

Immanuel United Church
Sept 19th, 2021

Welcome

Call to Worship:

We are seeking God who will enter into
all the empty spaces we are experiencing right now in our lives.
We are seeking a God of justice and peace, of fairness and love.

Let us open our hearts to the God who is with us
when we feel removed from the familiar or habitual ways of worshipping.
Let us seek new understanding of how to worship together.

Prayer:

Creating, Loving God,
in Christ, you show us a way to heal and to shape a new day,
and you entrust us with the gifts of faith.
In the changing seasons, in the changing world,
your love is constant.
May our witness and prayer sustain and support
goodness, justice, and peace
in our worship and work. Amen.

Hymn: MV 10 *Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom*

Scripture: Joel 2:23-29

O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the Lord your God;
for God has given the early rain for your vindication,
God has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.
The threshing-floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.
You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.
And my people shall never again
be put to shame.

Then afterwards
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

Reflection: A New Name for LIMBO

A friend of mine had a clock which she carried in her backpack. I do not know if she did it for the entire school year, but at least that's what she told the children at Children's Time during service one Sunday. "What's special about this clock?" she asked. "You might notice that it looks a bit unusual. This clock is missing the hands! You know -- the long and short pieces that point to the numbers to show us the time. What good is a clock that doesn't tell time?"

She continued, "But it does! This clock tells us that it is ... now. In our Bible stories, for God, it is always... now. And now... is when God is with us. My not-so-regular, not-so-ordinary, not-so-useful clock in my backpack is actually a very special tool. Whenever I hear someone ask, "What time is it?" I smile and know that it is always now."

This morning, I would like to talk about the time that is now.

"What time is it?"

"Now!"

Since the start of the pandemic, most things I tried, we tried, especially for and with Immanuel ministry and community, have been rather unprecedented, (like a clock with no hands), requiring a steep learning curve. The first time I heard the expression "steep learning curve" was from the Board chair of my previous congregation. I asked him,

“How did the reference check go?” He was just called for a reference check after I applied for a position, while still remaining in the congregation. I feared falling in limbo, with no where to belong after I left the congregation. I still appreciate how the chairperson did his best to make sure my transition was smooth and secure. He answered, “Ha Na, I explained to the interviewer that you have had a steep learning curve...” The interview and reference check did not go well, and I did not get that position. Since then, I never liked the term, “steep learning curve.” I am not sure if I understood the nuance of what steep learning curve could mean. It meant to me that I was not fully prepared, equipped enough, at the beginning, and so had to learn a lot, and, as a result, managed to make new, significant progress over the years. It also meant to me that the challenge ahead was higher than my capacity at that time. It took me years to master skills and experiences to climb it up.

This week, I double-checked the usage of steep learning curve to make sure I understood the meaning of it more accurately than from the disappointment I had at that time. My friend Google told me that, in colloquial usage, a steep learning curve means the knowledge in question takes longer to learn. It is a metaphor that rubs against a common concept that going up a steep hill is slower and more arduous than going up a long, shallow incline. In a real-life application of the term, though, a steep learning curve actually implies that there is an initial period of fast learning — even higher learning. (Show the graph.) See the blue graph. This means that the learner is making a rapid progression over a short period of time. The learner is mastering the skill or task quickly. On the contrary, the red graph displays what a learning curve would look like if the learner was having a slow and difficult time to learn the skill or task. The curve would actually appear to be shallow and long.

With this information about the learning curve model, I now see that a steep learning curve actually implies a positive connotation. I would like to commend all of us that we, as Immanuel and in other areas of our lives, have gone through the steep learning curve which surviving in a pandemic requires in order to keep our lives moving on, giving care, staying safe, sustaining connection, sharing the adventure called life with the significant people in our lives, in changing, unpredictable, varying circumstances. Over a relatively short period of time (one and a half years) we almost (almost!) mastered how to adapt, adjust plans, hold on to hope, even when hope seemed more a matter of faith, than a matter of fact.

We certainly have made an impressive steep learning curve together, as a community, as a society, as a homemaker, as an elder, as a student, as a teacher, as a front-line worker, and so on. However, we still might feel like the present time, the “now” of here, is like a clock without hands. Now is, even after the significant rapid progress, as challenging as

it was at the beginning of the pandemic. We fall in limbo. In contrast we have endured so much, mastered so much, sacrificed so much, achieved so much, the pandemic reality is still here with us, it lingers on abashedly, and still rules our lives. Daily news still hits us over and over with deepened complexity, unwanted warnings and reminders to keep our heads-up. Our reality is still going up a long curve. The time of now is a limbo, an edge, a boundary, which makes us so very tired again. As is often jokingly said, we are getting tired of getting tired, weary of waiting, of false hope, and of a delayed happy ending, limping in limbo.

Limbo. This is the word that originated from a Catholic theology (Latin *limbus*, edge or boundary, referring to the border of hell or heaven). It means being in an uncertain, undecided state or condition. It is an intermediate, transitional, or midway state or place. It can even imply a place or state of imprisonment or confinement. Limbo is a state of being caught between two stages, unclear of what will happen next.

A steep learning curve, followed by a limbo that still flattens us merely to exist, is not the best combo in which we would like to find ourselves. What would the Living Scripture tell us, when we look for the ways for faithful, spiritual grounding while going through a limbo state? I find that this September is interesting. Even though we usually see the lowest numbers in attendance before people return from their cottages and travels, I have been thinking that this month is particularly liminal and low. I wonder if we might feel like, ok, we are feeling done with the pandemic, done with zoom. And in-person worship is on our radar now, being planned. Then, even so, we are not there yet. The future appears to us as something perhaps probable, not certainly possible... We slip on the ice of limbo.

At this point, I hope to direct our attention to the prophet Joel who says, “**Then afterward** I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your elders shall dream dreams, and your youth and children shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (NRSV, a few wordings revised)

The following study comes from Wil Gafney (www.wilgafney.com). The prophet Joel writes this in response to an ecological disaster, a plague of locusts that exceeded their regular breeding and feeding cycles. The prophet calls for a community, a collective liturgical response, to the catastrophe. ‘What happened is related to not just me, you, or you, but all of us together.’ The prophet calls everyone: all the people in general, then specifically the elderly, children, breast-feeding babies (and their nursing mothers carrying them), bride, bridegroom, and all the clergy. The plague of locusts adversely affected the agricultural and economic well-being of God’s people; but they were not

the only ones affected. The earth was denuded of vegetation and the animals were starving. The prophet Joel describes the failure of grapevines, wheat, barley and palm, fig, apple and pomegranate trees. The community loses all of the seed for the next harvest. The starving animals wander about desperately seeking pasture that no longer exists.

All the people are called to fast and weep and beg God to reconsider their plight. And, their intercession is transformative; in the following verses, God promises to evict the locusts and reseed the ground with olives for oil, grain for bread, and grapes for wine.

God says, "fear not!"

Then come the opening words of our lesson:

"Children of Zion, sing-and-dance-for-joy and rejoice in the holy one our God..."

God has already begun to restore the earth, and with her the agricultural, economic, and nutritional being of God's people. The promise of rain, bringing with it sprouts of new grain, grapes, and olives in abundance... after the locust infestation and subsequent agricultural and economic collapse.

"Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your elders shall dream dreams, and your youth and children shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit."

You might laugh, in disbelief, if I suggest a new meaning for limbo: LIMBO as "Let's IMagine BeYOND". What could be the faithful, strange response to the catastrophe of the *impasse* to come out of the cocoon - - the Covid Cocoon - -, being stuck in the two different stages that have never been written in our biological, social, theological genes.

I am not suggesting each of us should become a think tank and propose a big scheme of social change after the Pandemic. Still meaningful, it is my hope that we adhere to God's promise and Words. The prophets and their steep learning curves are our faith genes. These are the expressions of the ancient times, and yet, always pointing to "now" in our times, too. They are the hands of the clock of faith. In my friend's backpack, the clock without the hands still shows that it is always now. "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. ... In those days, I will pour out my spirit."

May we be drawn to these ancient words of prayer in our times of limbo, Let's IMagine BeYOND. Fear not. have faith and prepare with hope - - God is with us now and God will still be with us now.

Keep watch, dear Christ
with those who wake, or watch, or weep this day,
Tend the sick,
give rest to the weary,
sustain the dying,
calm the suffering,
and pity the distressed;
all for your love's sake, O Christ our Compassionate Healer.

Hymn: VU 567 *Will You Come and Follow Me*

Prayers of the People

VU 400 *Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying*

... Open our minds to new possibilities for faithfulness.
And give us the insight and the courage to live them into being.

... Help us, O God, as we discern our way forward,
and be with us on our journey.

Hymn: MV 209 *Go Make a Diff'rence*

Commissioning and Blessing:
**The time of worship is ended and so we resume our daily tasks.
May we do so with the assurance that in this bewildering time,
God loves each one of us unconditionally.
Jesus the Christ is our guide,
pointing to the way of extreme compassion.
And the Holy Spirit is sometimes mischievous
in her abundant grace. Amen.**