

The best invitation of all..... inspired by Psalms 93

I remember when the news broke in March of 2020, that COVID-19 was closing churches in many states. Suddenly, we found ourselves on uncharted waters. We found ourselves in a wilderness! With the pandemic at our door, there was a has heighten sense of fear, a need for community, and spiritual comfort.

As the new reality sunk in, within days churches pivoted, entering the brave new world of video conferencing, live streaming, and social media. Overnight, pastors, church leaders and staffs became tech gurus and producers. They applied their faith, ingenuity, and wisdom to the task of keeping the “Body of Christ” together in order to witness God’s transformative power and love.

Collin Hanson, who wrote a wonderful NY Times Op- Ed about going back to church/post COVID, said, **“The pandemic did not temporarily sidetrack the church – it introduced a revolution in religion.” Yes, a revolution.**

Here are just some of the ways, on-line church has impacted us:

- We can go to church in the comforts of our own homes.
- You can go to church/ anytime of the day or night.
- You can take church with you to the ball game, or your child’s soccer practice, up to the lake house, a family gathering, or in the drs. office/ with (headphones).
- Wearing your Sunday best is optional.
- If you have always wanted to hear how the choir sounds at another church or experience the worship experience in an African American or Pentecostal church /you can livestream/zoom on into the service. And it is ok, very cool!

- You do not have to worry about sitting in someone else's pew or running around like me looking for a hymnal minutes just minutes before the procession at Festive Worship
- You can talk/give feedback/encouragement during the worship service through the chat feature- which is found on most social media platforms.
- And I am always encouraged, when I see an amen in the chat feature. Amen!

We have seen, the power of online worship and there are some benefits. Revolutionary indeed. And some congregations are exploring how they will continue to offer on-line worship!

So, if I took a survey right now, how many people would vote to continue on-line worship? If we were in person, I would be able to see your expressions and tally a score. Worshiping from the comfort of my home is appealing for sure!

So, why go back to in-person church? Have you asked yourself that question? Why should I go back to church? What's the big deal?

I want to share with you a recent experience that might help answer the question.

In mid- July, I attended the 10 am, "Sunday Watch Party" at our church. **When I received the invitation, I was excited, curious and a little worried about social distancing all at the same time.**

Now, you might not be like me, when faced with new situation and challenge, I have a little working group/ committee in my head which ask questions:

These are the committee's questions 1) will you remember people's names and faces, you have been separated for months-18 in the wilderness of the pandemic, (Surely, they will have the nametags out)

2) will there be a bulletin and hymnal- so I can follow the service? 3) I knew that God would be there, but I wondered, but how and where would God show up and break into the Watch Party? 4) How would the mystery of God's Holy Spirit unfold?

So, I when to church. And yes, God's presence was there/ among us.

First, God showed up in the beautiful warm smiles of the greeters and congregation. It was an extravagant welcome!

Seeing someone in person who you have only seen on-line for 18 months was good. Looking into their eyes and saying to them, "It is so good to see you?" was heartfelt and real. It has a deeper meaning.

The call to worship that morning kindled our hearts as the preacher's words beacons for God's fiery presence to be among us.

In the Holy pause, before we recited the Lord's Prayer together- God's energy could be felt. Saying the prayer in person together with other saints, united us and bounded us in the Spirit of the One that we call Abba.

The psalms tell us to make a joyful noise in our Singing and we did. How beautiful it was to blend our voices together again and listen to the various harmonies and sounds that the human voice can lift up in Praise to God. We sang with passion and spirit /our souls were free as God's spirit danced with us in song.

It was as if one could we could taste with our spirits the community God longs to build.

The invitation to the "Church Watch Party" was the Best Invitation I have received in a long time.

Gratitude permeated my spirit as I looked around and reveled in being present, laughing, singing, and praying and listening to God's Holy

Word with friends and strangers. Oh, to behold the beauty of the Lord, through God's people at worship. Every thing that was done in worship was a refraction of God's grace and love.

Someone said, that, earth is crammed with heaven. And every common bush, a fire with God.

My friends, getting back to church matters... it is a big deal! Because....

The very word that we translate from Greek as "church" in the New Testament suggest that we must assemble in person.

God through Jesus took on flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus physically rose from the dead and then come back and had a fish dinner on the beach with his disciples. And he said to them, follow me!

We are embodied souls made in God's image. We were made by God to see and hear and touch and taste and feel our way through the physical world God's made.

We are the **body of Christ**, and the body of Christ, is not the same when you separate its members. The hands and feet and ears and eyes need to be assembled for this body to work for the good of all.

There is no substitute for brushing up against one another and opening ourselves up to God who beckons us toward wholeness and love at every turn. We need to laugh together, eat together, cry and mourn together when we lose a member.

There is no substitute for showing up to do God's work---- feeding the hungry or protesting against injustice on-line just does not cut it. Each of us has a job to do!

We must taste and touch and see and hear the gospel, whether the splash of water in the baptismal fount or the broken gluten free bread and crushed grapes that feed us as we remember Christ sacrifice.

We need to feel the explosion God's love when our Children burst in the 9 am worship service to us join us at the communion table.

We are all transformed by God's presence in worship!

We are in the 4th surge of the virus- The pandemic is not over.

I've come to believe that we're all hungry for the touch of God's Presence. Like David- the author of our Psalm (63), our souls thirst and our flesh faints for tangible contact with the Living God that we encounter when we come together.

Our souls thirst for God's presence to descend among us so that we can taste and feel the inner sweetness of God's Presence- which is love, joy and grace and peace.

When the time is right, God's people will gather again in person. And my prayer is that we hold fast to God and long for the inner sweetness of God to permeate our lives. And I pray that you will "accept the best invitation of all" and have experience a little taste of heaven right at Old South.

Amen!

