



Muhlenberg Lutheran Church

Open # Authentic # Relational # Serving

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Dear people of Muhlenberg,

A new season in our life together is dawning at Muhlenberg! We are excited to announce the return to in-person worship, in the sanctuary and outdoors, beginning Pentecost Sunday, May 23. The attached newsletter provides details about these gatherings as well as our on-going digital worship.

But before we take these next steps, it is wise for us to consider where we've been. When the decision was made 15 months ago to suspend in-person gathering and move worship online, we did so with a clear biblical imperative to care for our neighbor, and seek the health and welfare of our community. Yet this season of uncertainty, fear, and separation was also a painful season of exile.

In the story of Israel told across the Hebrew scriptures, we find another story of exile. Across many accounts we hear of the Babylonian Exile, where captured and defeated, God's chosen people are uprooted from their homes to the strange land of Babylon. In a moment they lost their temple, their comfort, and the center of their life of faith. It's in this period of exile that the prophet Jeremiah offers his encouragement to the people to plant gardens in Babylon, to seek welfare in the midst of exile.

Since March 15, 2020, we as a congregation have been planting gardens in Babylon. Our worship life in an instant moved totally online, devoid of our house of worship, and we learned together how to reap the produce of this strange digital garden. Digital worship, digital devotionals, digital fellowship, digital faith formation, digital baptisms, digital eucharist... We've found a strange harvest in this digital garden, but we've learned in time how to tend it together.

But a new chapter is beginning soon. If we have experienced some form of Babylonian captivity this past 15 months, then the books of Ezra and Nehemiah may provide some guide as to what we can expect in the days ahead. These books tell the story of the return from exile—the slow, steady, and challenging return to Jerusalem. It doesn't happen all at once, and it is fraught with difficulty. There is a striking scene as the Temple is rebuilt and rededicated in the Book of Ezra. After the foundations of the temple were laid, and the people responded with worship and praise, it says, *"And all the people responded with a great shout... But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away."*

It is striking that in this long-awaited return home, the cries of sorrow for expectations unmet are blended with the joyful cries of hope and restoration to the point that they cannot be distinguished. What will be the *great shout* of our congregation in the days to come, as we return to in-person worship?

~over~

We expect that there will be great joy. Joy will be known to see familiar faces, even over the top of a mask, and feel the familiar pews of our house of worship. Joy will be known in the sharing of bread and wine within the assembly. We expect joy.

We expect that there will be great sadness. Sadness will be known as we recognize the faces no longer with us—the faithful saints who have finished their pilgrimage with us and rest in God’s promises. Grief will be felt as we remember the ways we’ve been unable to hold it together this past year in community. Anxiety and fear at being around a group of people for the first times since isolation began will be felt. Our worship, like just about everything else in our lives, will look and feel different than it did before COVID-19, and that might be uncomfortable at first.

We also expect that some will stay in Babylon. And that’s ok! Not all of Israel returned home. There are many good reasons, health and otherwise, for people in our community to choose to worship online. Our digital garden will continue to bear fruit, and worship online will still be a safe and meaningful way of worshipping with the Muhlenberg community. We’ve been blessed with expanding our geographical outreach through this time, and look forward to the new opportunities that these connections bring. Our way of worship life will be forever changed by COVID-19 and that will be both a joy and challenge for many.

We expect all of these feelings and more. And feeling any of these things is completely valid. Through the joy and through the sadness, we pray that we can bear with one another with care and compassion. We pray that we can give one another the space and grace to feel all the mixed feelings that will come with our return to worship. We—your pastors—are here for you in this new season in whatever way we can be. We’re here to listen and discern with you the feelings that arise in the months to come. We are delighted to see you, and we grieve with you as well. Please reach out to us if you would like to talk. We are both fully vaccinated and are resuming our in-person pastoral care with precautions.

As there is joy on the horizon, there is also still a deep biblical imperative to care for one another. Jesus reminds us that the greatest commandment is to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* With this in mind, we encourage you to continue to show love to your neighbor by masking to protect others, get your vaccine as soon as you are able to protect yourself, and keep encouraging others to get vaccinated. These practices are how we fulfill God’s call to compassion and mercy in this time.

Delight, social awkwardness, grief, laughter, anticipation... All of these things are possible as we gather again. But what is certain is that we are not alone. We have forebears in the faith who can show us how to grieve and rejoice. We have a God who promises to be with us in our gathering and in our distance. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit who will lead us faithfully into God’s future of mercy and abundant life being made known here and now. As the foundation of the Temple was laid in Ezra chapter 3, the people of God sang, *“For [the Lord] is good, for his steadfast love endures forever...”* We know this to be true and we join in this song. Through whatever blended shout of grief and joy that follows for our congregation, we will walk with one another in love, and trust that God is faithful.

In Christ,

Pastor Lauren and Pastor Alex