

## **Script for Video** *[Speak from balcony]*

Hi friends. This is Pastor David. Balcony, overlooking the sanctuary.

I'm recording this message on a Thursday (9/24).

Normally, this time of week, I'm recording my sermon and other materials for the upcoming Sunday.

But since we don't have our own worship service this weekend, I want to share an important update with you.

By the way, this Sunday (9/27), we're tapping into the worship service that East Ohio Conference is providing (add link).

What I want to do is to let you know where we've been and where we're going as a congregation.

I share this with you on the week when the USA passes 200,000 deaths attributed to COVID-19.

This week, the seasons have officially shifted from summer to autumn.

I'm sure you've noticed that the days are getting shorter, and we've gotten some hints already that colder weather is around the corner.

So, what can we expect in the coming season(s)?

A few years ago, I shared a metaphor with our congregation about the journey I believe we're on together.

The Lewis and Clark expedition, which took place 200+ years ago, has helped me understand what it can be like for a group of people to leave a familiar place, and go "off the map" into uncharted territory.

Their mission was to find a water route that would connect the world they knew all the way out to the Pacific Ocean to create a trade route.

Truth be told, for some time, we, the church, have had some sense that the landscape around us has been changing.

We knew something was happening, but we didn't realize that THIS was about to happen.

By THIS, I mean the coronavirus, COVID-19, a global pandemic that has had some effect on all of us, and a major effect on many.

Church consultants say that this disease has had the effect of dropkicking us 10-20 years into the future, whether we like it or not.

In other words, trends that were already happening have suddenly sped up, and we can't go back.

Back in March, when things suddenly began to shut down, it's like we were with Lewis and Clark and their "Corps of Discovery" when they reached the headwaters of the Missouri River.

At the Lemhi Pass (Montana/Idaho border), the water ran out. All of a sudden, their landscape changed dramatically.

In front of them were mountains. Huge, Rocky Mountains.

These mountains were nothing like the ones they knew back East.

Keep in mind, these were expert water navigators. They knew how to move along rivers.

And now, their canoes were rendered useless. At least for a while.

How would they navigate these mountains to continue their journey westward to find a water route to the Pacific?

We may feel that we are in a similar place.

One of our most reliable canoes has been Sunday morning worship and Sunday School – in the church building!

For the last six months, we've been unable to meet that way.

To be clear, the church has never been closed, just the building.

We've been doing things like: outdoor worship, Zoom calls, VBS, etc.

The good news is: We've learned how adapt! And I'm very proud of our congregation for that.

But I also want to acknowledge that this is hard!

- I wish we were able to be back in the building, too.
- I miss singing in the choir and seeing people in the hallways.

We feel that we've lost something by not being able to meet together as we've been used to doing for so long.

However, we have to weigh that against the potential losses of health and life that this pandemic poses.

**So that brings us to today. Where are we now? Where are we going?**

Last week, I met with both our church staff, as well as our Ministry Support Team, which acts as the leadership board for our congregation.

Each of them spent a good deal of time prayerfully discussing what we will plan to do in the future.

I'm glad to say that both our staff and the MST are in agreement about how to proceed.

The consensus is that we feel the risk is too high for us to return to indoor worship anytime soon.

So, together, we have made the decision that once we conclude outdoor worship, we will move back to online only until we reach a point when it's safe to gather (likely when a vaccine is widely available).

For now, we have decided to continue outdoor worship thru October.

After that, we will return to online only. We expect that will continue through the rest of the calendar year, if not longer.

**In simple terms, we will not be holding indoor worship in 2020.**

I remember when Pastor Andy Stanley of Northpoint Church (Atlanta) shared that same announcement a few months ago. It seemed radical at the time, but looking back now it makes sense.

Please know that this decision comes with much thought and prayer.

It was not taken lightly. In fact, we have been having in-depth conversation about risk for many months; this is not new topic.

Let me share a few important reasons for the decision.

**First**, we know from scientific research that outdoor gatherings are far safer than indoor gatherings!

As a former music educator, I've been paying a lot of attention to this.

We know that this coronavirus spreads primarily through the air.

That's why we try to keep a safe distance between people.

That's also where masks (face coverings) come in to help reduce the spread of droplets that carry the virus.

We also know is that tiny droplets called, aerosols, contain the virus.

If people are gathered in a room for an extended period of time, say half an hour or more, those aerosols build up.

**The second** thing we talked about is what worship would look like IF we did choose to meet.

The reality is that worship wouldn't resemble what people are used to.

Clearly, we would have to reduce the number of people in the room and have people sit at a safe distance from each other.

On the way in, people would have their temperature taken, be checked in for attendance purposes (contact tracing), hand sanitize.

We would also require masks to be worn at all times.

The worship service itself would be shortened to 40-45 minutes at most, probably less. There will be no choir, no congregational singing, and probably not even shared prayers and liturgy spoken aloud.

Once the service is over, people will be asked to head outdoors.

With all of that in mind, it didn't seem worth the risk to have people come for a worship experience that wouldn't be much like what people are used to or would expect.

As I share this, I acknowledge that we know this decision will not satisfy everyone's wishes.

We understand that we have a very wide range of perspectives about the pandemic within our congregation.

Yes, we are aware that other churches in our area have opened their building back up to meet indoors.

Some of them have had no issues at all so far. But a few have had confirmed COVID-19 cases and had to shut down again.

Please know that at the end of the day, showing love for our neighbor is our guiding principle.

This decision has been made, not out of fear, but out of an abundance of caution that expresses love of neighbor.

Because anyone can be asymptomatic and carry the coronavirus (without symptoms), we have to assume that any of us can have it.

We have many high-risk people in our congregation: due to people's age and/or underlying medical conditions.

We want to protect people's health as best we can during this time.

Honoring each other's health is a sign of loving our neighbor.

But please know this: what we're doing right now is temporary!

Yes, six months of not meeting in the building seems like a long time.

The prospect of not meeting in the building for even longer is difficult to imagine.

But, we will meet here again. It will happen eventually.

For Lewis and Clark, there was a day when their canoes would be useful again. They would find a river that would take them to the Pacific.

They would be able to use their river-navigating skills again.

But they had to get through the mountains first. And so do we.

By making this decision now to go back online from November through the winter months, it allows us to plan ahead for the next season(s).

We can focus on doing a few things well during this season.

Now, if things improve, if we get out of the mountains sooner than expected, we can always change course.

In the meantime, we will continue to live out our shared values.

Those things that we hold onto no matter what.

They'll just look a little different. They'll take some creativity.

For example,

- We'll still have outstanding music in our worship, but it will be shared with you online rather than in person.
- We will still encourage you to connect in small groups...
- We will still encourage you to serve others...

- We will still celebrate Advent/Christmas this year...
- We will still be a Christ-centered community!
- It'll just look different.

One specific idea I want us to think about for the coming months is the idea for gathering in small groups (pods) with people you feel safe being around health-wise. Maybe you're around them already.

What if on Sundays...

- You gathered with 4 or 6 or 8 people in a home?
- You shared the online worship service together?
- You had conversation about what you heard using materials that we produce from the church?
- You maybe even shared a meal together?

By doing this you can experience community, just in a smaller form than what we would normally have here at the church.

Which means safer – as we follow the less than 10 guidelines.

That's essentially what our preschool is doing as they meet here.

Classes are structured to 10 or less (including teacher).

Strict guidelines from the state are being followed.

We would ask the same for any small group that plans to meet here in the church building. Please contact the office w/ small group questions.

Thank you for taking time to listen. We appreciate your faithfulness as we continue on the journey together!

I encourage us to adopt the attitude described by Paul in his letter to the Philippians when he said, *"Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others."* Thanks be to God, Amen!