

Below is a Transcript of the sermon given at Reservoir Church as well as the URL to the sermon directly.

<https://www.reservoirchurch.org/sermon/how-covid-changes-us-pandemic-pause-and-prayer/>

I'd like to begin reading a few of Jesus' words from the gospel of John. They're from the beginning of the 15th chapter.

John 15:1-5 (New Revised Standard Version)

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Together we've spent the last year and a half reacting to our truly global pandemic –the first time any of us has done this. And for months, this church has been planning that after some summer

experiments in staying online while also reopening in person, we'd find our new normal together this fall.

What is that new normal, and how do we get there?

Well, truthfully, we're all still learning and figuring that out. But we have a few convictions, hopes, and inclinations. And today, in this sermon, I'll do two things. I'll share a few hopes for our new normal as a church this fall. And I'll call us to a few weeks of pause and prayer before we get there.

March a year ago, as many of us were starting to hunker down in our homes, bracing ourselves for the worst, I read a really helpful article.

It was called "Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization is Now a Startup." It was written by people that advise entrepreneurs who follow Jesus and because of their faith, are looking to do something positive for the common good through their business.

The authors said we can engage in this pandemic like it's a blizzard, like it's a tough winter, or like it is a whole little ice age.

A blizzard is a devastating but short-term winter weather event. Winds blow ferociously, snow piles up and interrupts our lives, but it ends quickly, we tunnel out and clean up, and most things are mostly OK again. In this part of the country, the blizzard of 1978 is infamous. I grew up around here and was four and a half years old at the time. I have vague memories of feet of snow piled up, of everyone being homebound for a week, hearing about cars stranded on highways, and all that. It was a big event, horrible for some, but it was short, and mostly, life then went on.

COVID as a blizzard was when for Sunday, March 8, 2020, we realized we probably shouldn't lay out a communal bagel and cream cheese table at church, and we probably shouldn't serve communion with all of us dipping our crackers we hold in our fingers into the same shared cup. It was the next week, when it became clear we shouldn't be gathering together at all and had like 48 hours to imagine how we'd host our first ever online worship service.

It was you and everyone you know making runs to the store to stock up on toilet paper of all things. Who knew that Americans would all decide the one thing you can not run out of during a blizzard is soft paper you use to wipe your rear? Who knew?

Pandemic as blizzard was shutting down schools for a week, and then two weeks, and cancelling everything for just about everyone

because we had no idea what we were facing or how bad it was going to be.

Pandemics, though, aren't just short-term crises. Pandemics are a whole season of change. Not just a blizzard, but a long, hard winter.

2015 was the worst winter we've had in Boston. It was long. It was cold. And we got more than seven and a half feet of snow in one month. More than seven and a half feet. Were you here that winter? Do you remember this?

There was nowhere to put the snow. It just piled and piled. Biking, which I do to commute, was out of the question. There was no room. I walked miles sometimes to get places. My back's probably never been as strong or as tired as it was that winter from all the shovelling. I was stressed out that winter too. I was still a relatively new senior pastor here, and our church was going through a lot at the time. And then all that snow. I'm not a regular yoga practitioner, but that winter, I found a little yoga studio where you could walk in, put down 10 bucks, and sweat out an hour of hot yoga in this 90 degree studio. I went there every week for a while, just to be in the heat, more than anything else, but also to destress.

Pandemic as winter was the long and stressful season we entered last March, but were figuring would end within months. It was all our kids doing some not so great version of their normal lives

online. Many of us doing the same. It was my family's years-in-the-making first ever trip to China cancelled and then our back up little trip cancelled, and then like everything we cared about in our lives getting cancelled.

It was a phone call I had with a good friend of mine who's a college professor, where he wondered how many of his colleagues would die that year, and I wondered how painful it was going to be to officiate two or three funerals per week. Life didn't play out that badly for either of us, but it did for others. Pandemic winter was stressful for all of us but for some of us, there was more loss and more stress than we could bear. It was unevenly spread out among us, often along familiar lines of racial and class inequities.

For our church, pandemic winter was learning to connect over the phone and online for some of us, for others taking a break or tuning out because that mode of connection was harder to sustain or initiate or engage with. Pandemic winter was me naively thinking we're cancelling Easter in person but sometime soon we'd all celebrate Easter together the way we always did. Boy, I was wrong. And pandemic winter was on the upside, learning to use our church community and church building in new ways – feeding Cambridge families, hosting blood drives and a vaccination site, and more.

The biggest insight of this article, though, was that the authors saw that this pandemic wouldn't just be a blizzard, it wouldn't just be a

long winter, it would be a kind of an ice age. A more than year-long interruption to the normal course of life, that would change us and our habits and systems and institutions for good.

The authors said we're not going back to normal anytime soon, and when we do, that normal will not be the same. We'll have changed. There will be much to grieve and lament. There will be letting go. There will be unexpected shifts and opportunities. And we'll need to adapt and change and grow if we're going to survive, let alone flourish.

Pandemic as ice age would be resetting our social norms and community lives. It would be a significant increase in mental health challenge and awareness for us all. For me, that included reengaging in therapy given what the stress and intensity of the season exposed.

Pandemic as ice age meant changing expectations in my family for what our kids teenage years would look end up looking like. In other families, it meant long separations and loss and grief.

Pandemic as ice age meant massive disruptions to whole sectors of our economy, knocking some of our careers and businesses and industries way off course, while rewarding and blessing others.

Pandemic as ice age ended up including an acceleration of our country's political rancor and divides, which continues now. It

meant unprecedented threats to our elections and democracy last November and this past January.

Pandemic as ice age was George Floyd's murder and an already pounding social movement for anti-racism and for the mattering of Black lives and then Asian lives too bursting forth with new passion and energy.

Pandemic as ice age has meant deep exposure of church's complicity in white supremacy and in Christian nationalism and in anti-science superstition. Just as it's also meant wondering from churches in a time when church attendance and church engagement was already dropping sharply: in places like Reservoir, will we ever again gather in person on Sundays the numbers of people we used to gather? Probably not.

Ice ages change us, for a long time. They present us with losses we need to grieve and lament and make peace with and let go of if we're to move forward well. And they present us with invitations to live differently, to find the most creative, redemptive path forward we can toward a new way of flourishing in this world.

In the scripture we began with, Jesus has an interesting metaphor for losses and change we never would have wanted or asked for, but that sometimes create the conditions for new life, new growth, and new fruitfulness.

He calls it pruning. He says

every branch that bears fruit, God prunes to make it bear more fruit. Pruning isn't clear-cutting, just wiping out a tree or a bush or a garden. It's also not just leaving it be to fill up with weeds and overgrowth. Pruning is neither abuse nor neglect.

Pruning is loving a plant and its health and its possibilities enough to stimulate new, creative, fruitful growth through cutting parts back, through letting things go. Pruning is saying "no" to some kinds of growth in order to say "yes" to something better.

Jesus tells his students they know what this looks like because Jesus' words do this to people too. We miss the play on words in English, but in Greek the word for "pruning" and "cleansing" is the same word. Pruning means to clean off the plant. So Jesus says, you already are pruned by my words. My words teach you holy yeses, but also holy nos.

Abiding in Jesus, staying with Jesus, living, walking with Jesus involves holy "nos" as well as holy "yeses" that result in good and lasting fruit.

When I've hurt my wife or child or friend or neighbor and I find courage to apologize and make amends, I'm saying a kind of "no" to my own pride, my own need to be right. I'm saying "no" to my defensiveness and my fear of rejection in the vulnerability of

apology. And I'm saying yes to humility and making things right and mending relationships. Holy no, and holy yes.

When I make space for sabbath rhythms in my life – daily and weekly and seasonal times for rest, for not working, for play and prayer and peace, I'm saying no to endless busyness, I'm saying no to endless work, to being a tool of capitalism. I'm saying no to opportunities and options and distractions. So I can say yes to peace in my body, peace in my life. So I can say yes to cultivating conscious awareness of the presence of God. I'm saying yes to my health, yes to the freedom God has given me, and yes to the ability to pay attention to what matters most.

This is pruning through listening to and following Jesus' words. I could give many more examples. Perhaps you could too. Holy nos and holy yeses that lead to lasting fruit, to flourishing, to these metaphors for abundant, holy, joyful life.

This is God's longing for us, Jesus says. And this is perhaps a possible upside of something like a pandemic, to welcome the opportunities for pruning it brings, to notice how the forced nos and forced losses in our lives can become holy yeses and opportunities for lasting fruit.

Now let me be clear on one thing here. This is important, so if you've lulled off into a half sleep while I'm talking, wake up, Dial into this part, OK?

God does not cause bad things to happen to get good results. Let me say that again. God does not make bad, evil, suffering things happen to get good results.

People talk that way a lot, like bad things happen because God has some kind of silver lining God can bring about through it. I think this way of thinking is wrong. I think it minimizes the weight of evil, it harms us, and it is an offense to God to speak like this.

God doesn't make evil to do good. God hates evil and suffering just like we do. But God can and does work creatively to bring good out of evil. The word for that is redemption. To take something bad, and to bring something good out of it.

God didn't cause this pandemic as some kind of curse to get good things to happen through it. No, chaos and the way viruses work, and maybe humans encroaching too much on animal's lives (we're not sure), and certainly poor planning and foolish underinvestment in public health all caused this pandemic. It's not God's fault or God's will. Clear?

But our blizzard and winter and ice age of the pandemic is also not the last word in our story. And it is not the last word for God's story either. God wants to and can bring good even out of this season.

How has COVID changed us?

How has the pandemic brought trouble and grief and loss and new challenges into our lives? In many ways. Has it also, though, brought any goodness into your life, any new possibilities or new openness to life, joy, love, purpose?

Has the big giant NO of this pandemic ice age made space for any holy YES's for you? If it hasn't yet, can you pray with God about what those might be?

I invite us all today into a season of pause – no worship services the next two weeks. I hope that during these two weeks, you'll take some pause and rest in your life as well. And I invite us all as well to a moment of prayer. [I've written a simple prayer of examen that's up on our website](#) that I strongly encourage you to use in prayer at least once a week for the next three weeks.

You're invited to consider how this pandemic has changed you, in ways that have been harmful, but also to notice any ways this time has brought life to you, or any possibilities for new life that are before you.

And you'll be invited to pray this way for your church and for the broader world as well. To ask how faith and relationship to your church have suffered, but also to ask how they've grown and how you hope to reengage in your faith and in your participation in this community as well, to experience and be part of growing fruit that lasts at Reservoir Church, in our new normal.

We'll be praying about this together.

The other article I read last year that shaped me even more than the blizzard, winter, ice age one was [an essay by the Indian writer Arundathi Roy, called *The Pandemic as Portal*](#). I've read it dozens of times. And it's as stirring today as it was when she published it in April, 2020. I've considered these words to be prophetic, meaning a timely message of God-inspired truth.

Arundathi Roy looked at the devastation of this pandemic, the ways that globally, it has part of a chain of loss and poverty and suffering that has disproportionately devastated black and brown and poor peoples. That's true in the states, it's true globally as well.

And she asks questions about injustice, but also questions about possibility. She writes:

Arundathi Roy – from *The Pandemic as a Portal*

“What is this thing that has happened to us? ...

Whatever it is, **coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could.** Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. **Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.**

Historically, **pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.**

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it”

This pandemic, like any winter or ice age, like most suffering in fact, is simply suffering. But by God’s grace, it is also a portal, a gateway between the old and new life, the way of being we didn’t know how to say no to, and a holy yes to new possibilities.

What will that be for Reservoir Church?

Things we love have changed. Not so many of us get together in person all at once any more. We're still not singing together and we're still wearing masks when we're together. Those two things are linked. They are our best protection against inadvertently spreading sickness while we're still advised to do so, as with the current CDC encouragement to masking indoors. Some of this is temporary, but given trends in churchgoing around here and throughout this country, Reservoir is very unlikely to ever again gather 900 people together every Sunday as we did 15 years ago, or even the four to five hundred people we did just two – three years ago.

That's a loss. And that's the nature of ice ages, ice ages of pandemic, but also a longer ice age in this country of the failing reputation and problems of Christianity and churches in America. That's a long and old story we've talked about often at other times.

The losses related to that are real.

But new futures are possible. New fruit can grow.

Reservoir's current incarnation of our vision for connection to Jesus and church and flourishing is [our Beloved community vision](#), that this church will be a place of deep belonging, of healing and justice that includes anti-racism; of radical, transformative generosity; and of innovative, healthy approaches to faith and churchgoing that do

great things in people's lives and communities, wherever they are and however they gather.

Parts of this new normal connected to that vision we have some handle on. We are not going back to two in person Sunday services this fall. Instead, we'll be here at 9:30, but we'll maintain an online worship presence that will be a space for innovation in how we gather, and who gathers with Reservoir.

We'll continue to center the importance of not just things that look like church, what we're doing here, but also other spaces where the love of Jesus, the gift of community, and the joy of living happen. Like in our community groups, and in our shared work in neighboring and justice, and in inspiring the people we all are when we follow Jesus in our homes, and neighborhoods, and workplaces, and other life callings.

I invite you to pray with us in person or online on September 5th, as we make space to pray for ourselves and the church we are still becoming. I invite you to join us on September 12th and 19th, in person or online, as we worship again together and also do some workshopping as we are each invited to engage our time and talents in making Reservoir's new normal possible.

And I invite us to pray for our own precious lives, as together we take stock of how this pandemic has changed us. How have we hurt?

What have we lost? What have we gained, if anything? What holy nos do we feel called to say to old ways of being, old ways of living – the luggage and the carcasses that weren't bearing fruit? And what holy yeses do we feel called toward? What new possibilities is God leading us into?

Feel free to send me a note at steve@reservoirchurch.org anytime over these next three weeks with what you learn as you reflect and pray. I'd love to hear your story, and if you're willing, to empower you to share your story with the congregation as well.

Let's pray.