

Pandemic Perspective

This is our first Sunday with an in person audience since March 15th. For many that's probably the longest you've ever gone without being in person in a church service in your life. I've been here every Sunday, but if I hadn't been preaching, that would have been true for me. So welcome to those in person and welcome to you watching from home or from some other location. I don't want anyone to feel guilty about not being here in person. We want everyone to be safe and we are glad you are faithfully joining us online for these services.

The last Sunday of March I preached from the book of Habakkuk and said then that we needed to station ourselves and to be quiet and wait to hear from the Lord. I cautioned about being too quick to speak about what this pandemic is all about. After 65 years I'm still learning the value of what James says, "be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." James 1:19 In addition, the bible repeatedly tells us to get information and understanding. I've been trying to do that over these weeks, trying to set all this in perspective. I want to share some thoughts I felt the Lord laid on my heart to help us gain what I've called Pandemic Perspective.

One of the first things I felt the Lord speak to me happened I think on March 15, the last Sunday we were worshiping together with an in person congregation, knowing we were probably going to have to cancel services. If you remember at the beginning of the year, I said I felt the Lord had spoken to me that 2020 was going to be a year of blessing for CAG. I preached that on January 5th. We paid off the debt on the church remodel, attendance was strong. I thought the Lord was going to bless the church with financial and numerical growth and spiritual blessings and then, covid19. So on Sunday morning March 15 as I was praying, "Lord, I thought this was to be a year of blessing. What's up?" I sensed the Holy Spirit whisper into my heart his clarifying word. I had information and now I was gaining understanding. I wrote that morning, "A year of blessing. I thought it meant the Lord was going to pour his blessings on us but I believe he meant it would be a year when we would bless others in extraordinary fashion – unusual blessing of others – and when we do that, He continues to bless us."

A year of blessing, spoken from the one who said it is more blessed to give than to receive! **Sometimes the word the Lord speaks to you needs kingdom clarification.** Don't rush it. That message from Habakkuk says of the word of the Lord. "Though it linger, wait for it." Give God time to make plain his word and his instruction to you! How does that fit from a

kingdom of heaven perspective? Do the values of heaven match up with the values you are embracing? Let the Lord give you kingdom clarification in this season.

So his word about blessing was for us to bless others in extraordinary fashion. We've been praying each night, asking God to help us recognize and seize the opportunities to be a blessing, to be the church in action in our community, our city, our world. Would you continue to ask the Lord to give us all wisdom and show us how to serve our community as well as the needs of his church. The needs are going to increase. The church may need to find new ways to be a blessing. Lord, show us the way forward.

Another thing I said in that sermon in January was that we were praying for 20/20 vision. I said then, "I'm asking God to help us see the world and our circumstances as he sees them rather than how we see them. Our view is too small, too prejudiced and biased, too determined by our own circumstances and history and our own fears, too earth bound. We are short sighted most of the time... We need to see heaven's bigger picture, to see life from the perspective of the Kingdom of God... We need to be able to see what is truly, eternally, absolutely important from Heaven's point of view."

That's what I said on January 5th of this year. What have we learned? Have we gained understanding? I think we've been given an opportunity to gain some perspective. I said back in March we've gained perspective about how we are all connected, all vulnerable to a virus that crosses every line, every race, creed and color. It means we need to care for one other.

We've had the opportunity to learn we can live without some things. We experienced shortages - toilet paper, cleaning supplies, I still can't find the Campbell's soup I'm looking for but guess what? The world didn't come to an end did it? We can actually manage with less. The truth is, most people in most countries experience shortages on a regular basis. Welcome to the world and perspective of most missionaries, of most people in the world. It's an opportunity to be more thankful for what we have and complain less about what we lack.

We've had the opportunity to learn about what is truly essential. Turns out you don't have to have professional or even amateur athletics for life to have meaning and purpose. There is more to living than entertainment. You can survive without eating in restaurants, at least for a while. We even learned you can be the church without meeting in a building together. We need each other, but we don't have to gather in a building to have relationship, to pray, to worship. We can find ways to connect, ways to worship, ways to grow, ways to serve.

We've been given the opportunity in recent weeks to learn how to respond biblically to others' pain and grief. The bible says **“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves...Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.” Romans 12:10, 15.** More than 105,000 Americans have died from this Pandemic. Don't bother trying to explain to me about how the numbers are elevated, about how they all died from something else, about how Bill Gates did something or other. The bible doesn't say anything about justifying your arguments or about proving anything, it says, weep with those who weep. Have you wept over the loss of life, the pain and grief suffered by so many? We've watched once again as African American citizens have felt the pain of racial injustice. And sadly, again, from Christians I've heard the excuses, the deflection, “Yes, that's horrible what happened to George Floyd but...” and then you fill in the blank. Listen, you can't rush past the injustice to start talking about looters and rioters. You haven't done the biblical work yet. First you have to weep with those who weep. Don't let rioters and idiots blur the opportunity for vision and clarity for all races. Right now there are hurting people, hurting black people, our people, that need the body of Christ to just weep with them. We all need understanding. We all need to listen to learn rather than listen to respond. How about if we just devote ourselves to loving each other and honoring others above ourselves and we just take some time to weep with folks that are weeping. There'll be time for rhetoric and speeches later.

This is an opportunity for understanding. I think right now the best thing I know to say to brothers and sisters of color that are part of our Carbondale family, is to tell you that we love you, we support you. I don't know what it's like to be a minority in this nation, or in this church, so help me understand. I'm listening. And know that I value you, we value you, we love you, you matter, your family matters, yes black lives matter, your life matters and we weep with you today. God give us clarity and understanding to love one another and to weep with one another and pray for better days when we can rejoice with one another as well.

This pandemic is giving us the opportunity to learn how to love. I've never seen people more divided. Maybe it's just social media. We used to assume everyone was as intelligent and reasonable as we were because we didn't know what they thought. Now we know what everyone thinks and “Yikes!” Who knew? We don't agree, but we can still love one another. Not everyone who loves Jesus agrees with your political views. “You can't love Jesus and vote for that...” Thanks for telling me. Not everyone who is a part of Carbondale or who worships

with us, thinks the same way about things, about the pandemic, about how to combat it, about politics, about a million other things. So the opportunity we have is to learn about grace for everyone, to learn about other ways of viewing things and then being able to say, “I still love you and I’m glad you love Jesus and now let’s talk about something else.” If you joined the church in the past 35 years I read a statement to you from Jerry Cooks’ book *Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness*. Maybe that’s what I’m trying to say, what I’m trying to remind you of, it’s about love, acceptance and forgiveness, about healing, hope, laughter and peace.

The bible says, **“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”** **Philippians 2:1-4**

Paul says to be like minded. He didn’t expect people to agree on everything. He was suggesting they be like minded in this – that they have the same love and spirit and purpose and that was to love Jesus and serve him and serve others. Verse 5 he says “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” NIV reads, **“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”** **Philippians 2:5** Like minded in having the mind, the attitude of Christ.

I’ve been saying it for weeks, so let me say it again. Keep your focus on Jesus. Keep the conversation on Jesus. Keep pointing people to Jesus. We can’t agree on much these days, but we can agree that Jesus is the answer, he is the hope, he is the Savior. Stay focused on Him.

The last thing I said in that message at the beginning of the year was that I felt the Lord had spoken to my heart that people were supposed to come home to Carbondale in 2020. I thought they would physically return and begin attending. Instead, the Lord brought people home to us online. Once again I’ve had to stop and realize God’s agenda, his plans, his purposes are far beyond mine. He can speak a word and then make it come to pass in ways I couldn’t see or anticipate. People are watching today that haven’t been here in a long time, or couldn’t possibly get here, from places all across the nation, but they have found their way home to us. Welcome home! We are glad you are part of our online family!

When I look at what I felt the Lord spoke to my heart months ago and now, half way through the year how different it turned out to be and yet how faithful God has proven to be once

again, it reminds me once again, “Yes, I can trust God. Yes, I can trust his timing. I can trust his plans. He still works all things for our good and he has more faithful things in store.”

I’ve said all along that I believe God is saying something we haven’t heard yet. Are you willing to keep listening? Are you willing to learn? Are you open to gaining knowledge and understanding? Is it okay if God opens your eyes to something brand new? What if he shifts your perspective, if he rocks your world? Are you willing to change and to be changed? You remember the old saying, “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” I’m pretty sure it depends on the old dog. If you will open your heart to Jesus, I believe he has more blessing, more clarity, more insight, more things for you, for us to learn, more things to accomplish. He isn’t through with us yet. Let’s keep listening and learning and gaining understanding for all he has for us as his church!

May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace!