

*both sides now*

# It's Déjà Vu All Over Again

by Nancy Raabe

**m**ost of us can name the day in 2020 that “life as we knew it” changed—or should we say, ended. Maybe it was Sunday, March 8, if your congregation was really on top of things. Or Sunday, March 15, like mine, a week behind the curve. Or maybe even Sunday, March 22, for those slow on the uptake. Whichever, somewhere in there we all experienced a seismic shift as congregations rapidly closed down in the panicked early days of the pandemic. Suddenly many of us faced a truly scary question: now what?

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Lacking answers, we struggled. Haltingly, we learned skills we never imagined we'd need. First I tried setting my phone up on a stand in front of the pulpit and preaching to an empty room. That was weird and pathetic. Then I figured out I could do the entire service from home, since being home was better anyway, and we were being urged not to go *anywhere*. (Am I remembering that right?) I sat at the piano for the entire service, including the sermon. That was dull, as the scant number of views attested.

Then I figured out I could string a service together from different locations. It was spring by then, so I took my trusty iPhone and



the electronic piano out into the back yard for the hymns, praying that the neighbors did not start up their lawn mowers. I did the Thanksgiving for Baptism at a birdbath in our front yard. I drove around looking for sermon locations that fit the sermon text. My favorite was the middle of a cornfield for the parable of the sower.

That June we started a drive-in service that turned out to be surprisingly successful. People loved it, and many brought their dogs. We started taking canine attendance. By Christmas the cold was a factor (this was Wisconsin). I presided over two outside services on Christmas Eve in 7-degree weather. Our musician, Carol, was tucked just inside the main entrance, but I remained outside. The experience was exhilarating.

While we had the drive-in, we kept the online service going in an entirely separate production, since we didn't have the ability to livestream the outdoor service. I kept experimenting with sermon

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locations—the frozen tundra, different rooms in our house, outside a mobile food pantry. At home, the dog often sneaked in behind me, which is mainly what I heard about: “I saw your dog again!” Finally, Carol and I returned to the building and began taping our services there, and eventually the church re-opened.

**Why am I telling you this?**

Because, as Yogi Berra once said, it is déjà vu all over again. And once more God is calling on us to get creative. As our bishop here in southeastern Pennsylvania reminds us, “pivoting” and “agility” have become regular words in our lexicon. By now many of us are accustomed to doing virtual services and, if our churches do

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decide to close down for a month or two with this latest wave of the virus, we can make the shift fairly easily.

But the stress of all this is taking its toll on us and on our parishioners. As we labor through divisions in our congregations over such basic things as safety measures, I am pleading with you: do not give up. Do not throw in the towel. Instead, let your imagination run free. What new opportunities might there be for inventiveness—for reaching members of your church as well as those beyond—that haven't been tried yet? What can you do to help create a church without walls?

The key may lie in letting go of preconceptions. In his little book *God and the Pandemic*, N. T. Wright points out that “if you want to know what it means to talk about

God being ‘in charge of’ the world, or being ‘in control,’ or being ‘sovereign,’ then Jesus himself instructs you to rethink the notion of ‘kingdom,’ ‘control’ and ‘sovereignty’ themselves, around his death on the cross.”<sup>1</sup> Let go of that which brought comfort in the past. People are hungering for new experiences of God. What can *you* do to create avenues for the Holy Spirit’s power?

What about starting your own weekly video series on the Hymn of the Day? Dig up some juicy background, talk through the text, discuss quirks of the musical setting, and post it to your church web site and YouTube channel. Alternatively, it could be a podcast on a free site such as Buzzfeed. Or—something I’m about to try—livestream a one-person Compline service from home one night each week. Bringing a typical day full

of stress and anxiety to such a peaceful end may spread healing through your community.

*Guide us waking, O Lord,  
and guard us sleeping;  
that awake we may watch  
with Christ  
and asleep we may rest in peace.<sup>2</sup>*

May God in Christ through the Holy Spirit continue to empower you for the great work of ministry.



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### Endnotes

1. N. T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 25.
2. From *Compline*, *ELW* p. 324; *LSB* p. 258.

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