

October 20, 2020

2020 will be a memorable year for the rest of our lives. Every day, sin and death and frustrations encircle us as the end times of this world draw ever closer. Very often this year, I reminded myself that all these niggles and frustrations and disappointments prove, time and again, that God's Word – even the terrible, unfathomable bits, are absolute truth. This world is truly not heaven.

Yet, for we who believe that we are sinners, who believe we need salvation, who believe that God's promise of salvation was accomplished for us by the baby who's birth we celebrate each Christmas; even all the trials and frustrations of 2020 can't dampen the hope and determination we have that the victory of eternal life in heaven will be ours in the end. And that is what has made 2020 special. It has reminded we who have this assurance that some of our loved ones may actually fear death and what comes after. The need for us to fearlessly preach and model Christ has never been greater.

It's difficult to remember back to the start of this year; to life before the pandemic hit our countries. January to March started normally enough. We planned to visit the States at Easter, to say good-bye in May to our Pastor and his wife who had served us for the past few years as the Civilian Chaplain at our monthly Lutheran worship services, to attend the wedding of our friends' eldest daughter in July... but, as we learned so dramatically, God had other plans. Our trips and visits were all cancelled and rescheduled.

Once the initial shock of the situation subsided, and we began to live a "new normal" in lockdown, Phil and I really didn't notice too much of a difference. Fortunately, my job as a product manager for Openreach here in the UK has proven to be fairly safe – the demand for fast, fibre broadband is even greater than before, given the need for everyone in the country to work from home. Openreach is instead facing the problem of far more demand than we have engineers to install it. I've worked from home almost every day since August of 2006 anyway, so no problems adjusting to that. And Phil focused his attention fully on our tiny little back yard/garden. No use trying to find a job outside the home when we don't need the income and he's happy doing what's needed around here.

From the end of April until July, we did miss the company of our friends. We tried playing "Settlers of Catan" virtually with them, but it just wasn't the same as visiting face to face. (Fortunately, at the end of the summer, lockdown eased up for a short period and we've been able to visit with them a couple of times this fall.) And we missed the weekly visits of our friend and cleaner – Phil did a good job of keeping up with most of the cleaning in her absence but we were both glad when she was able to come back at the end of July. Also in July, we grieved the loss of our dog, Amber, who passed away a few weeks after turning 14. It's been a hard adjustment to life without our lovely dogs and we hope God has them in our plan again some day.

Never has Satan's work been so clear as in the restrictions placed on corporate, public worship here. We've been without our wider church family since our last service at the beginning of March. And unfortunately, re-starting our services which include singing and a pot-luck fellowship meal, and a pastor who travels from Germany to be with us, continues to be unlikely for the foreseeable future. Instead, we are blessed with video-streaming worship privately in our home from our home congregation back in Crete, Illinois, which never fully stopped weekly service broadcasts. To God be the Glory!

We usually veg out in front of TV or YouTube and play games on our phones at night. While playing one night, I had an advert for “Duolingo”, a foreign language training app. So, during lockdown, Ich lerne auch Deutsche! I’ve never found languages terribly easy, but this app made it like an online game and I really enjoyed it. After a few months, I stopped paying for the app, so haven’t maintained my practice as much as I should – it got pretty hard to remember all the grammar rules. But it filled the hours of lockdown a bit more productively than otherwise.

I made great use of my new office/craft room through the year. I made a quilt top (I still have to figure out how I’m going to quilt it), decouped recycled glass jars, made a couple of wreaths, made loads of different Christmas ornaments, made and sent various greeting cards to friends, (thanks to inspiration from YouTube’s Maymay made it.com) and tried my hand at sewing rope baskets. My new pipedream is to quit my day job and build a business teaching others how to make various crafts by being the “activity” for birthday parties, baby or bridal showers, or other gatherings – perhaps in retirement if the world recovers a bit and people can meet up in groups again, I can try to make a go of it.

Phil’s gardening produced a bounty of flowers and vegetables for us this summer. Cucumbers, radishes, potatoes, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, peas, green beans... he even got a volunteer pumpkin and tried growing sweet potatoes! With only 20 square feet of garden, we’ll never be self-sufficient (we only got 4 large runner beans; enough as a side for just one meal); so thank God for weekly online grocery delivery. But our garden made for some awesome, huge salad suppers, and we preserved over 17 pounds of green tomatoes that we’ll use to make lovely sweet spiced loaf bread, similar to zucchini bread. Phil’s courgettes (zucchini’s) didn’t do well this year; he grew them in pots that were too small to sustain the plants, but there was plenty of other stuff and he learned a lot through the season.

Through lockdown, we continued to occasionally visit Phil’s parents. We considered them part of our “social bubble.” They are okay, although Dad really misses all the socialising with “the Buffs” (the Royal Order of Buffalos, an organisation that raises money for local charities). He does continue to maintain a regular newsletter for the group, passing jokes and news far and wide with a booklet he mails to people near, and as far away as South Africa. He does the vast majority of the work on his own, but we regularly assist with scanning and inputting pictures and resolving computer issues that seem to occur precisely when we receive a call to see if we’re coming over for Sunday dinner. ☺ Phil occasionally wears his “No 1 will not fix your computer for you” t-shirt as a joke, although we really don’t mind helping where we can.

As for Sandy’s Dad, the big news is that, after 2-years on the market, this autumn has seen him suddenly receive offers on his house. Several offers have fallen through, but we think that one of the buyers in the running at the moment may be in a better position, with the house sale scheduled for late December. We’re hoping and praying that it happens and God-willing, we’re even planning to take an essential trip over to the States for three weeks in November to help him with moving out. Even if the sale falls through again, he’ll have the big house cleared so that he doesn’t have to rush if an offer finally does stick. Our travel is timed so that we can be there, broadly isolated with the move, for the first two weeks, and then take a week for shopping and visiting before returning to the UK and quarantining here for the two weeks right before Christmas. We’ve arranged special health insurance for while we’re there, and will have to wear face masks on the plane and who knows what else along the way, but are so glad for this important reason to travel back after a whole year away.

The day that this latest offer was made on Dad’s house, Phil & I had agreed to adopt two rescue dogs from a charity that saves dogs from Romania. Fortunately, the charity was able to find other homes for Monty and Noah and hopefully when we get back from the States we’ll be able to fill our home once again with some new fur babies. We hope that’s in God’s plan, anyway.

2020 has been a year of adjustment for everyone. That adjustment has been stressful and tense, but it’s also forced time to think and reflect on what’s important. As you close out this year of change, we pray that you, too, are coping with your new normal and that you are able to find nuggets of joy and love in your memories of this unique year. As Christmas comes upon us, we hope that the craziness of this year helps you find fresh pleasure and reassurance in the promises of the baby in the manger who went on to save our souls for an eternal life of worship and fellowship in heaven with Him.

We hope that 2021 gives lots of opportunities to glorify God and enjoy Him, no matter what this sin-filled world throws at you. Take courage and keep pressing on.

Warm regards,

Sandy & Phil Parker