

# “This, Vulnerability, and an Elephant”



**Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan**

*September 12, 2021*

It has been 78 weeks since we have been together in this sanctuary. We entered the 2019-2020 church year on September 8, 2019, full of hope and anticipation. We had spent the summer doing many things, including installing our new sound system designed to allow everyone to hear better. For the first time, people with blue-tooth-enabled hearing aids could connect to our hearing loop installed beneath the sanctuary floors.

We were grateful and excited about the possibilities. “Maybe we can even stream the services,” said Rob Close, our AV technician extraordinaire. “Now, let’s not get too far ahead of yourselves. We may want to stream someday, but let’s not be overly ambitious,” the rest of us responded.

If we had only known what was to come . . . None of us could have predicted what was to become our new normal in six short months: COVID and its accompanying “life online.”

This was a life that included virtual church, children going to school online and now in masks, health-care surgeries moving to “only urgent,” and other appointments taking place online and mental health challenges skyrocketing. In addition, who could have predicted the radical changes and challenges in social unrest, racial tensions, political divides, and threats to our democracy; and who could have predicted the reality of climate change and the onslaught of devastating hurricanes, storm surges, and wildfires? And now, we have the Delta variant.

We held our last in-person worship service in this sanctuary on March 8th, 2020. The following week, we took the church entirely online, thinking it would be for the rest of that church year, at worst. Instead, the period of not meeting together in this sanctuary continued, not only to the end of that church year, but through the entire next church year as well, spanning a period of seventy-eight weeks, from March 8th, 2020, until today.

Those were challenging times, at times devastatingly so. We quickly adapted and were proud of our collective efforts. Do you remember when I offered daily Facebook Live meditations

and we sent emails called “Journeying Together” almost as frequently? Those emails included Zoom links to online gatherings and programs and videos from our staff offering connection and encouragement. I cannot thank the staff enough, those who are still with us and those who have left.

We moved as a congregation through various trials, triumphs, tribulations, and joys over the past 78 weeks. We’ve lost parishioners who died during this time, including our beloved Minister Emeritus, The Reverend Bert Steeves. We have just begun holding many of those memorial services. We grieved not being together, and we grieved the many personal losses, made harder by our not being with one another and our families and friends.

So too did we deepen some friendships, discover new hobbies, and learn technology, namely Zoom. Many of us reconnected with old friends or strengthened relationships with family members thanks to that same technology. At church we met the largest fundraising goal in the history of the congregation, to support our staff and buildings and overcome the loss of other rental income.

Our beloved congregation grew in many ways during the pandemic. We not only learned how to have church entirely online, but also welcomed three classes of new members, began to gather in *communitas*, or small informal groups, and approved our Values, Mission, and Ends.

It was not all easy, nor was it all good. Some days I wasn’t sure I could do it much longer. Perhaps most poignant for me was preaching to an empty sanctuary on Christmas Eve. The sometimes-exciting novelty of it all fell away, and I missed you deeply.

Late this summer while beginning to prepare to return from my study leave and vacation, I knew we couldn’t do “that” any longer. The way we had done church over the last 18 months was remarkable, and it was time for something different. We could no longer do what we had been doing, exactly as we had been doing it. It was time for something new.

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My dear colleague, The Reverend John Gibbons, gave me language for what I was discerning. He called it “*this*.”

We had been meeting for lunch more or less one day a month when he gave me a stone inscribed with one word: “*this*.” His congregation had made these inscribed stones as a commemoration on his retirement. The stones were thank-you gifts as they celebrated his long ministry. Each stone had one of his key messages carved into it. He had chosen to give me the stone he felt I needed most.

“*This*?” I said to him. “What does that mean?”

“*This*. Not that, not there, not then, not when. *This*.”

I knew what he meant, and I wanted to scream. My eyes filled up with tears as I thought, “No, you were supposed to tell me it would get better, life would return to how it used to be.”

The love in John’s eyes as he looked at me across the table was palpable. He knows me well. He knows how I deeply I care and how much I love ministry. He knows I love the church with a capital C and the denomination I am ordained into. He also knows that I am a tenacious survivor and learned the art of hanging on long ago. He knew my magical thinking that ran the risk of creeping in, that whispered that somehow this would all disappear. He was telling me in the most loving way possible to bring my attention, talents, and love to this, to today’s reality, not yesterday’s

You might be wondering what all this has to do with vulnerability and an elephant: “*This*, vulnerability, and an elephant.”

It has to do with vulnerability because to accept *this* is to recognize vulnerability. Life is impermanence; change is inevitable. And, change is challenging, even when it is desired and especially when it is thrust upon us. Change involves loss, and we humans are hardwired, it seems, to do all we can to avoid loss.

*This* is what we have. *This* reality. *This* world, as painful and disorientated as it can be. *This* meeting online or in person, masked. *This* life with loved ones gone, no longer living in the flesh.

To live in *this* requires vulnerability. To live *this*

well demands that we show up, stay, and feel our way through it. It requires that we let go of certain ways of doing things and allow dreams that need to change to adapt to the reality. Vulnerability will ensure that we are stripped of our fierce independence and mask of perfection and that we learn to accept help, live humbly, and be aware of our interdependence and openly honest about our shortcomings. In the vulnerability of doing *this*, we find our true self, we find each other.

“*This*, vulnerability, and an elephant.”

In addition to emotional intelligence, learning to live with *this* requires perspective, memory, and benevolence. An elephant has all three. Alex Gendler shares in his TED talk that elephants have the largest brain of any land mammal and an emotional quotient (EQ) nearly as high as that of chimpanzees. Their brains are uncannily like ours, especially in their cerebral neocortex and hippocampus, which is why they are among the few nonhumans who suffer from PTSD.

Elephants are also the only nonhumans who mourn their dead by performing burial rituals and returning over time to visit their grave sites. In addition to knowing their herd members, elephants remember animals and people who have had an impact on their lives.

According to one report, two circus elephants who performed together for a short time greeted each other with glee after 23 years apart, and elephants are reported to remember humans who cared for them, after decades of not seeing the humans.

Elephants also have the longest gestation period of any animal, with the average length of pregnancy being 95 weeks, or 23 weeks longer than the 78 weeks we have been apart. Thus, in addition to the gentle reminders to be kind, emotionally intelligent, and loyal, elephants model to us the importance of patience and perspective.

A few weeks into the pandemic, one of you wrote me the kindest email that among other things said, “I’m sorry your ministry has been upended by COVID.” I could feel my body pull back and retract as I read his words. “What are you talking about?” I wanted to scream. “It has not been upended. Maybe disrupted, but not upended.”

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Well, as is often the case with our elders, he was right. My ministry was upended, not ruined, not over, but transplanted to a new area called *this*.

My friends, there is great work to be done this year, namely that of loving each other and helping each other make sense of all that has occurred and is continuing to occur.

It is vulnerable work, it is sacred work, it is what we are called to do. This year will include ritual, loss, grieving, reorientating, applying practices of restoring, creating, and strengthening the beloved community. It will take us time, and it is good. Everything we learn to do together in church can be applicable and helpful to the rest of our lives.

We will not resume business as usual. That would be denial and hypocrisy. We will take the time necessary to listen to one another, to be here together in this reality. We will share redemptive stories, lean on one another, and make room for all that is and was and will be.

We will become what we are becoming, together.

For *this* is the day that life has given us, with all of its tumultuousness and uncertainties. *This* is the day that life has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen and blessed be.