

“BACK TO NORMAL?”

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Scripture Texts: Isaiah 43:18-19; Philippians 3:12-15

Prayer

Holy Father, you meet your people in your Word by the power of your Holy Spirit. Meet us here in your Word and draw us further up and further into a knowledge of you and not just that, but a love for you. In the name of Jesus and for the sake of His name, Amen.

Introduction.

The word normal is getting used a lot these days. As in getting back to normal, the old normal, the new normal, and when will things ever be normal again.

There is no question the novelty has worn off this whole crisis and we are all ready to get back to normal.

It's normal to want to get back to normal, especially when we are in the midst of something stressful and especially when there is no end in sight, no date to look forward to on the calendar. If there was just a date, even if it was October 1st, we could endure this a little better.

Why is normal such a big deal, why do we want to get back to normal? We like normal because we know what to expect, we know what to do, how to act and feel. Its familiar, easier, comfortable, like an old sweater or old pair of slippers, like comfort food.

But the question I want to explore with you this morning is, do we really want to get back to normal, do we really want to go back to our old ways? How was normal really working for you? How were your priorities, how were your important relationships, what was out of balance, how was your prayer life, were you distracted with all kinds of distractions?

Some of us are waking up to the reality that things may never be the same again, that whatever lies ahead, it is going to be different. We are not going back.

Are you OK with that? Do we really want to if we think about it? Was normal as good as we thought it was? What if all this chaos and disruption is a divine interruption for our benefit?

What does Scripture say about normal?

What does Scripture have to say about normal and going back to normal?

What has been God's pattern in history? Scripture seems to be anti-normal.

God is in the business of disrupting normal. Just ask Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Mary, Zacchaeus, Lazarus, Paul. Remember Job. I just came across a passage in Job 29 that we could resonate with.

Job 29:1-8 Job again took up his discourse, and said:

2 “Oh, that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me,
4 as I was in my prime, when the friendship of God was upon my tent,
5 when the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were all around me.

Job recalls and longs for better days, happier days, days when his children were alive and with him. How can he make sense of all the bad and unjust things that have happen, how Satan has ruined everything? It all seems so unjust, unfair.

God interrupts and disrupts life a lot. But He is not capricious or vindictive or mean spirited. He isn't like the kid who throws a rock into an ant hill just for the fun of it.

God disrupts normal so we have to trust in Him and lean not on our own understanding. God disrupts normal to perfect us and strengthen our faith, to do something new, to bring us to a better place.

Isaiah 43:18-19

Isaiah 43:18-19 Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.
19 Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The former things are God's great deliverance of the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, how He led them through the Red Sea and through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

Now God will do another great deliverance when He gathers the scattered people of Israel from Babylon and restores them to the Promised Land.

You remember the former kindness of God when He revealed His power on your behalf. No less a thing will happen again. What your forefathers experienced you will experience.

Jeremiah 23:7-8 “Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’
8 but ‘As the Lord lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.’ Then they shall dwell in their own land.”

God shows Himself to be the redeemer of His people all through their history. This is what God does. Salvation belongs to our God and everything He does is moving toward salvation, redemption.

Salvation is being poured out all over the earth. There are reports in unlikely places, in places outwardly opposed to Christianity like Iran and China where the kingdom of God is growing. And what is true at the global and national level is also true on the personal levels as Paul says.

Philippians 3:12-15

Philippians 3:12-14 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul remembers his former life, all the rights and privileges he had and how now they are all lost, and he is glad they are lost so that he could gain one thing, Jesus Christ. He has no desire to go back. His only desire is more and more to lay hold on the greatest treasure, Jesus Christ. Further up and further in.

There is no satisfaction with normal in Paul. He is always reaching, stretching, seeking, increasing, desiring more. Wherever there is an experience of true grace there is a desire for more grace.

If this is true of Paul, how much more of us? We must be striving to grow in our love for Jesus and our faith in Jesus and our hope of eternal life. We must increasingly long for Jesus' coming and work to improve our knowledge of Christ. We must be trained in suffering and humility, and be perfected in faith, tested and tried. None of us are perfect, but have need to be perfected.

As we have already been taken a hold of by Jesus, so we are constantly striving to take hold of Him. We should all have a holy dissatisfaction with anything that smacks of normal, ordinary, average, good enough type faith. How much of Christ do we possess? Is it ever enough?

What is the purpose of a race, but to continue on to the finish, to cross the line. Like a good runner he presses on around or over obstacles, he doesn't allow himself to be distracted by irrelevant or secondary things, anything contrary to his goal.

You know how track coaches and swim coaches tell those they are training not to look around, don't look to the side or back to see where the other competitors are. Focus forward and strive with all your energy toward the goal. Don't get distracted, don't lose focus.

Are we to forget everything past? No, only those things that hinder our progress forward. Remembering past grace encourages us and gives us hope for future grace. Remembering past sin admonishes us to kill our sin and improve our repentance and self-control.

To the extent that remembering the past deepens our dependency on grace, deepens our love for Jesus, and gives us greater trust in His power, that kind of remembering is good and helps us toward the goal.

Baptism and Profession of faith.

Think about baptism and profession of faith. What are we saying when we do that?

These signals of radical shifts, changes in direction. They are a declaration of new allegiance. I no longer belong to the world and to the devil. There is no going back.

These acts are a changing team, of joining the other side. This is a turning from death to life, from hell to heaven, from Satan as our father to God as our father. This is a declaration of new priorities, new values, new cares and concerns, new interests.

We are not a normal gathering of people. This is not business as usual. We are the body of Christ, followers of Christ, baptized in His name, redeemed by His blood. There is nothing normal here, this is miraculous, this is supernatural, this is looking forward to glory, to Christ's return.

God takes us as we are. Sinful, broken, dirty, imperfect. In fact, it would be better to say He takes us despite how we are. We don't have to clean up or act or get it all together before He will accept us. But when He takes us as we are, He never leaves us as we were. He begins changing, transforming, renewing, sanctifying, taking out the old and putting on the new. He sets out to renew our life into the image of Jesus.

II Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

God's love for us never stops, and it never stops working. It has a goal, a future in sight. God is against normal, status quo, complacency, comfortable old self.

What is God doing?

God is always up to something. God is always working. God is always moving, planning, preparing, bringing to completion the good work He began at creation.

If normal is so great why did God send Jesus into our world to change everything? Nothing can ever be the same again once Jesus came into the world, and once He comes into our own lives. Jesus didn't invade our world so we could get back to normal. There is nothing normal about following Jesus Christ.

When we pray "Thy will be done," we are praying for something far bigger than we realize, we are asking for God-sized things to happen. When we pray we are moving away from our little world and toward God's much bigger world.

The call of God is always from something to something, out of something into something. It is a call to give up something, let go of something, cast off, leave behind, change directions.

We are all living through something unprecedented, never before experienced in any of our lifetimes. We are living through something that has altered all of us and our lives. This is truly lifechanging.

The whole point of it is not for us to go back to normal, not to return to the ordinary. The point is to be changed, transformed, for the better, in a way that is more Christ-like. The purpose of the discipline of the Lord is to remove sin and bring about good fruit, the fruit of righteousness.

This is not happening so we can remain as shallow as we were, or as immature as we were, or as spiritual dry or empty as we were, or at the same level of sanctification.

Do you have a growing dissatisfaction with the things of this world and a growing desire and longing for the things of God? Taste and see that the Lord is truly good. The love of the Lord is better than life.

How do you feel about the things we have lost, about sports, shopping, parties, gatherings, all the other world's distraction that have been denied us or taken away?

Has it given you a stronger desire to get back to them or are you finding that you are not missing them? Are you finding life simpler, more focused, fewer distractions?

Do you think God wants to move you back to your normal, or move you toward something better, closer to a relationship with Him? The new normal involves the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is always up to something new.

God's best means making all things new, making you new, making your marriage new, making your relationships new, making your priorities and goals new.

How?

I Peter 5:10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

Suffering is part of the way forward to a better reality. And God Himself will do the new work if we are submitted and surrendered and seeking and striving to take hold of Him who has already taken hold of us.

Implications and application.

Not only should we not long for things to get back to normal, but if they do we should consider that a tragedy. So start praying right now that God not let that happen in your life or your home.

I am praying that doesn't happen to you and to us.

Instead of complaining about how bad things are or how bad others are making things, instead of complaining, ask God what new thing is He doing, not just in the world or nation, but in your life and in your family. Ask God what new opportunities He is creating and offering to you. Ask God what He wants you to change or do different or strive for.

Find a quiet place and pray and say these things to God. Maybe write down your questions, what you would like God to answer, to show you. And then circle back and ask again and again. But ask expectantly, waiting, looking, watching. Ask Him not just to answer but to make sure that when He answers, you hear it, you see it, you get it.

Then each day as you pray and read Scripture just stay tuned to what it might be saying to you.

The opportunities before us are endless, opportunities to change how we live, what we spend time on, how much we are caught up in sports or mindless entertainment. Opportunities to change priorities, habits, technology usage, how we view relationships, and our relationship with God, and how we view worship.

Dwell on big questions like what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, to have the world by the tail, and lose his soul.

This divine intervention and interruption is a call to think more eternally and spiritually, about the matters of the soul.

Let's stop complaining and stop pining for a return to normal and start thinking about what new thing God is doing. Don't grumble and complain like the children of Israel in the wilderness wishing for Egypt. Remember your baptism. Remember your profession of faith. Remember Christ who has taken hold of you and press forward in taking hold of Him wherever He leads.

Prayer: Father, we are children and we need your instruction and discipline. Awaken our slothful hearts, strengthen the weary, call us out of complacency and from seeking only comfort and ease. Wake us up to the vastness of eternity to the riches of your glory and grace. Give us a greater hunger and thirst for you, for your love is better than life itself. Enable us to want the very things your Word holds out for us.