

5781: Year of Mystery, Year of Hope
Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5781/2020
By Rabbi Mark S. Glickman

Imagine what would have happened if last year at this time I would have stood before our congregation and said, “Next year at Rosh Hashanah, you won’t be here at Temple – almost none of you will. Instead, for the first time in the history of our congregation we won’t be gathering in person to celebrate the Days of Awe...and in fact, very few Reform congregations will be doing so at all. You see, at this time next year there’s going to be a worldwide pandemic going on. Millions of people all over the world will have gotten sick. Hundreds of thousands will have died. Our economy here in Canada – and indeed economies all over the world – will be in a tailspin the likes of which few of us have ever experienced. To go anywhere in Calgary, you’ll be legally required to wear a face-covering; stepping within two meters of anyone in a public place will be considered socially irresponsible. Grocery store lanes will be one-way thoroughfares. Everyone will have spent months cooped up in their homes. Your vocabulary will have expanded to include terms like *contact-tracing*, *herd immunity*, *pool testing*, and *Dr. Hinshaw*. Society will be driven almost to the point of violence over issues such as whether mask requirements should be legal, whether bars should be open, and whether children should go to school.”

If I would have told you any of those things, you would have said, “Yeah, right. And the next you’re going to tell me is that the president of the United States tried to sell snake oil to cure horrible diseases.”

But here we are, looking into our computer screens on Rosh Hashanah, trying to stay healthy, and living in a weird world that none of us could have predicted. Who would have thought that things ever would ever be like they are today?

Very few of us would have thought it, of course – maybe even none of us would have. That’s because the world is a very mysterious place, its future constantly shrouded in clouds of mystery. What’s going to happen between now and tomorrow, between now and next month, between now and next year? God only knows...God only knows.

And that, today, is my point. One of the main differences between us and God, indeed one of the main factors that characterizes our humanity, is that we don’t ever know for sure what the future will bring. *God knows* what the future will bring. We don’t.

We remind ourselves of this truth over and over again during these days. “On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die. Who by sword and who by beast...who by earthquake, and who by plague.” These days, in other words, God decides upon our future. “Avinu Malkeinu,” we pray, “O Parent and Sovereign, make this new year a good one for us.” We can affect the future, of course – that’s why we try to improve ourselves during these days – but we can’t control it. That’s why we stand in awe before God’s presence.

And if you have any doubt of it, I invite you to look not only at this past year's pandemic for proof, but also at your own life. Think about all that's happened to you during the past twelve months. Think of all of the utterly unpredictable things that have taken place. I know about many of them, because you've shared them with me. Think of the deaths, and the births that have happened – who would have thought it? Think of the relationships broken, and the relationships made – who would have thought it? Think of yourselves and your loved ones: the chance encounters, the job changes, the plans made and the plans canceled, a flight to one place that took you to another, that person you met while waiting in line, and all the others you might have met but didn't. Think of your illnesses and your healing, your dreams destroyed and your new dreams found, those new habits you've gotten into – both good and bad – and those new melodies that have gotten into you...both good and bad. Think of the rainbows you saw, the thunder you heard, the rumblings you felt. Think, in short, of the myriad of experiences you've had this year which you never would have dreamed possible when we sat together in the sanctuary twelve months ago.

When I think of those things, my jaw drops, and I can only stand in awe, which is one of the reasons these days of awe resonate so deeply.

The sum total of these memories should be a reminder to us all of the fragility of life. Each of our blessings can disappear without warning in an instant. We wake up healthy, and then the medical test results come back positive. We cherish a friendship, and a misplaced or misunderstood word destroys it. We feel secure in a job, and then the pink slip arrives in our mailbox. We love, we lose, we weep, and we don't fully understand why it all happened as it did.

Think of all of the energy we invest into making life steady and predictable. We buy sturdy homes; we work to shore up our relationships; we sign contracts, we schedule our lives down to the minute; we buy insurance. And then, life happens, and we realize how little control we had in the first place.

It's terrifying, if you think about it. Everything good can end in an instant. But it needn't be totally terrifying, because our pain, too, is fragile, just like our joy. We feel lonely, and then somebody new steps into our life and destroys that loneliness with their love. We suffer illness, we think our pain will never end, and then – wouldn't you know it – we get better. We despair, but then hope steps in and sweeps the despair away.

This has been a hard year for so many of us. I know it has for me. But my guess is that it hasn't been completely difficult for anyone, because life rarely fades to total black. Sometimes, in fact, the very pain that we face itself brings blessing.

There was a moment several months ago, for example, when I stood with Caron, my brothers, my stepmother, and couple other family members, looking through the intensive care unit window at my father breathing his final few breaths as we said the Shema for him together. The grief was crushing, and yet never before had I felt so close to my family. It was one of the worst moments of my life. And one of the greatest.

Part of the power of that moment for me is that it was one that I never could have envisioned beforehand. I had always known that my father was going to die someday, of course, but *then*? And so soon? And like that? We had just been joking around with him on Zoom a few days earlier.

Being human, it turns out, means living a life that is unpredictable. On the one hand, that's what makes life so exciting. You wake up in the morning, and you never know what the day will bring. Every moment is full of potential and it's utterly thrilling. On the other hand, this is also the source of our greatest anxieties and fears. After all, when you wake up in the morning, you never know what the day will bring. Every moment is full of potential, and it's utterly dreadful.

But so often, we forget about life's unpredictable nature. Sometimes, when life is going well, we think that it always will, and forget that our happiness can shatter as easily as a delicate piece of crystal. And sometimes we suffer, and we forget that our sadness is equally fragile. Indeed, it is when we fall into the trap of assuming that life will always be just like it is now that we fall into complacency, and that's also when we slip into despair. Remembering the fragility of the present moment, gives us the perspective we need to both treasure the good times, and see beyond the bad.

The past months have been horrible for millions and millions of people throughout the world, and we mustn't minimize the suffering. There's been the pandemic, of course – which frightens us. Many of us know people who have gotten infected; some of us know people who have died; a few of us have even contracted the virus ourselves. There's also been economic upheaval, and that threatens us all at some level. There are also political concerns, profound environmental challenges, and much more. Dickens wrote of the best of times and the worst of times; this leans toward the latter.

But that suffering, like most everything else, is ultimately fragile for us collectively. There have been many pandemics in the past, and they've all concluded, eventually. When they do, we mourn our dead, we learn what we can from the ordeal, and we go on with our lives. Pandemics end – we must never forget that.

Indeed, human beings have an amazing ability to heal – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Sometimes our healing is incomplete, but usually it's significant. Think about your most painful experience. If it caused you great suffering, then there's a good chance that it's still causing you pain, but my guess is that there's a good chance that the time that has passed since it hurt most has brought you at least a modicum of relief.

That's how life goes. We hurt, we heal, we hurt, we heal. Rarely does any of it last forever. And tonight, as we stand distanced-but-together on the precipice of the new year, I want to remind you that, for better or for worse, it is packed full of potential. I suppose that means that things could get worse, but it also means that they could get better, and the fact that that's a possibility should give us hope. Who knows what great and amazing things could happen in the months that lie ahead of us?

Remember, last year at this time you never could have guessed what the upcoming twelve months would have in store, and similarly, none of us knows what the next twelve months have in store for us either. I won't hazard a guess, but I will remind you that maybe – just maybe – it will be great. Maybe, it will bring healing, and health, and prosperity. Maybe, it will bring hope and vigor and optimism. Maybe it will bring a vaccine, and handshakes, and major league sports. Maybe it will bring joy and goodness the likes of which none of us can predict right now.

Last year, nobody could foresee what was coming. This year, we can't, either, and that, my friends, might be very good news.

It would be foolish, of course, to hope without foundation, but so too would it be foolish to assume without reason that life will get worse.

Let's pray for a great new year, but even more, let's work for it, too. There is so much we can do. Wear your masks; wash your hands; distance; listen to scientists; envision a better tomorrow and work to make it real.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed – who shall live and who shall die. Maybe, just maybe, the list of life is a long one this year, and maybe God has shortened the list of deaths. With our help and with our hope, it can be a good, sweet New Year for us all.

Shanah Tovah.