

We're back! We're back together.

No, we're not back to normal. We won't be back to normal for quite a while. But we are back together.

Things today are both strange and familiar. We're doing some of the things we've always done. We're doing other things we've always done but in a new way. And we're having to give up for a season some other things we like to do.

But we're back together. Let's celebrate. That's something to be thankful for. And let's not take worshipping together for granted ever again. It is a wonderful gift and privilege to be able to come together in this place to worship God together.

Of course, we've been worshipping together this whole time during the COVID shutdown. We've been streaming services every Sunday. God has continued to be worshipped by us and has been present in the sacrament of Holy Communion every Sunday this year.

But today, many of us get to gather together again in person.

And while we're together, we need to remember that some of our members are still needing to join us through streaming for now. There are various reasons, foremost of which is them being in high-risk categories. One day we'll look forward to being back to normal, and being back with them in this building together. For now, we're glad they're able to join us online. And very soon, we'll have newer and permanent online broadcasting capabilities. And that's something to be thankful for.

One of the changes we're making in our Phase 2 return is trying to do shorter services. That means, amongst other things, we'll have shorter sermons. (Don't get too used to that—one day we'll be back to normal, and I'll be able to preach normal length sermons.)

But we're also omitting our Old Testament lessons during Phase 2. If we were reading our Old Testament lessons this summer, we'd be reading about Abraham and his family. And then in the fall, we'd transition to the stories of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt.

Both of those great sagas resonate with the kind of time we're in right now. We're in an in-between time.

We're no longer in total lockdown, we're not sheltering at home, we not streaming services online only.

On the other hand, we're also not back to normal. We're not yet at that time when social distancing rules will have ended.

No, we're in-between. And the great saga of Abraham and his descendants going down through the time of Moses is all about being in-between.

The saga starts with Abraham in the region we would call Iraq. He answers God's call to move to what we would call Israel. God promises to give the land to Abraham's many descendants. But that promise won't come to pass for many centuries. Abraham lives with the hope of the promise, but he doesn't experience the fullness of the promise. Abraham is a nomadic shepherd in the Holy Land. But he doesn't own any of the land there, until the very end of his life when he buys one small cave to use as a family cemetery. Other than that, Abraham is a nomadic wanderer. So are his sons. So are his grandsons. So are his great-grandchildren.

And it is that generation of descendants that will move to Egypt because of a great famine. And they will stay there for centuries. They will eventually become enslaved. And eventually God sends Moses to lead them from bondage into freedom.

But before they reach the promised land, they will spend 40 years wandering as nomads in the wilderness. Eventually their children will inherit the promised land. But the generation that leaves Egypt will die in the desert.

And yet, through all these centuries, this extended family worships God. They start by setting up small altars, small piles of stones to offer sacrifices wherever they happen to be. Eventually they will construct an elaborate tent, a portable temple that can move with them. And eventually in the promised land they will build a permanent temple to the God of Israel.

But there will be more than 1,000 years between the time this family leaves its ancestral homeland with its own permanent temples, and that time when they are "back to normal" and are able to build a permanent temple to their God in Jerusalem. That's a long time to wait between periods of relative normality.

I don't think we'll have to wait 1,000 years. And I don't expect it to be 40 years either. But we will have to spend some time in the wilderness. We may have to wait 6 months, or 12 months, or 24 months until we're able to be back to normal. If any of you has a crystal ball, let me know. Otherwise, we just need to do what the people of Abraham and Moses did. They moved forward. They did their best in a new situation. They dealt with new realities and tried to adapt to them, while also trying to be faithful to God.

One day we will be back to normal. But this is not that day.

But it is a day for rejoicing and giving thanks. We are alive. And we are back together in this place.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give him thanks and praise.