

Like A Tree planted by streams of water (90th Year Celebration)

Psalm 1

What lessons did you learn from 2020?

Today is the last Sunday of 2020. How was your 2020? Strange, unusual, dangerous, difficult and chaotic... I am with you. Due to the pandemic, the whole world has had to stop for many months and everything has been unsettled. Along with the pandemic, the death of Mr. George Floyd sparked calls for racial justice and widespread civil unrest. The 2020 presidential election revealed the deep polarization of our society and the vulnerability of our democracy. Compared to all my years in the United States, 2020 has been a challenging year. I felt like I was in a storm that would never end. But no storm lasts forever. 2020 comes to an end and 2021 is coming.

What lessons have you learned from 2020? I have learned that I am a tech-savvy pastor. Until this year, I didn't know about myself so well. I have also learned the resilience and power of Asbury UMC. When the pandemic started, we had to close our church building for months. I worried about if the church could be sustained during this time of pandemic since gathering at the church for worship and fellowship were the center of our faith. But I soon discovered that our church leadership found ways to reach out to our church members and take care of one another in love. Also, Asbury outreach committee found an innovative way of serving our neighbors. We have never stopped being a church even in this unusual time of the pandemic. We have learned new ways of being a church.

Another thing I have learned during this pandemic is that we are all connected with one another. The virus traveled from animals to human beings and back to animals. It has moved from one place to every continent in the world in less than six months. We hadn't felt how closely we are connected with our neighbors in other continents but Covid-19 has shown our destinies are linked together.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." We knew we are interconnected but we didn't often feel it. But Covid-19 has forced us to face this unbreakable relationship and ask us to be responsible for the lives of others.

Tree of Life

The Tree of life is a good symbol of this unbreakable tie among us. [ppt] I don't know why... but recently, the tree of life has caught my attention and I have mediated on its meaning. The tree of life often symbolizes interconnectedness of everything in the universe; connection to one's family and ancestors. It also symbolizes growth, strength, eternal life and peace.

Like branches of a tree, we are all connected. Think of the big oak tree at the church. It reminds me of the fact that we are all connected in many different ways. This tree was planted when the church building was founded in its current location. This tree is a witness of our history. This tree might remember a little girl, Linda Ruscio [ppt] playing in the yard. Do you recognize her? I bet little Frank Rose or Carl Bishop jr. might have attempted to climb this tree at least once. If you want to know the answer, please call Frank or Carl. Just like this tree remembers our history, our life stories are interconnected throughout the generations.

Imagine you are one of our church members who planted this tree. With their prayers, their toils, their tears and joys, along with this tree, Asbury UMC was planted and grew day by day for 90 years. Because there were people who planted this tree, we can enjoy its shade during

the summer. Because there were faithful people who showed us what the love of God looked like through their life, we are able to share that love with our families and neighbors. Because of their commitment, we can enjoy our beautiful sanctuary and love-filled congregation. We are not just what we are now but we are the sum of our shared history and life. Like branches of a tree, we are all connected and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We are stronger than we think because we are grafted to the true tree of life, Jesus Christ.

We have faced many challenges during 2020. The Pandemic has hindered us from gathering and reaching out to our neighbors. Also, people have seemed to lose their interest in religion. Even those who are raised in the church doesn't come to the church and many of us don't know what to do. We feel like we are facing a severe spiritual drought. But my friends, we are stronger than we think. We are like a tree planted by streams of living water so we can face the toughest of storms or severe drought. Sometimes, we just need to endure until the drought passes and wait for the rain to come. Sometimes, we just need to endure storm passing. No storm lasts forever and the sun always shines again. If we don't know what to do, we just need to endure this challenging time with faith and hope and prayer. And that endurance makes us strong and help us grow.

[ppt] This is the picture of the Temple of the Flourishing Dharma in Japan. This Buddhist temple is widely recognized as the world's oldest wooden building. It was built at least 1,300 years ago out of wood. Few skilled carpenters could build and take care of this old wooden building. What would be most important in building a durable wooden building that would lasts more than a thousand years? It's a Tree! The Tree is the most crucial thing. According to those carpenters, to build a wooden building that lasts more than a thousand years, they needed a tree that had lived and endured over a thousand year. Those trees had experienced severe droughts and survived terrible storms. They had survived from season to season for thousands of years.

[ppt] As they endured such difficulties over time, the trees may have developed scars, knots, and sometimes, their branches and even trunks were twisted. But in the hands of skillful carpenters, they were transformed into pillars of a beautiful wooden temple that has lasted thousands of years.

We are like a tree planted by streams of living water. God planted Asbury UMC 90 years ago through the hands of faithful people of God. They nurtured and raised Asbury UMC with their commitment and love. I am sure that there were stormy days as well as shining days. We have made 90 years of history. [ppt] But the root of our faith is much deeper. It goes back to Francis Asbury, John Wesley, all great reformers, undivided church, apostles and our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Christ is the very root and foundation of Asbury UMC. We may face other storms or droughts on our spiritual journey but nothing will prevail. Jesus Christ, the master carpenter, will use us to build His eternal kingdom of justice, peace and love.

90th Church Anniversary

We are celebrating our 90th church anniversary. We initially planned to have a big celebration in May but our plan had to be canceled due to Covid-19. No one expected Covid-19 would last this long. Even though we cannot gather at the church together, I would like to celebrate our 90 year long history, which is a result of the grace of God and commitment and love of God's people.

As a part of our celebration, Asbury UMC have shared small wooden crosses and asked you to decorate each cross and write your prayer on the back of crosses. We were able to collect 90 crosses and our semi-official carpenter of Asbury UMC, Carl Bishop Jr. has assembled them

and made our 90th anniversary cross. Thanks Carl and all who have participated in this project! Let me show you the cross!

I shared a picture of our cross with my clergy friend. He is so impressed with its beauty and meaning. Each small cross represents us. It reflects our uniqueness and individuality. Not a single cross is identically decorated. These small crosses also represent what we bear. Our weakness, brokenness, pain and suffering. But these crosses are a bold proclamation of our Christian faith. We don't stand alone but we are grafted to the larger story of Christ, the story of salvation. We are grafted to the true tree of life, Jesus Christ.

I would like to thank you all for your faithfulness for the past year. I am also grateful for your love for Christ and commitment to the church. I am sure that we will grow together and will become stronger in 2021.

We are closing out 2020 and looking ahead to 2021. As we prepare for a new year, remember God's grace and those who planted and nourished Asbury through their commitment and love. Be grateful for them.

Also, think of how Asbury UMC can be a pillar of God's kingdom that will last forever. It sounds too big. So let us start with our mission statement. I am planning to read the Asbury mission statement every Sunday with you.

Let us read our mission statement together. [ppt]
"We are Asbury; Abundantly thankful to God; Saved by Christ's resurrection; Blessed by God; United by Christ's love for each of us; Reaching out to our church family and our community; Yearning to tell the Good News to all by being Christ's voice, hands, and feet in the world."

Rooted in Jesus Christ, the living water, let us continue to reach out to our neighbors and extend the kingdom of God through our serving and loving. Make our history a hundred years and more! God will be with us on our 2021 journey. Amen.