

## WEEK ONE September 12 2021 *Be For God*

Again, if you're joining us for the first time in a while,  
welcome back!

So our Kick Off weekend is here and we have lots of exciting things  
happening this weekend with our kids and students programs starting,  
adult small group sign ups,  
blessing of our ministers at the end of Mass  
and an opportunity for all of us to fellowship afterwards.

### **SCREEN: Back to the Future main screen**

This weekend we're also beginning our Fall message series titled, Back to the Future.  
Now, back in May, when the message team and I began planning this series,  
we presumed that the pandemic would be over by now and  
that life would be back to normal...for the most part.

That wasn't a dream or fantasy on our part,  
it's what the experts were predicting.

In May, vaccination rates were high,  
and hospitalizations and deaths were declining.

The vaccinated were ditching their masks, social distancing was relaxed,  
and we all started doing things we'd missed.

It was going to be a glorious summer celebrating the end of the pandemic  
and the bright future ahead.

So the title of our series seemed appropriate.

Well, rather than 'Back to the Future',  
life feels more like the movie 'Groundhog Day'  
where one day keeps repeating over and over.

We are repeating life over and over - with the Delta variant,  
masks, and an uncertain future.

One writer shared this online:

*"This summer, after the year of absolute hell and  
the illusion that things were opening up again,  
I've had the impulse to leap back out into the world.*

*Then the world turned out to be more heinous than ever,  
and I wanted to dive back into a hole, never to emerge again.  
I feel like I've pulled a spiritual muscle."*

(-writer Kevin Fallon 9/3/21)

*"I feel like I pulled a spiritual muscle."*

I can relate to that image, maybe you can too.

Pulled a spiritual muscle - people are just limping along,  
unsure of where to turn and what to do,  
and facing difficult choices every day:

Do I quit my job or not?

Do I plan that family vacation or not?

Do I make that big purchase or not?

Do I sign my children up for this activity,  
make a dinner reservation,

do I go to church or not?

I'm not telling you anything you don't already know.

And though we all want to go back to the way things were.

We just can't.

And that's because the pandemic has profoundly changed life as we know it.

In some cases it accelerated change that had already begun.

It's changed how we work and go to school and worship.

It's changed how we shop and travel and entertain ourselves.

And some of the change has been good.

But let's be honest, all this change has taken a toll on everyone -  
emotionally, physically and spiritually.

So we have no choice but to move forward,  
even when that future is full of unknowns.

Now, lest we lose sight of what matters most,  
we have to mourn the 650,000 Americans who have died from Covid,  
and all those in hospitals or struggling to regain their health.

**SCREEN: denial**

**anger**

**sadness**

**bargaining**

**acceptance**

When grief counselors talk about dealing with loss -

whether it's something personal like a death or collective like a pandemic-

they describe five stages of grief:

denial, anger, sadness, bargaining, and acceptance.

Throughout the pandemic, I've experienced each stage, maybe you have too.

All of them are understandable - absolutely understandable.

But in order to move forward you have to get to acceptance.

And when it comes to our current predicament,

here's what I have concluded:

**SCREEN: we can't build the future by longing for the past.**

We can't build the future by longing for the past.

We must accept that there is no going back, we can only go forward.

Even though it means we are going forward into a future we can't predict or control.

This new message series will challenge you to decide

who you want to be when all this ends.

And it will end....someday.

Who do you want to be after the pandemic?

What do you want to hold on to and what do you need to let go of?

Each week you'll hear one important lesson on who

God wants us to be as disciples of Christ.

**SCREEN: be for God**

**be for others**

**be a team player**

**be true to your word**

These lessons are:

1 we need to be for God

2 we need to be for others,

3 we need to be a team player, *and*

4 we need to be true to our word.

Today's scriptures get us started with the first lesson we need to learn for our future: we need to be for God.

So let's turn to our readings.

**SCREEN: blank red background**

Now, the scripture readings we heard today remind us of something we'd just as soon not face: life entails suffering.

We can wish this weren't the case, but it is.

Life entails suffering.

We've all experienced this in different ways over the past two years.

When the Prophet Isaiah wrote about suffering,

he had a vision of God's servant, who is a suffering servant.

Isaiah wrote this:

**SCREEN: I gave my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who plucked my beard;  
my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.**

And what did God's servant do in the face of this incredible suffering?

Did he quit, did he fight back, did he cry out?

No, just the opposite.

He said, *I did not rebel, I did not turn back. Why?*

He said, *the Lord is my help. God is with me. So I am for God.*

This passage from Isaiah is one that we hear during Mass on Palm Sunday as we commemorate Jesus's passion and death on the cross.

Because we believe Jesus is the suffering servant that the prophet Isaiah predicted.

The things Isaiah described all happened to Jesus on Good Friday.

And Jesus told his Apostles this would happen.

It was in today's Gospel.

Jesus said,

*the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the chief priests,*

*the elders and the scribes, and be killed and rise after three days.*

Now, this was the last thing Peter wanted to hear.

He was stuck in denial.

He'd do anything he could to stop this from happening.

But Jesus told him and the others,

that not only was this going to happen to him,

but that any who would follow him must deny himself and take up his cross.

He said it's the only way to save one's life.

I can relate to Peter in this story.

When the pandemic shut down our parish, overnight we were forced to rethink everything we were doing - worship, ministry, mission activities.

It was overwhelming.

We hadn't prepared for this. No church could.

As pastor, I had the same attitude as Peter, thinking:

*this can't be happening, no way, I don't want this.*

Was Peter's response so bad?

No.

Clearly he wanted to follow Jesus, but only if he could do so on his own terms.

And when Jesus told him that following would lead to pain and sacrifice,

Peter wavered.

As I said, I've been there.

And my reaction was denial, anger, sadness...and only reluctantly....acceptance.

What helped me get to acceptance?

Prayer and meditating on scriptures like the ones we just heard.

And growing in my understanding that following Jesus

requires me to take up my cross.

Which means I need to surrender my life to God every day.

Surrendering all my plans and agendas and schedules

and embracing God's plan and agenda and schedule.

Even when I don't know what the future holds.

But that's what it means to be for God.

There is no salvation without the cross.

There is no path that doesn't intersect with Calvary.

In order to rise, we first have to die.

Die to self.

And in so doing, we let die any illusion that

we are in control and calling the shots.

**SCREEN: who do you say that he is?**

If you want to follow Christ, you must answer this question for yourself:

*Who do you say that he is?*

And your life, going forward from this day is your answer.

Earlier I asked the question,

Who do you want to be when the pandemic ends?

What do you want to be known for?

What lessons do you want to remember as you go forward?

I hope and pray that on the top of your list is to 'be for God'.

Which means following Jesus by accepting your share of life's sufferings and sacrifices.

How can you do that?

For most people, the sacrifices of life come in small ways.

It's all the inconveniences and disruptions in the course of any day.

Things you and I can complain about endlessly.

Rather than announcing your frustration with the whole world, decide to accept them, quietly.

Maybe, just maybe, God wants you to experience these things

so that you will grow in patience, understanding, and compassion.

For you to 'be for God' means accepting whatever comes your way.

Accept it, then offer it up, as Christ did.

When you do this consistently, you become the person God wants you to be.

One of the best ways I've found to do what Jesus asks his followers to do, is to make a daily act of spiritual surrender.

I want to encourage you to do the same.

If you are looking for some words to help,

here's a simple prayer I wrote which I would like to pray for you now:

**SCREEN: Dear God, today I offer my life to you.**

**Help me to take up my cross and follow you.**

**Give me the strength to accept any suffering that comes my way.**

**Give me the grace to surrender my life in this world**

**that I may live with you eternally.**

**Amen. +**

Why not include this in your daily prayer?

Commit to doing it at the start of each day or anytime you struggle with your crosses in life.

I hope you will join us - online or in person - for each week of this series as we continue to explore what it means for us to be for God and others.

Amen. +