Hello First Church,

Once again, I welcome you to a New Year. As we begin this year, I am reminded once more of the words of Paul in the book of Philippians. At the end of Philippians (chapters 3 and 4) Paul basically makes an appeal to fellow disciples for unity and steadfastness. Verse 2 of chapter 4 even says Paul *pleads* with Euodia and Syntyche. He pleads for them to stand fast in the Lord; for them to keep their eyes on Christ, to continue to pursue God’s kingdom, and no matter the circumstances, be content.

In other words, I feel like Paul is saying, “Hang in there, we will make it!”

That is really what I want to share with you today friends: hang in there! We will make it! We will get there!

A few weeks ago, I shared with you that we made the decision to cancel in person worship services until at least January 10.

As hard as that decision was, I am convinced it was the right one. Since that time, we have seen cases spike, hospitals fill to capacity or beyond, and school districts go fully remote. And now, nearly everyone I know knows someone personally who has Covid 19. It is here. At the same time, I have had several people from the community share with me “thank you” for taking that step because it makes them feel like we care about them by doing our part to keep people healthy.

It had been my deep hope that we could gather again in person for worship starting this weekend, January 10. However, let me share where we are: Our hospitals are still filled to capacity and on the verge of overwhelm. As of right now, school districts still fully remote (hopefully that will change soon). We are in the expected peak of cases right now from the holidays —we are hoping that goes down soon. Vaccines have begun rolling out but are taking longer than expected to get out to individuals. And our church leadership and authorities have continued to ask us to wait before gathering.

For these reasons *I just do not believe we are quite ready to start in person worship this weekend*. Therefore, please plan on only online worship this week.

The other reason we are going to pause a bit longer is because we want to get past the waves of starting, then stopping, then starting, then stopping. Waiting a little bit longer allows us to reduce the potential to have to take a break again. When we start, we want to continue being able to gather. We also do not want everyone having to guess week in and week out if we are meeting or not.

Therefore, we are going to plan on a *tentative* gathering in person for worship on Sunday, February 7, which is the first Sunday in February. We picked that date in the hopes that by then we will be seeing a definite downward trend of cases, that hopefully schools will be meeting again, and the vaccines will be getting rolled out ever more efficiently. By taking this step we want to communicate to our wider community we care about them and will take steps to ensure their safety as well. We also hope that if we start in February, we will be able to continue and not have to stop gathering so that we can keep meeting. *Again, this date is tentative*.

I will confirm closer to that time if we will or will not gather in person on February 7, but that is our hope.

*To be consistent, we are also asking all life groups and other groups to not meet in the church facilities until the week of February 7*. We encourage these groups to still gather via zoom or some other Covid-safe way, but to refrain from using the church facilities until February 7.

So, in the spirit of Paul, I ask you, I *plead* with you, remain steadfast! Hang in there.

Let us use this time to BE the church. Please seek to bless educators and health care workers who have so much on their shoulders.

Use this time to become more resilient in your own faith journey. Use this time to develop holy habits. I truly cannot wait to be back with you.

I know this is not ideal, but like Paul, we claim our citizenship in heaven so that, as Paul says, “We can learn to be content whatever the circumstances.” (Philippians 4:11).

Hang in there, church. We will make it. We will make it. Because our citizenship is in heaven.

Thank you for your prayers and understanding.

In Christ,

Pastor Matt