

Psalm 36:5–10 is a lectionary text for Jan. 16, the second Sunday after Epiphany.



Be assured, God is still leading you Pandemic changes don't have to erode faith

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Presbyterians affirm that the church is “reformed and always reforming.” God guides us through the Scriptures and the Spirit to learn what traditions to sustain and what innovations to explore. Tradition and innovation, though, haven’t always been the best of friends. Think of the conversations Christians have had through the centuries: Can we invite Gentiles in? Can we speak the local language in Mass? Does a drum set belong on the chancel? And, as each question gets answered, a new season, marked by joy over the new thing God is doing and lament over what is gone, is heralded in.

Over the past two years, the pandemic has taken the church’s notoriously slow-moving changes out of the crockpot and put them into the microwave. Overnight we entered a virtual reality, rethinking everything we ever did. I experimented with a Zoom small group at the church where I was serving in December 2020, three months before the pandemic began. I only had two people sign up. About a hundred days later, the pandemic forced us to become experts on Zoom, Facebook Live, Vimeo, YouTube and too many other platforms to count. And yes, I then had more than two people in my Zoom small group.

As we move forward in 2022, it is still unclear what church will look like once the pandemic has moved into the rearview mirror. How will online and in-person ministry coexist? How will stewardship be impacted? What will be the best way to serve our neighbors?

Amid this confusion, Psalm 36:5–10 reassures us that God’s love for us is constant. The psalmist writes, “Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. . . . you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.” The passage ends with the joyful entreaty, “O continue your steadfast love to those who know you!”

Now more than ever, we need this reassurance. At a

recent synod meeting, a participant spoke passionately about the struggles of churches and how difficult it is to attract, engage and retain members. Many of us feel this pain. We look around and in most worship services we have even fewer people than we did in the sanctuary before the pandemic. While we know that some are now joining online, it is still unsettling not to see them face to face. And so, we worry.

But the season of troubling unknowns and conflicts doesn’t end there. We also face the challenge that comes from the variety of church members’ perspectives about the need to wear masks or to worship outside. A pastor friend of mine recently received a heartfelt letter from a couple saddened because their children’s faith experiences were all mediated through computer screens — a pale substitute for an in-person experience. Yet we are children of God, living with faith in the new thing that will emerge when the pandemic dust settles.

Moving into a new season can be disconcerting. My dad’s half-joking mantra is, “Change is bad!” Yet the church’s vitality depends on balancing our lament with hope and by living faithfully in a season of continued uncertainty. And when our fears and frustrations rise, let’s join the psalmist and pray, “Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds!”

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LET'S DISCUSS

- What traditions are important to keep in this new season?
- What innovations are important to explore?
- Where have you felt God’s love in this season?