going forward. **My fear is that too many people will just return to working for food that perishes. And that goes even for those of us who have returned to church this morning.** If we're excited to be back because we've missed each other, because we've missed this place, because we've missed the singing, the rituals, the fellowship, **well, that's all good, but even those good things are perishable things.**

It's time for a reset, but every reset needs to be built on the right foundation, Otherwise, the reset will send us in a direction which will be misguided. **There's a big difference between the bread from heaven, the manna in the wilderness that fed the people of God and the bread of God that gives life to the world.** Even manna is perishable, it only lasted a day, if you tried to hoard it, it spoiled and became infested with maggots. The crowds were following Jesus because he fed them, **but Jesus is interested in offering them food that doesn't perish, that endures for eternal life, that gives life to the world.** When the crowds heard Jesus, they said to him, Sir, give us this bread always. And Jesus said to them, **I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.**

It's time for a reset and every reset begins with Jesus. He is the reason we have craved to gather together for worship again. Yes, it's good to see you, I even like you, every one of you, and it's so good to sing together again and over the next few weeks we're going to sing the most familiar hymns and praise songs so that we can sing as passionately as we can, **but worship can't be only about praising and people, it's always about Jesus first and foremost. Every reset begins with Jesus. He is the food that doesn't perish but endures for eternal life, he is the bread of life that will never leave us hungry, and he is the one who will never leave us thirsty.**

We stand before a unique opportunity. Maybe we wouldn't have wanted to get here in the way we have, through a pandemic, but the reality is that we are here. **So, what will we do with the opportunity?** Things are slowly returning to a semblance of what it was like before the pandemic. Schools will reopen in the fall, people are returning to work. Businesses are opening up again and we can visit with people like we used to. And now, 71 weeks after closing our doors, our church building is open again. **But don't waste this opportunity by just going back to the way things were. Don't chase the food that perishes, that will leave you hungry the next day, that will leave you thirsty again and again. You don't have to be here, lots of people have chosen otherwise. But if you choose to be here, and those of you who are watching on our livestream or will watch later, if you choose to return here soon, do it with the clear purpose of resetting our lives, both individually and collectively, around the one who is the bread of life, the one who is the bread of God who gives life to the world.**

As a congregation our motto is, Deep with God, Wide with the World. As a congregation being forced to stay apart for 17 months again is a unique circumstance. We have an opportunity for a reset. We don't have to just return as quickly as we can to the way we were before, that would be a shame and a disappointment. We have an opportunity to reset our commitment as a congregation and every reset begins with Jesus. Later this fall, on Thanksgiving Sunday, I want to invite our congregation to engage in a covenant renewal, an act of renewing our collective faith and mission around the person and ministry of Jesus. **We can choose to be more intentional as a congregation around our collective faith in Jesus Christ who is the bread of God and gives life to the world.**

Did you hear that? Jesus, the bread of life, the bread of God, the food that does not perish but endures for eternal life, **Jesus gives life to the world.** So if we begin our reset with Jesus, it means that the vision of this congregation, of this community of disciples, of this part of the body of Christ, must be engaged in the mission of God to give life to the world. Deep with God, Wide with the World. **But it always begins with Jesus, every reset does.**

David Sellery writes, **God didn't send us Jesus, the Bread of Life, to work wonders, to preach and to teach, to die for our sins... so we could become a (bunch) of spiritual free-loaders.**

Yes, grace is a free gift from God. But it is unlike any other gift we have ever received. It has a transformational purpose. We are here to do God's work in the world. We are here to share the Bread of Life with a world that is stuffed with sin and starving for love.¹

My friends, it is so good to be here with you, but it is even better to be here with Jesus and the people Jesus loves. We have an opportunity for a reset, personally and collectively. Let's use the opportunity wisely. Let's begin with Jesus, with Jesus as Lord and Saviour, as God with us. **Let's begin with the food that Jesus offers, food that does not perish, with the one who is the Bread of Life, the one who frees us from fear and anxiety, death and darkness, so that we can live, truly live and love, truly love, so that we can share the good news of Jesus Christ with a world that needs food that doesn't perish.**

There's still a lot of uncertainty ahead of us. We will move in spurts and starts, there may be setbacks. There's still so much that is unknown and we don't know exactly how things will go. But we can go with Jesus, **we have to go with Jesus.** I remember my conversation with Jean Morris a few weeks ago. She preached on the same story but from a different gospel account. In that account Jesus was with his disciples as they crossed the Sea of Galilee after feeding the crowd. I remember Jean saying, Jesus invites his disciples to get in the boat and go to the other side. **The disciples don't know what awaits them on the other side, but they know who goes with them. We don't know where this will all end, but we do know who goes with us.**

Thanks be to God, Amen!

¹ The Reverend David F. Sellery, St. John's Church, Salisbury, Connecticut