

## **2021-08-22 A New Life**

### ***A New Life***

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Pastor Scott Austin

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

And now I'm going to send it over to Ville for our pre-sermon reading.

[Voice of Ken Tryon]

And our second scripture reading this morning comes from the Gospel of John chapter 12 verses 20 through 26. The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life, lose it. And those who hate their life and this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am, there will be my servant. Also, whoever serves me, the father will honor.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thanks Ken. So, I had this theory about how the pandemic is affecting some people's lives right now. My theory is that people are using this moment in our history together to make, like last chance, big changes in their lives. Right. How many of you, you don't have to show hands because this might be kind of personal for some of you, how many of you know somebody who's left a job or a relationship or started some big new thing or moved to a new city, very recently, right. How many of you are some of those people. Right. and my theory is that, because, Lord, please help me not to be speaking falsehooods right now because it's coming to the end of the pandemic. I think there's a lot of people who are out there feeling like, Oh no, this is my last chance to make that huge change that I've been thinking about for longer than a year and a half, but I really like felt like there's a window to make it right now. And it feels like that window is closing and sometimes people, it feels to me, just observing the world and to some extent my own life that people are like, okay, now's the time. Now's the last moment, we got to move right now, because who knows how much longer. The Pandennis will be around as

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an excuse for why you did that thing. Hopefully not that much longer. So I think some people are using this moment and in our shared history as an opportunity to start a new life in some ways. Now of course on the face of it starting something new is actually morally neutral. It can be really good to start something new. But sometimes we start something new and it's done maybe irresponsibly or it has consequences for other people. Some of you know that all too well. Anyway, I've had this theory for a few months now. But it has resurfaced for me this week. Because the title of this week's message is a new life. This is the third week in our series entitled the new normal is neither new normal. And this is really the week where things take a pretty serious turn. So far we've done a new day. Anybody can do a new day. And we've done a new season and we're all kind of familiar with the fact that life moves and seasons. But today it's a whole new life. And that might be that might be pretty significant for you. So the key verse as you've just heard read is from John chapter 12 and it's when Jesus said, Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. So he's teaching about this, this connection between death and resurrection between one thing, ending so that a new thing can start. And of course he's talking about his own experience that he's about to have, but traditionally the church has also interpreted this to be speaking about a type of conversion that can happen in our own lives, or one thing dies so that another thing can live or something old passes away. So that's something new can grow in its place. Now, I will give you a caveat at the outset here. This message is not going to apply to everybody, it's not for everybody. And I'll just quickly acknowledge that maybe you like me hear the phrase new life, and it carries with it, all kinds of assumptions and I'm not necessarily trying to bring all of those assumptions to the table for you today. But the truth is, for many of you that that phrase new life in Christ is kind of the elephant in the room anyway it's very very common in conservative American Christianity, which a lot of us have some experience with and to be fair to conservative, American Christianity. It's a common phrase in those settings because it's a common phrase in the New Testament, new life in Christ is definitely a thing. In the Bible, right. Here's the problem though. Just because of phrase appears in the Bible doesn't mean that it means when it comes to take on as its meaning in the broader culture. Does that make sense. This phrase appears in the Bible, it means whatever it means. It also appears in our common religious vocabulary and it means whatever I say it means, Because I'm the pastor and I get to do that. Right. You're chuckling because you're perceiving that hopefully that's not what I'm trying to do right now. But maybe you've been in a setting where that is what somebody is trying to do. And this by the way this is this is like, you know, the one simple trick for manipulating religious people. you can take this language which is in the Bible. The book that has authority in their lives and apply to it your own meaning and leverage that in to do almost anything. No. Again, I hope that that's not what I'm about to do. But I'm probably guilty of doing that kind of thing in my own way. At times in my life and in my career. And I hope that I'm open

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to correction if that ever does happen, all that to say the phrase new life might carry some specific meaning for you and I know it does for me. This idea that someone whose life is totally consumed with sin has a literal come to Jesus moment, you know, whether that's, you know, in my church context who would have been coming forward to the altar, right, or maybe it's at a prayer meeting or an inner varsity meeting or a young life meeting or prison ministry or whatever it might be, in youth group we were led to believe that every one of us was the spiritual equivalent of a mass murderer, or a drug drug kingpin or something. Right. And that all we all needed to have this drastic life change by asking Jesus into our hearts, language, by the way, which is not from the Bible. The problem with us so it's not exactly rocket science looking back is that, to my knowledge, none of us were actually in need of that kind of radical reorientation of our entire lives, we all needed Jesus, still do. But what we did not need to do and I think we were sometimes told to do is to reject everything about ourselves. In order to follow him. Still don't need to do that. And so I'm wade into the waters of this new life language with some trepidation, which is part of the reason why I say this message might not be for you today. And that's okay. So, as I said so far in this series, we've done a new day and a new season and those weeks I've asked you to at the end of the sermon, I asked you to imagine on the first week. Gently waking up to a new day with God. And then last week I asked you to imagine what the markers of a new season with God would be what are the, the leaves changing color or the springs coming out of the cold ground equivalents for you spiritually right now as you imagine a new season with God and today I want to ask you to consider whether you might need to think about this more drastic idea of something more comprehensive and whole new life with God. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies it bears much fruit. What I want to do is use this teaching of Jesus. As a starting point. Because if it if it's true that Jesus was talking about his own death and resurrection and that if it's true that we're all going to have our own type of experiences with God but if it's true that there is some meaning in that seed falling to the ground and dying and then becoming something. I began to think about other agricultural plant life metaphors. This is so I'm going to do if you'll permit me and you know what this means, a little bit of a little bit of New Testament mid rash, and just kind of open up some other metaphors and imagery that are based on this teaching of Jesus because this one as I said has perhaps taken on such a radical hue. So the first image that I want you to think about is of a tree, and specifically today, I'm thinking about a tree and maybe you've seen a tree like this that has had sort of late in its life and entire limb removed from it. Do you have a picture of that in your head, it has that that flat oval shape where the limb used to be. And it kind of grows that ring that sort of like a tree scar around it. Can you picture this tree. I saw a tree like that on a prayer walk in 2012, and I had one of the few times actually wrote something down while I was on a prayer walk and I'm glad I did because it reminded me of what was happening in that moment. And what was happening in that moment for me was

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that artists in church had just sort of finished a season of a couple of years of major transition, where we had lost all of our founding pastors from the staff except for myself, where I had been involved in something that was collaborative in a, in a way that was no longer true, where relationships had changed their character and, in some cases, ended or had paused. And at the time, looking at that tree while I was praying. It conveyed a message to me of new life, but also of laws and explain what I mean. Let me explain what I mean. Because the first thing I did was imagine that all the had been lost when that limb had been cut off. I don't remember what kind of tree, it was but you might imagine it as a fruit tree or an oak tree that has acorns Think of all the fruit all the seeds all the leaves. That would have grown off of this limb in the life of the tree Had it been able to continue on in the path it was on before it got that limb cut off all of that life was lost. Every single piece of fruit that would have grown on that limb will never exist, every seed or acorn that would have grown off that limb and created something new and an entirely new tree will never exist, none of those trees will ever grow. Can I looked at that tree and I felt so sad, because I was focusing on what had been lost from artists in his life. And from my life at that time. And I couldn't stop thinking for a few minutes of all of the potential that was gone. Then I looked at the tree a little more carefully and walked around it and saw it from all sides and realize that this tree was in much better balance, than it would have been had that limb, not been cut off. This tree. Not only was fully healed in the spot where the limb had come off, but was so much healthier than it might have been otherwise. And therefore, was going to live and flourish so much longer than it would have been if that limb hadn't been cut off. And so I stopped thinking about that. Dead limb lying on the ground, never to produce anything else. And I started thinking about how much stronger the tree was. How many more hundreds or thousands of trees, it might be able to produce because it was healthy because it had been pruned. That's also biblical language, by the way. Some of you find yourselves today. In a situation like the tree was before the limb was cut off. Not all of you, but some of you maybe a few of you are recognizing right now that there's a there's a huge part of your life, that needs to be removed. Possibly at significant pain and loss to yourself. And that needs to be removed if you're going to flourish for the rest of your life. You probably know what it is. You probably know that it has to go. What is holding you back from making that cut. Others of you. This story is hitting differently because you've had a limb removed from your tree trunk. And you never wanted it to be removed in the first place. You've lost a job or a relationship or a family member. And you're still feeling the pain of that loss, you're still feeling a sense of misshapen it's like you don't exist in the world the way you know and feel like you should. If you're in that boat, can you trust that your life will one day return to balance, even though it will never be the same. Can you and trust that process to God. And can you choose to begin it today. So maybe you're a tree that's last one of its limbs. I'm going to miniaturize. Now, and give you a second image, another metaphor to think about something smaller something younger and I'm going to ask

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you to think about a sapling in a pot. Just a young sprig just a few inches above the soil. Last spring I took some of the seeds from our cherry tree out here and planted them in pots. I think I had 10 or 12 pots that Angela gave me. Put some soil in there. And then just Google that so I'm an expert, what you're supposed to do is, you're supposed to do is leave it out in the freezing cold all winter which seemed really dumb until I thought he'd done me, that's what happens to actual cherry seeds. Right. And so a few of them did sprout and then I ignored them, but that's not what the servants about the word too much more hopeful sermon. I got bored I don't know what to tell you. But these little cherry trees were just, you know, three inches above the soil level. I want you to imagine that this sapling in a pot is somehow uprooted from the soil in fact I want you to imagine that the pot has fallen off it's a ceramic products fallen off the shelf and shattered. And so there's little plant is fragile little thing is uprooted from the soil, it's exposed to the elements. And it's not getting any water. By the way, this is a metaphor that the Eastern Church Fathers used to describe the consequences of our sin or the, the way that the human race fell away from God. And they think about it very differently than the western church but that's a whole different story. The circumstances of this little plant life have changed dramatically and suddenly. It's helpless. Now left on its own. This plant will die. It's not dead yet. And there's a gardener. Gardener who cares for the plan. So I want you to imagine the gardener. Carefully lift from the ground and wraps the roots up in a, like a damp paper towel. While she goes and gets a new pot. This part is bigger, by the way, That little plant was going to outgrow that old one. And the gardener fills the pot with soil and she, she gently places the young plant into that new soil pressing it down you know how you can press the soil down. Can you feel it, holding that plants stock in place and then she adds water, and she puts the plant on the window so where can get plenty of warm sunlight. This plant is going to live, had no hope. If it stayed on the floor with the pot shards. And it might take some time to recover and start growing again. That's going to be okay. It's going to be better than okay it's going to thrive. Some of you today are feeling like your entire support system has been shattered. Some of you are noticing that all the structure and safety that you had not that long ago. What you had rooted yourself in, not that long ago is gone. For some of you, your entire way of understanding the world doesn't make sense anymore. And that could be because of everything that's going on in the world, it could be because of religious shift that's happening in your own heart in life or mind. For the sake of this analogy let's imagine that this is not your fault. This is, this is no consequence of anything you have done. You are not being punished by having your pot removed. Can you trust. The Master Gardener to report you to transplant you. And maybe, maybe you will find yourself in a totally different soil, you might find yourself in a completely new faith community or none at all for a season, you may find yourself, engaging in a totally new spiritual practice, a completely different way of praying or reading the Bible or being with God at all. You may find yourself in a much bigger pot and you ever thought was necessary or a

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real thing. You're seeing a plant that's in a pot that's too small and when you pull that whole thing out like this, jello mold experience and the roots are pressing so hard against the whole enchilada they have nowhere to go there pot was too small. Their pot was too small. Maybe you've been living in a pot that's too small. Maybe you'll get replanted in the real garden out in the elements. But mystically connected to every other plant in the world, as you are potted in the soil, not in a pot. But planted in the soil. Some of this might sound scary if you overthink it because there's a familiarity and a safety in the old part. Can you stop yourself from fighting God. Can you stop yourself from insisting that God put you back into a pot that is actually broken. if not just too small. Can you stop yourself from begging God to put you back into soil with no nutrients to nourish you into a housing that's way too small for what God desires for you. So, maybe the idea of a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying is not the only way to have a new life. Maybe pruning or transplanting is a valid way to try. Or maybe that grain of seed that the grain of wheat falling into the ground is actually just the start of new life right if you, if we wanted to really extend these metaphors, probably past their point of breakage but we would imagine that both the tree and the potted plant started out as a seed that fell into the ground and died and sprouted up again right. And I say that because if you like me, lived a good part of your life thinking that the only thing that mattered was the death. and the original resurrection or the original sprout, you're missing out on so much more new life. So God wants to give you new life that's not just this one little moment of conversion that you might have had 20 3040 years ago or two minutes ago. Right. There's so much more. there's new life every day. So if that little underground death has already taken place and you're being. Thanks be to God. I am not in any way. Trying to diminish the importance of that experience that you had. But I am telling you that you might be ready and you might need to, you might find yourself in need of a different understanding of new life of an expanded idea. You don't need to chop down the entire tree of your life. But you might need to remove some that way. You don't need to throw your fragile and vulnerable self into the compost heap. You just need to trust the gardener to come along and lovingly provide a new environment where it's safe to grow and where it's possible to thrive. If you're a imaginative person you might already be thinking of other agricultural metaphors that work for you. It's okay. I'll just say it one last time. Not everyone is in need of a new life right this minute. If none of these ideas ring true for you today. Perhaps it would be worth thinking about those around you, both here in the room if you are those around you in your life, people you love and whether they're ready for that kind of transformation and what your role or what the privilege of watching that happened might be for you. But I do believe that there are probably some of you who find yourselves. In this moment on this day in this season. in need of a whole new way of life. The people I mentioned earlier, who are blowing up their lives in one way or another, because it feels like this is their, their window to do it. They're not necessarily wrong about the window. It's quite possible that

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you or someone you know is going about it in a way that's destructive to themselves or others, but it can be done in a way that's healthy. So, is there a way that you today since the Spirit of God calling you forward into new life. I'm going to offer you a minute or two of quiet reflection, encourage you to practice a listening prayer, where you just imagine yourself sitting before God and saying, I'm listening. And after that we'll take communion together. I trust that the Spirit of Jesus has spoken to you if you need to speaking to. God will give you what you need to hear today, last thing I'll say is this. I returned to that moment of prayer from 2012, because I wrote it down. I'm not usually good at that. But on the off chance that you had a meaningful moment with God that if the spirit has spoken to you in some way about what's happening in your life right now. I would encourage you to take a minute and record it somehow. This is your free moment to tap on your phone while I'm preaching. If you want to I'm done, I'm not preaching anymore but maybe write it down in a notebook if you have one, make a little sketch. I'm not an artist but I had a sketch of that tree, and it really meant something to me to see it again. So I'll leave you with that encouragement, make a record of this experience, if you've had one.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).