

## Annual Meeting Letter to the Congregation from Lead Minister, the Rev. Elissa Johnk

Friends,

Without a doubt, one date stands out in my mind as I look back over this year – July 4, 2021. Not, of course, because of the fireworks, but because this was the date that our doors officially opened again, to allow in anyone who was able to worship in the physical space of our beautiful sanctuary. It was the culmination of more than a year of hard work on several fronts: researching, purchasing, installing, and learning how to use the new live-streaming A/V equipment. Learning how to adapt our space to the safety requirements of the pandemic: masking, distancing, singing, sterilizing, air and traffic flow (all of this remains a constantly moving target, with each new wave or variant). And, of course, crafting our liturgy and style to fit a hybrid congregation: digital ushering and participation, offering, communion, prayers, fellowship.



All of this work, and when the day came... I was not there.

I was in quarantine.

My daughter had been a close contact of someone with Covid at school and was showing symptoms, and our test results hadn't come back in. In true hybrid-worship style, I filmed my sermon as I had for the previous 16 months, and worshiped, like so many of us, from the comfort of my living room. The A/V equipment worked flawlessly, the service was joyful, the digital participation enthusiastic, and still I wept.

If there is a single scripture that encapsulates this year for me, it would be the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem. Called back after 70 years of exile, they laid the foundation stone for a new Temple, the center of their life together, and the scripture says the people erupted in shouts of praise. But it also says that "many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud," (Ezra 3:12). I think we all know now, in a new way, that for those who were returning home, there must have been joy, relief, gratitude and grief, all at once.

Indeed, it was this same mixture that marked Memorial Day weekend – the final celebration upon the retirement of our Director of Music – Dr. David Neiweem. After more than 20 years with us, coaxing our diverse voices into a single song, David officially retired on May 30. It was a joyful celebration, of course, marking David's unique mixture of pastoral and musical skill and accomplishments. With a zoom party – a bit of a roast, really – on Saturday, and an in-person (masked, distanced and outside) gathering on Sunday, and official vows of release during worship, it was a poignant observance of the fact that our musical life together is, as David phrased it, "the hub around which many spokes of the church services turn." In leaving the community he has so faithfully guided (through 6 ministers!), he repeated his desire that the space of the sanctuary might continue to adapt, as it always has, into a place that better allows "music and musicians [to] flow freely, like water seeking to find its own level." The overwhelming response to the David Neiweem Sanctuary Fund was a sign that, not only was David instrumental in all our lives, but also in shaping our understanding of church as an evolving, vibrant, living organism.

And take up his challenge we did. As you'll see in the music report – our lay musicians went above and beyond to ensure our worship life did not suffer during an interim period. The 7-member search team, comprised of program and musical staff, as well as members selected by the choir and deacons, met almost weekly (often twice weekly!) for the next 7 months, prayerfully discerning who our next Music Director might be. With input from the choirs and wider congregation through our visioning program, it would be an understatement to say that we are all excited for what the next Director – Amy Shortt – will be able to do with the strong foundation David laid for us all. Perhaps most fulfilling for me, however, is the flexibility and commitment we all have shown throughout this process. Not only has the music we have made together been beautiful, it has been joyful, and we have all displayed great grace with one another throughout the process.

This is true with both of these two events – the return home, to lay the new foundation-stone of hybrid worship, and the transition in musical leadership and management of our musical life together. Both took enormous amounts of staff and volunteer energy. It took all of us. From Personnel, to Search, Worship, Tech, Covid Response and Buildings teams, to musicians and ushers (and bears, oh my!), 2021 has asked something of every single member of this church. And all, of course, while we are each individually struggling with a global trauma.

And yet we really do remain strong. 2021 has revealed a resilience in this congregation that is remarkable to experience. We welcomed new members, baptized babies, participated in book groups and multiple discussion and study groups. We re-launched our pulpit swap with the Ohavi Zedek congregation and strengthened our relationship with College Street church. We made great headway on our Visioning project and continued to support our core missions in new ways. Most importantly, however, our attendance at worship – remotely and in the sanctuary – remains high. When it comes time to worship, like the Israelites before us, we are eager to gather and sing our praises.

This, for me, is what I hope the history books remember of these years in our life together. That in the face of overwhelming personal trauma, this church has gathered together to support one another in entirely new ways and on entirely new levels. For much of my career, the story of the mainline church has been one of institutional decline. And that very well may be. But what I have experienced here over the last 24 months – well, that has felt more like laying a new foundation stone. Which is almost enough to make you cry. But certainly enough to make us lift shouts of praise.

In gratitude, and faith,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elissa".

[The Rev. Elissa Johnk](#), Lead Minister