

St. Paul's In Your Home
Daily Devotionals:
Meditations, Meanderings, and Music
In A Time of Covid

Volume 1, #1-243

Wednesday, March 18, 2020 to
Friday, December 25, 2020

by Pastor Mark Opgrand

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With Several by
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Preface

In March 2020 our way of being together in Christian community changed. The world was in a pandemic; we were sheltering in place. For the first time in at least a hundred years, our church was closed on Sundays for worship and during weekdays for everything else. It was a new world.

Like many churches, we quickly worked toward creating online worship, and forming groups to keep in touch with each other. Our Senior Pastor Jonathan Conrad and I elected create daily offerings that would be accessed through the internet. Pastor Jonathan created God's Minute video devotions and daily Bible studies. I began writing "St. Paul's In Your Home," my own variation on the popular "Christ In Our Home" devotionals distributed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church In America.

After writing #1 on March 18, 2020, I never imagined that two hundred thirty-four devotions later, I would still be writing. While I have written sermons for over forty years, I had never written extensively like this, essentially writing every day since I first began.

There was no master plan for what might emerge. I jotted ideas, looked for resonating scripture, sought words that would proclaim God's grace, and added a prayer. As a bonus, I soon discovered that by adding links to YouTube music, I could provide added opportunity for meditation. I believed that even if the theme of the devotion didn't speak to someone that particular day, maybe the music would. Well over a thousand links have been added. Many performers were new to me, and it has been a great joy to discover them.

Positive feedback from members has encouraged this project. As I review Volume One, I see great variety. Included are personal stories I have never had occasion to tell before. So here I could share the time I got picked up for armed robbery in college or seeing the wonder of a snack bar 792 feet below the earth at Carlsbad Caverns. On a beautiful spring day, I could share an observation that while the Azalea Festival had been cancelled, azaleas were not. Here I could share something from favorite authors like C.S. Lewis, Walter Bruggeman, Frederick Buechner, my seminary professor Gerhard Frost, Henri Nouwen, and (of course) good old Martin Luther. After a time, I was glad to include about twenty devotions from our retired or semi-retired Pastors Bob Weeks and Michael Megahan. St. Paul's Deacon Susan Jackson has happily written a couple. Current unfolding events like the pandemic or racial unrest would also invite looking for how I might comment on what has been happening during these weeks in unique year 2020.

I have not taken time to do is go through these with a fine-tooth comb, looking for misspellings or grammatical errors. I fear doing so I would be in constant editing mode. Therefore we have what we have. I am grateful for the opportunity to put this collection together. Blessings.

Pastor Mark Opgrand **December, 2020**

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, March 18, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #1

One day the world changed.

It wasn't that the world changed on a certain day, but rather it was the day I realized the world as I have experienced it, is forever changed (and still changing).

We've had other days like this: the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the terrorist attack of 9/11/2001, the "Black Tuesday" stock market collapse October 24, 1929.

This time, for me, it was March 15, 2020, the day church closed because of an emerging worldwide pandemic. And while nothing seemed really "wrong" on this particular Sunday, it marked the beginning of an awareness that many Sundays may pass before we are unable to gather for the precious gift of Christian worship and fellowship in Jesus name.

I've had Sundays "off" during other times and have always been so glad to be back together with everyone soon after that. Now we all need to learn how to connect and stay connected to each other when we cannot physically share sacred worship space.

All I know today is that it is hard to bear the thought of not being with you brothers and sisters, singing hymns, praying, sharing God's word and Holy Supper... and yes... hugging. And like nearly everyone, the unknown of what's going to happen to us during this global crisis is terrifying.

One day the world changed. What has not changed is the promise that God is faithful and merciful, steadfastly at our sides forever. That has never changed.

No matter what happens I pray that by clinging to all God's promises, we will change the way we live these days and continue to serve in Jesus name, regardless of how many feet we are from each other.

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (Jn. 14:27 NRS)

Let us pray:

O God, bless us during this time of global distress and uncertainty. We had hardly keep up with all the emotions that are stirred daily by news reports of our illness laden world. Give us strength to trust in you above all else and show us all the ways we can continue to let all our friends and loved ones know we love them. Bless all our health care workers, our scientists and researchers, our first responders and all who are in harm's way today. Protect those who are sick and those who care for them. In Jesus name. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for March 19, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #2

"Spring 'Give Me A' Break"

*"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."
(Jn. 15:13 NKJ)*

In this verse, Jesus talks about love and sacrifice. It has often been cited in wartime to acknowledge the sacrifice that one soldier makes to save another's life. It's a big thing to ask, and honorable when done.

I thought about this verse when I saw the images of thousands of young people in close contact while celebrating Spring Break on Georgia and Florida beaches. Even while their schools are closed for the rest of the year, they party on. Even while coronavirus infections spike and millions are at risk of illness and death, they party on.

Maybe this is due to ignorance. Or indifference. But the simple act of social distancing to slow the spread of this virus is not that hard. It's not throwing yourself on a live grenade to save a comrade's life.

It is choosing, for the sake of others, especially those most vulnerable, not to go to the party. It is practicing responsible hygiene. It is recognizing that we are part of humanity and have a responsibility to each other.

Christian faith has this right. Jesus calls us to love and care for our neighbor. Furthermore, Jesus models what it looks like to sacrifice everything to show us the way God wants us to live.

Seeing spring breakers or anyone who is careless with their health practices makes me grateful for all those who are doing everything possible to address this global crisis and keep people safe. I don't take that for granted.

As Christians, it should come as a matter of faith to care for our family, neighbors, and all of humanity. That's because everything we are and everything we do is about receiving with grateful hearts the love of God and practicing it through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray.

We give you thanks, gracious God, for each day that we are protected from harm. We pray for all those, and now their loved ones, who may have been unnecessarily exposed to the virus this past week. Continue to strengthen our resolve to do all we can to be safe. Bless our scientists and health care professionals, our elected leaders, policy makers, and those in industry who are making the things we need. Continue to remind us of your never-failing love and faithfulness. In Jesus name. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, March 20, 2020, by Pastor Mark Opgrand, #3

"I Want Jesus to Walk with Me"

Was it just a couple of weeks ago that we had our last "regular" worship at St. Paul's? I wonder what we might have done differently had we known things would be changing so quickly?

Probably not much. And that is a good thing. We would still have been singing, praying, hearing the gospel proclaimed, and sharing Holy Communion. Just the normal wonderful things that come with being a community of faith.

One thing I did at the 9:00 am service was to videotape a special instrumental prelude performed by Dick Stover on alto sax and accompanied by Glenda Poole on piano. I am new to using my phone to video, but I anticipated this would be a sweet offering. It was.

What I hadn't anticipated was how the words of this song would be so relatable to our current daily lives. Please click the link below to share the song (and maybe sing along).

1 I want Jesus to walk with me;
I want Jesus to walk with me;
all along my pilgrim journey,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

2 In my trials, Lord, walk with me;
in my trials, Lord, walk with me;
when my heart is almost breaking,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

3 When I'm in trouble, Lord, walk with me;
when I'm in trouble, Lord, walk with me;
when my head is bowed in sorrow,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

Let us pray:

The song expresses so well what so many of us are feeling these days, Lord Jesus. We need you to walk with us during these difficult days. Help us experience grace and wonder as we sense your gentle footsteps. Amen.

Here is the YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozMLPeWqD2U>

St. Paul's In Your Home Daily Devotional Monday, March 23, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #4

The Azalea Festival is cancelled. Azaleas are not.

Since 1948, the Azalea Festival has been one of Wilmington's most exciting and well attended events. It is such a part of this community that it is nearly impossible to think of Wilmington without the Azalea Festival. And yet, this year we must.

2020 will be marked by no Azalea Festival. No parade, queen, court, belles, concerts, home tours, garden tours, art and craft fairs, car shows, food booths, etc. This year, nothing but the azaleas. But oh, how beautiful they are, even without a festival to celebrate them.

Where Jesus walked, they didn't have azaleas. They did have lilies, however, and Jesus spoke of them when he talked about fear and anxiety:

²⁷ Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the *lilies* of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? (Matt. 6:27-30 NRSV)

Regrettably, I'm not doing a very good job in taking these encouraging words of Jesus to heart. I wish I were, and pray I shall, but these days when I walk by the vibrant blooming azaleas, I am so easily focused simply on longing for this year to be like it has been every year since 1948 – with a festival soon to follow.

But another thing is happening this year when we actually consider the azaleas. Many of us are finding ourselves dwelling more on the God who made the heavens and the earth and especially all the beautiful things around us that we so easily take for granted. When we consider just the azaleas, we enjoy the azaleas, and thank God for all their splendor.

So the Azalea Festival is cancelled. And azaleas are not.
Church is also cancelled. But worship is not.

We continue to be joined with each other and the whole world in prayer and thanksgiving for the precious gift of God among us. We think about our beautiful precious friendships and our dear loved ones. With grateful hearts we look to God for healing and hope.

Let us pray:

Thank you for the beauty of spring days and the wonderful azaleas surrounding us. May they be a sign of hope that you engineer not only beautiful spring flowers, but also the means to see that which is deeply important. Amid the uncertainty and worry of these days, help us consider just how close in our lives, you continue to be. In Jesus name, bless all those who are sick and those who care for them. Amen.

P.S. This weekend our own Alex Hall sent along a video of a song he sang in front of his back-yard azalea bush. While not expressly about azaleas, it is about the mighty grace and mercy of God.

It's called "God Delivers Again" and you can link to it on our YouTube Channel: "stpaulslutheranncc". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWodvpYkDug> Enjoy. And more to come.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday March 24, 2020, by Pastor Mark Opgrand #5

What would you do if the world were ending tomorrow?

Martin Luther has said to have replied, "Even if the world were going to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree today."

The quote has also been attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr. It's one of those wonderful quotes where we're not quite sure who first said it. The first time we can find it quoted was by German Lutheran Pastor Karl Lotz in 1944, when the world around him was indeed going to pieces.

"Und wenn ich wüsste, dass morgen die Welt in tausend Stücke zerbräche, ich würde heute noch einen Baum pflanzen." (Literally: When I would know, that tomorrow the world will break up in thousand pieces, I would plant a tree today).

When I was brand-new pastor, my first confirmation class consisted of three middle school boys. I remember asking them this very question. I remember hoping they might imagine doing something meaningful like Luther (or Lotz or King, Jr.) Without hesitation they all agreed they would like to "go downtown and break windows." Hopefully, they were just trying to provoke their new pastor, but I can imagine in the face of destruction many at least feeling, "Oh, to hell with it. I'm going to have fun." Whatever that is. Or smash something. By contrast, some of our Men in Mission (observing physical distancing) have painted Keever Hall (Thanks!).

Based on Luther's strong confidence in God no matter what happens, we can most certainly imagine him planting a tree as a sign of hope.

One thing I have noticed in my neighborhood these days: People in their gardens. And that has reminded me of how often I have heard some people say, "I love working in my garden. I just wish I had more time." Now they do.

So... in the face of the world possibly going to pieces, people are planting trees... or shrubs... or flowers. Very nice. And apparently.... very Lutheran.

Let us pray: *Thank you for each day we can enjoy the things you give us. For those who enjoy working in gardens, may that time outside bring joy. At the same time, we turn to those dedicated servants who continue to serve the public by growing, processing, transporting, and distributing food as well as the health care workers and scientists involved in treating people and finding cures who are sick. Bless us all we pray. Amen.*

P.S. A favorite seasonal song at the 9:00 am service has been one called "The Garden Song," sung by Ron Jamieson and Alex Hall. It's one of those songs that always makes me smile, once again celebrating God's good earth and the privilege of enjoying it. "Inch by inch, row by row, God bless these seeds I sow...." Here is the link:

Also, if you are interested, the original composer of the song has a nice video here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m0LewjkO4s>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, March 25, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #6

Have you recognized God speaking to you in unexpected ways recently?

Jessica Casarez was looking at the simple news headline "COVID19 Death Rates Increase" and pondered how God might be speaking to her. Looking at CO VID 19, for reasons unknown to her at the moment, she wondered if CO might be directing her to Corinthians, either 1st or 2nd.

When she looked at 2nd CO-rinthians chapter 1, verse 9 here is what she found. St. Paul writes:

"Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises who raises the dead."

For Jessica, this spoke so clearly to our impulse to rely on ourselves during this time of crisis – on our ability to stock up food or provide for our families. It made her think about how easy it is to let fear and worry direct us away from our reliance on God.

What an amazing discovery! While pondering a dire headline, Jessica Casarez identified God directing her to a strong word of hope and encouragement in scripture. Rely on God!

When St. Paul wrote this letter, his readers may have known what had happened to him that prompted this writing. We do not. In the previous verse he says, *"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself."*

Whatever happened, it was pretty bad. And yet good came from it. Complete reliance on God.

Becoming utterly burdened beyond our strength is an experience now widely anticipated among all God's people these days. And yet God continues to speak to us, even through a headline that gets us pondering and then directs us to the comfort of the scriptures.

I am thankful these days for all the people of faith who are sharing their experiences of God with us. I would have missed COVID19's connection to 2 CO-rinthians 1:9 except for someone I never met who shared this story with a friend who shared with a friend who shared with a friend. That kind of contagious is the good kind. Spread it.

Let us pray: *Gracious Jesus, Lord of heaven and earth, be our strength. With each passing hour, we anticipate increasing burdens that seek to overwhelm us. Show us like with St. Paul, that when we feel like the world is under a sentence of death, you address our despair with true words of comfort and hope, born out of your own experience of undying love. We are relying on you. Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer. Amen.*

P.S. One of the ways we set claim to faith in all times is through music. I'm attaching a link to Director of Music Bill Remele sharing one of the greatest hymns of the church. This is the first time

the organ has been heard in many weeks, due to the pipes being removed for sanctuary restoration work. Upon re-installation, what better hymn for us to hear than *“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8ifmMvHKao>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, March 26, 2020, by Pastor Mark Opgrand #7

“Too many people are dying alone.”

It was a chilling story on WECT's website: “A New York doctor's story: ‘Too many people are dying alone.’”

In the report, Dr. Kamini Doobay, an emergency medicine physician said this: “So often a patient will be on their deathbed, dying alone, and it's been incredibly painful to see the suffering of family members who I call from the ICU, hearing the tears, crying with them on the phone. Too many of them are dying alone with absolutely no family around them. This is one of the most horrific things.”

Dr. Doobay describes a widespread heartache that we have not yet experienced in our community. But one thing struck me after years of being at people's bedsides in hospice centers. While we suffer as a loved one is dying, people of faith know they are not alone. When family can be with the, it is a deep comfort. But even more important is that undeniable expression of faith and keen awareness that God is with them.

This is one of the great gifts of faith. We are not alone. God is with us.
I am not alone. God is with me. Living or dying.

St. Paul said it this way:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. (Romans 14:7-9)

For people of faith, this is a comfort for both the living and the dying. For those on their deathbeds in an emergency room or intensive care unit, this is a comfort. For those loved ones unable to see them, this is a comfort. For those who know the love and God and the love of family, we pray the presence of God and love of family is keenly felt, especially in the dark hours.

I recently videotaped our organist Bill Remele playing “A Mighty Fortress.” At that time, I asked Bill for a second one I could post later. Bill replied, “How about ‘My Faith Looks Up To Thee.’” Thinking of today's devotion this is just right, not only because of its beautiful melody, but especially because of the strong declaration of faith in verses three and four:

*When life's dark maze I tread
and grief around me spread,
be thou my guide;
bid darkness turn to day
wipe sorrow's tears away
nor let me ever stray
from thee aside.*

*When ends life's transient dream,
when death's cold sullen stream
shall o'er me roll;
blest Savior then in love
fear and distrust remove;
oh, bear me safe above,
a ransomed soul.*
(text Ray Palmer 1808-1887)

I believe no one dies alone. By God's grace, some of us know that we have a blessed Lord Jesus at our side every breath of the way. In these troubled times I pray that each person, living or dying will come to know this beautiful promise.

Let us pray:

Living or dying, Lord Jesus we are yours. May all your children come to know your presence and eternal love, so that we all can look toward the one certain part of our future, namely that you will always hold us close and never let us be alone. Amen.

Here is the link to the hymn: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8nFLTn7SIA>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, March 27, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #8

A(nother) Mighty Fortress (that may deeply move you)

I honestly believe one of the greatest technological gifts to us has been the website "YouTube." Thousands upon thousands of videos are able to be uploaded (including those from St. Paul's during this time of distancing). I have no idea how many total views there are of all the posted videos posted. Billions I imagine.

There is a kind of fancy internet algorithm apparently that determines your interest and then recommends certain videos to watch. Perhaps posting Bill's wonderful recitation of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is what prompted YouTube to imagine I might like another version of "A Mighty Fortress" done by the Fountainview Academy, which I later learned is a Christian High School in British Columbia.

I clicked. And was brought to tears. Really.

This performance by a group of these students is so touching and so moving that I would be remiss to not share it with all of you who also love this great hymn of the church.

It is a timely hymn that speaks to every age

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBhVuCcz9GI>

1. A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and pow'r are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

2. Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

3. And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us;
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure, One little word shall fell him.

4. That word above all earthly pow'rs, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth;
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,

His kingdom is forever.

Let us pray:

Thank you, God, for the gift of music and for how through creative melody and powerful lyrics you make possible bearing witness to your wonderful grace and determined love. Thank you for this day. Help us be safe in the days ahead. In Jesus Name. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, March 30, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #9

Sheltering In Place with Psalm 91

Everything these days takes on a new perspective because of COVID-19. Everything.

Today a "sheltering in place" order comes down from governing authorities desperate to "flatten the curve." Just a few months ago I had no idea what that even meant. I sure do now, and along with the whole world I pray for this to happen so that the whole human race, and those most vulnerable among us, might have a better chance of surviving this pandemic.

And so now we are now directed to "shelter in place."

"Sheltering" has prompted me to think of the song "On Eagles' Wings." Many of us know Psalm 91 as much through the song as through the scripture. Composed by Roman Catholic Priest Michael Joncas in 1979, it makes a beautiful affirmation of faith drawn from the Psalm as well as from Exodus 19 and Matthew 13. Since its inception, it is now included in multiple hymnals and has been recorded or sung by countless artists.

So about to shelter in place I think about the song's opening lyric, "You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord, who abide in the shadow for life, say to the Lord my refuge, my Rock in Whom I trust. (Ps. 91:1-2).

For Christians facing or living in a pandemic, few places can feel really safe these days. Even as we seek safe shelter, we are so aware of the insidious nature of a virus that lives determined to seek us out to inhabit our bodies and take our breath away.

Psalm 91 promises the faithful that we shall not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day (substitute "droplet that flies.") I love this promise, but to be honest, this is one that is easily embraced. It's so much easier to be confident in such promises when all is well and we are well.

Even so, one of the increasingly *less hidden* blessings these days, is for the faithful, a growing realization that God is continually finding ways for us to connect deeply with him. As if our life depends on it (which it does).

We *are* dwelling in the shelter of Lord. We always have. But maybe we are realizing it a bit more now that we are "sheltering... in place."

Let us pray.

Help us sing those songs which lift our spirits as we shelter in place. Raise us up as on eagle's wings. Bear us up. Guard us in all your ways. In Jesus holy name we pray.

P.S. There are many versions of "*On Eagles' Wings*" on YouTube. Hopefully we'll have our own rendition sometime soon, but here is a link to a beautiful version that was accompanied by some touching graphics. Blessings.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9zEgRsorZ4>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, March 31, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #10

"One Day More" for a Pandemic New Day

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24)

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy, then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them." Psalm 126:1

One of the most popular musicals of this past century has been "Les Miserables," or "Les Mis" for short. Quite a few years ago now we had a large group from St. Paul's attend a Myrtle Beach performance of the musical.

One of the best known and most stirring songs in Les Mis is "One Day More," where many characters are assembled together on the eve of the 1832 Paris uprising. With many voices, everyone ponders what "God in heaven has in store" for the new day.

A version of this song "going viral" (in a good way) is one done with all new words for an all new day done by a family in Kent, England. It was passed along to me not long after I received my daily dose of news that did not make me smile. This video by the Marsh family reflected on their own experience of "One Day More." This one made my smile and laugh so hard I was once again brought to tears.

Every day is a gift. Every day gives us an opportunity to turn distress and fear into moments where we continue to celebrate the precious time God gives us. May God smile upon us and may we smile back.

Let us pray: *With each new day in this changed world, we wonder how many more days shall be like this. Help us take each day at a time and find parts of each day that remind us of the precious nature of our lives and our relationships with each other. Thank you for those who, with grace and humor, bring smiles to our faces. In Jesus name. Amen.*

Here's the link to "One Day More" by the Marsh family on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdcSONbo7Ng>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, April 1, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #11

April Fools! Devotional Edition.

For many, this has been one of the fun days of the year, an annual tradition for people and corporations becoming pranksters. Newspapers or websites annually come up with creative false stories or spoofs to promote their businesses and make us laugh. Websites like Parade.com release their annual "Show off your Inner-Jokester with these 60 Outrageous April Fools' Day Pranks."

This year it has pretty much been cancelled. Many corporations are not charging the "creatives" to come up with something. And the whole idea of trying to trick someone with a false statement for a laugh (like wasting toilet paper for a prank) just doesn't seem so funny this year.

"Did you hear about the guy who thought it was funny to cough in someone's face and say he has the coronavirus? April Fools! Haha." Could get you arrested. Really.

Regrettably, there appears to be many "April Fools" this year, that is, people who are have not been paying attention to a world changing global pandemic. By choosing not to be active in social distancing or staying in place, or who have thrown caution to the wind, defying social gathering restrictions, they have been putting themselves and their loved ones in harms way unnecessarily.

Proverbs has something to say about these April (or any other month) Fools. Note how, by contrast, the wise some off much better.

²¹ The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense. (Prov. 10:21 NRS)

¹⁵ Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice. (Prov. 12:15 NRS)

²⁶ Those who trust in their own wits are fools; but those who walk in wisdom come through safely. (Prov. 28:26 NRS)

⁶ The wise are cautious and turn away from evil, but the fool throws off restraint and is careless. (Prov. 14:16 NRS)

You get the point. What is hard these days is that being foolish has consequences not only for the individual fool, for those exposed to the fool's poor choices. Like every person in prayer these days, I hope the whole human race can "wise up," so we can do everything possible to pay attention to life preserving guidelines and live... and furthermore live as God calls us.

That would be the wise thing to do. Blessings to you as you care for yourself, your loved ones, your neighbors, and all whom God loves.... even the fools out there.

Let us pray:

Grant us wisdom, O God, that we may support and care for each other. Bless those called to serve as medical professionals and caregivers. Grant wisdom to the scientists and researchers, and common sense to us all as we do our parts to fight this pandemic. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. Regarding the devotion you just read.... I was just kidding. (April fool!) Not.

PPSS. Okay, blame it on this foolish pastor trying to make a meaningful devotion on April Fools Day, but I here I am with a "Oh my, I may need a YouTube link to save this one." Well, God and YouTube once again provide, but it may be better appreciated if 1) if you know the classic rock ballad "*Bohemian Rhapsody*" by Queen and 2) recognize that I saw in this parody the point I was trying to make about April Fools. If it makes no sense, open up tomorrow's St. Paul's In Your Home for (hopefully) something better. Blessings. Your fool for Christ, Pastor Mark

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lr_tEdQvFcc

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, April 2, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #12

March 2020: Going to church today?

April 2020: Going online to church today?

How things change so quickly. Yesterday I received our church magazine, "The Living Lutheran." The latest edition of Christ In Our Home (for April, May, and June) has been here for a few weeks.

What strikes me is how all these articles were written for a different time our formerly "normal" time. Before everything has come to be filtered through a world pandemic crisis. For us in Wilmington, the worst of this is something we only now seeing on TV. We fear what is to come.

During this time, at St. Paul's we are trying to find ways to keep in touch with everyone, whether through these email devotions, or Pastor Jonathan's God Minutes, or trying to create online worship experiences. I know phone calls have been very welcomed.

In doing these devotionals, I welcome feedback or links to things you have found meaningful. Today I am grateful to Beth Pottle for sharing with me something she had discovered on one of her favorite blogs: "A First Slip" by Claudia Cummins.

So today I want to share with you a wonderful offering written by Lynn Ungar. It speaks clearly to us as we seek meaningful ways to worship and draw closer to God during this time of physical separation, isolation and staying in place. There is much to ponder in these words, especially as we consider how the sabbath is now (even with separation) becoming more and more a time when we can think and pray deeply, connecting with God and each other. Through these sabbath days, I pray we will all discover surprising connections and gifts that lift our spirits and bring to light all that which is so important right now.

"Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy." (Exodus 20:8)

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?

Cease from travel.

Cease from buying and selling.

Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those

to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)

Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

~ Lynn Ungar

Let us pray: *O God may these days bring for us a kind of sabbatical connection that draws us deeply into the experience of your great love for us. Thank you for artists and poets who find words that stir our hearts and bring us hope. Protect those who put their lives in danger every day to save and serve others. In Jesus name. Amen.*

P.S. I found another video that moved me, this time another version of "A Mighty Fortress." This was done before the pandemic, but done in a virtual way with 176 participants from 34 different countries being knit together on unity of voice for the gospel. God is good. Enjoy

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4EoLm3_luM

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, April 3, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #13

For the love of Christ urges us on – II Corinthians 5:14

I wasn't so much drawn to the quote as the little book it was in. I had been looking on my bookshelf at old hymnals for information on how Palm Sunday was celebrated here at St. Paul's more than a hundred years ago. (More on that Palm Sunday).

It was a very worn falling apart copy of a book that had belonged to my grandmother that caught my attention. It was entitled God's Minute: A Book of Daily Prayers For Home Worship; A Prayer for Every Day in the Year, by "365 Eminent clergymen and laymen."

A couple of things struck me. First was published in 1916, it has been reprinted over the years many times. You can even download a Kindle version for just \$0.99. It's quite a testament to the way generations of Christians had been drawn to these prayers, even while they were first composed during World War I.

With a kind of awkward King James English style, this book of prayers likely fell out of favor sometime after the sixth printing in the mid-sixties, but as with many things these days, I am taking renewed interest. (I'm sure doing daily devotionals is encouraging me to look for inspiration in many places).

When I think of how this book of prayers was used so regularly by my grandmother, and as I recognize these prayers first written in the context of the first World War and the Spanish Flu epidemic which affected the lives of everyone, I am quite moved. I am also touched by the eloquence of the prose. So let me share one today that spoke deeply to me a hundred and four years after it was first written. From February Fourteenth, by Rev. John Thomson Peters, New York New York.

Our Father, whose creative and guiding hand is behind all of life, make real within me today the heart that responds to [your] love. The world in the midst of which [you have] set me too often seems unfriendly and hostile, and in this strange land that I call home I need the assurance of that power that springs from love.

Long before I breathed the air of the world [you were] conscious of me. During every waking and sleeping hour of my life [you] are laying siege to my heart, seeking from within me a response of love and confidence.

Let me now unbolt every door that holds [you] from my inmost being. Let Christ and the love of Christ be formed in me that I may become a new creature.

I confess, O Lord, that when [your] love is in my heart I am a changed person. Send now that love, that I may be less critical of my neighbors, more tolerant and loving toward my family. Give me a sense of the highest that is in my own life, that I may strive to become that best.

For it is not by the force of law, nor yet by a judicial command, but only by the urgency of love that [you] seek me. So let me now be urged by [your] love to yield myself completely to [you].

Cast out my sin and enter in, Be born in me this day. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, April 4, 2020, by Pastor Mark Opgrand #14

A beautiful day for a parade. (If we had one).

Not many months ago, I was thinking about the 2020 Azalea Festival Parade happening the day before Palm Sunday.

Then I imagined drawing upon Azalea Parade imagery during the children's sermon. The kids would identify with the parade, remembering floats and bands and clowns and belles and festival queen and court. Because kids love parades, it would not be hard for them to identify with the crowd in reli during that day when Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem.

Jesus was welcomed like a king, with palm branches waving and shouts of "Hosanna." Since that first Palm Sunday parade, we have regularly remembered that time as we have entered into our own time of worship with that rousing hymn, "All glory, laud and honor, to you redeemer king. To whom the lips of children, made sweet hosanna's ring."

But today, with no Azalea Festival Parade, and on the eve our very first remote experienced Palm Sunday worship, I am actually thinking about another hymn. We could even march to it in a parade, if we had one.

That hymn is "*Onward Christian Soldiers*".

For many generations, this has been a favorite hymn, though it fell out of favor in recent years by some who believed the lyrics' militaristic imagery set Christians against persons of other faiths. This was countered by those who proposed the battle imagery simply described the war against Satan and the hosts of hell.

Today I see this hymn in a new and positive way. Because of Covid-19, whole world now has a common enemy. It is a very real enemy that has the power to destroy millions of lives regardless of ethnicity, religion or country of origin. This enemy is now giving those who share common faith (or even common humanity) cause and encouragement to unite in ways never experienced before.

A war is being waged upon us. The foe is the virus. And what we are learning is that in faith "we are not divided; all one body [are] we." And neither gates of hell nor effects of disease shall prevail. So, consider again these powerful lyrics (and click the link to Bill playing the organ to sing along.

Onward, Christian Soldiers

1 Onward, Christian soldiers,
 marching as to war,
 with the cross of Jesus
 going on before.
 Christ, the royal master,

leads against the foe;
forward into battle,
see, his banners go!

Refrain

Onward, Christian soldiers,
marching as to war,
with the cross of Jesus
going on before.

2 Like a mighty army
moves the church of God;
let us boldly follow
where the saints have trod.
We are not divided;
all one body we;
one in hope and doctrine,
one in charity. Refrain

3 Crowns and thrones may perish,
kingdoms rise and wane,
but the church of Jesus
constant will remain;
gates of hell can never
'gainst the church prevail.
We have Christ's own promise,
and that cannot fail. Refrain

4 Onward, then, you faithful,
join our happy throng;
blend with ours your voices
in the triumph song.
Glory, laud, and honor
unto Christ the king.
We through countless ages
with the angels sing: *Refrain*

Text: Sabine Baring-Gould, 1834-1924

May God bless us as we fight this together. Let us pray.

Hear our prayers, O God, as we march together for you and against all that would seek to destroy life, faith, and hope. May we draw strength from you and each other as we battle this deadly

coronavirus and its effects on lives and livelihoods. Be with those at the front lines and show us all ways to support them and each other. In Jesus name, all glory laud and honor. Amen.

P.S. Please click the link to hear Bill Remele play “*Onward Christian Soldiers*” on St. Paul’s organ. Sing along. And here’s some fun facts I did not know: While the text was composed by Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould in 1864. It was written for his children to sing during a processional parade. Its original tune “St. Albans” has an entirely different feel. The most popular tune, the boisterous “St. Gertrude”, was composed in 1871 by Arthur Sullivan, best known for his 14 popular operettas with collaborator W.S. Gilbert.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwPiRt1t8mcC2lnVrIBDnCO/>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #15

Remembering Palm Thursday 1987

"The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Matthew 21: 9-11.

On that first Palm Sunday, only a few people knew who was stirring up all this interest as he entered Jerusalem on a donkey.

On Palm Thursday 1987, we all knew who was stirring all the interest. It was one of the biggest days in the history of Purdue University. This was the day President Ronald Reagan came into the small West Lafayette, Indiana university airport (with a long runway because the school taught aviation technology and repaired big jets) and visited Purdue University!

I had never seen so many people crowding the airport and lining the streets for a glimpse of our popular president. I had never seen such excitement. I had never heard such cheering (and I regularly attended Purdue basketball games). It was wild.

It also gave me a rare gift. In my Palm Sunday Sermon, when I referred to Reagan's visit as "*Palm Thursday*," everyone at Our Saviour Lutheran Church knew exactly what I was talking about. It was as close as welcoming royalty as we had ever experienced. It was impressive.

In my sermon I noticed a lot of parallels between the president's visit and Jesus entering Jerusalem. And maybe you had to be there. But as technology would make possible, I found that old sermon and was able to format it to attach to this email devotion. I have noted over the years that my sermons sometimes have this little twist and turns that hopefully keep them interesting and make a point. This was no exception, even then.

What I had not anticipated is that 33 years later amid a pandemic I would remember an old sermon that might still speak to us even if we weren't there, and especially during a time when we are desperate for leadership we can trust and who can guide us through the most difficult of times. None of this is required reading, of course, but some of you do have a little more time for such things these days. Happy Palm Sunday (Thursday?)

Let us pray. *As we begin a Holy Week like never before in our lifetimes, grant us opportunities to draw deeply from this sacred story of your love for us. As we struggle with many things, help us turn to you, trusting that you are with us all the way. We love you Lord. Draw close. Amen.*

attachment

Palm Thursday 1987 Sermon Preached at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, West Lafayette, Indiana

My dear friends in Christ. Grace to you and peace from God our creator and our savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Having been part of the crowd that welcomed the president on Thursday, I do not think I'll ever be able to preach a Palm Sunday sermon without thinking of Palm Thursday. The way some people were excited, you'd almost think it was Christ himself who came to town.

Well, it was exciting. Regardless of how people feel about this particular president, it was quite an experience. the sort of thing some will tell their children and grandchildren. *"Oh, yes, I saw Reagan back at Purdue in 87...."*

But could you feel the parallels between Palm Sunday and Palm Thursday? On Palm Sunday, Jesus of Nazareth came to Jerusalem and was greeted by an exuberant crowd of supporters waving palm fronds and laying them in his path.

On Palm Thursday, the President of the United States came to West Lafayette. He was also greeted by an exuberant crowd, holding in their palms thousands of American flags while hundreds of red, white, and blue balloons were released.

Prior to Palm Sunday, Jesus sent advance men to arrange transportation and make preparations for Passover.

Prior to Palm Thursday, advance men and women, mostly secret service, made preparations for the president's lay over. The president's limousine was flown in on a cargo plane so he could have a safe trip from the airport to campus.

Jesus arrived on a borrowed donkey-- not exactly a limo, but it served the purpose.

On Palm Thursday, a Pan Am jet preceded the president with the white house press corps. Other press persons were in the rear of Air Force One. They, along with more local press and news media followed every move the president made.

On Palm Sunday, the chief priests, scribes and the pharisees followed from a distance but like the press, watched carefully every move Jesus made.

On Palm Thursday, the president spoke of hope and basic values, technology and education, new standards of excellence.

When he finished, he left for California and a Holy Week vacation at the ranch.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus continued what he had been doing all along -- teaching, healing, listening, touching, loving.

At the end of the week, when he was finished -- it was finished. And he was dead.

For me, being part of the crowd on Palm Thursday helped me get into the spirit of what that first Palm Sunday must have been like.

It had to have been a very exciting day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Maybe not quite as exciting as the president and all the flags and police and secret service and bands and balloons, but remember that for some of the people, there really were hopes (great hopes and expectations) that this man Jesus was going to be the one, among other things, to turn things around, especially the government.

These hopes were not wholly unlike the hopes people place in presidents or presidential candidates.

Jesus life during the preceding three years had been a lot like on the campaign trail. Lots of travelling.... lots of speeches....lots of whistle stops....

Still, he managed many intimate moments with people. More than just offering a quick wave or fleeting smile or secret fraternity handshake with selected people, Jesus stopped to spend time with all sorts the people.

Especially the kind of people who don't get offered VIP tickets or front row seats for special events.

Jesus seemed to favor the "last come, least served" -- those were the outcasts, the folks who never seem to get out of their ruts and on to a decent life.

Somehow Jesus had a way of reaching them. He stopped to listen to their hopes and fears. He witnessed their afflictions and sicknesses. He laid his hands on them and his heart in them, and in the process, a man born blind is healed, another possessed by spirits is freed, a friend is raised from the dead.

A woman is told her sins are forgiven....a group of lepers are healed from a terrible disease that was the AIDS of their day.

Those were the sorts of things that happened along the way.... the sorts of things that generated a lot of interest. (and controversy)

Help for the helpless. Hope for the hopeless.

Then there were his teachings.... Lessons and parables spoken with authority that there is more to life than the pursuit of material things...

...that laws are made to serve people --not people the lawsthat God is a God of love who loves all his people, not just selected ones....that God wants all people to love each other and serve each other.

So it was, that on Palm Sunday, this Jesus of Nazareth came to Jerusalem and was greeted by a thundering crowd of supporters waving palm fronds and laying them in his path.

But by the end of the week, this triumphant procession would reach a tragic conclusion.

Sunday's cheers would become Friday's jeers as the last procession was to a place of execution.

As events began to unfold on Palm Sunday, there were some who thought Jesus was asking for trouble by doing the things he did to upset the authorities.

Throwing the vendors out of the temple, for example, may have lit the final fuse.

There were some who thought he was stupid for taking such security risks. There were others who thought nothing could happen to him. His destiny was to lead the people.

The story of the passion seems to indicate it was all for a purpose. The ministry. The teachings. The healings.

Even the manner of his dying.

Not in order to be a martyr for the so called "cause," thereby insuring that his good ideas would live on in his followers, but rather it is to show the power of God to enter our human condition and to go a step further than any other human leader could go.

In Jesus Christ, God enters human history to be the one person who will make a difference in how our history will be played out. -- how our stories and the stories of the whole human race will conclude.

In Jesus Christ, God becomes the vulnerable, affected, passionate expression of all God's hopesall God's hopes for his broken, helpless, needy people.

Hope that sickness can turn to health, sorrow to joy, death to life. Jesus is the expression of God who will defeat sin, death, and the powers of darkness.

In order to be victorious, though, Jesus would die a cruel tortured death. Today is Palm Sunday. A triumphant day foreshadowing the terrible suffering that God through Jesus will experience so that we may become the people God always intended us to be.

This past week, on Palm Thursday, many of us were caught up in Palm Sunday enthusiasm. The plane, the flags, the balloons, the motorcade, the speeches, just "seeing" the president, if only for a moment. I, for one, enjoyed it even though I was just one in the crowd.

But I also think this whole experience illustrates how we are the kind of people who desperately want to have confidence in our leaders.

We long for a leader we can admire, one who knows how to lead -- how to make good decisions for the benefit of all people-- one who encourages the pursuit of peace and justice in the world -- We long for a leader we can trust to do what is right.

In this respect, not a whole lot separates our Palm Thursday crowd from the first Palm Sunday crowd. We have a lot in common.

The difference, perhaps, is that Palm Sunday's messiah -- Palm Sunday's messiah is the one who can be trusted when all others fail.

This is the story of his passion.

The Passion of the Christ.... According to St. Matthew. (follows)

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, April 6, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #16

Some Good News.

"What does the word '*gospel*' mean?" I cannot estimate how many times I have asked our children at St. Paul's that question. Hundreds, probably. Usually, it's near the start of the children's sermon. My theory has been that if our young persons learned nothing more from me as their pastor, they would always know that the word "gospel" means "*good news*." Go ahead. Ask them.

For a long time, even long before the Covid-19 pandemic, secular news stories have regularly been filled with "bad news." Now with the pandemic, daily bad news keeps going from bad to worse.

My morning routine has typically to get up very early, feed and walk the dogs, and then with them, sit on the couch with a cup of coffee, channeling through the morning news shows. I want to know the latest. And I hate to learn the latest. At least so far.

So much bad news. But even if morning news shows regularly featured good news, this would not be gospel, and we all recognize this. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a deeper kind of good news that addresses us and encourages whenever the world is filled with bad news.

This is described in the greeting to the Colossians, chapter 1, 3-6:

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

This is The Gospel, the good news that comes from faith in Jesus Christ.

And maybe these days, this means we might need to be looking away from morning news shows to observe expressions of good news. Sometimes these expressions may come from preachers on the other channels, and hopefully though all those services that many churches are streaming.

Some Good News might also come from persons whose confession of faith we might not even know. John Kasinsky and his wife Emily Blunt started a little YouTube show out of their home called "Some Good News." I happened on to "episode two" this morning, and it took me right out of my bad news morning cable TV funk, reminding me that there are people out there offering expressions of love and care and joy that is certainly consistent with the encouragement of Jesus to love our neighbors. I believe this will bring a little joy to you today, as it did me. Blessings."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oilZ1hNZPRM>

Let us pray. *Dear Jesus. Thank you for your love, and for the gospel that opens that love for all of us to experience. Thank you for those who tirelessly continue to care those who are sick of vulnerable, and for all who recognize the value of human persons. Thanks too, for those who can make us smile and laugh through these difficult times. Help us bring smiles to each other's faces (even if online). Amen.*

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, April 7, 2020, by Pastor Mark Opgrand #17

"You are Stronger than You Know."

For the past few days this has been written in large letters with chalk on the sidewalk in front of a neighbor's house. I have passed it many times while taking our dogs on their daily walks. It is among several sidewalk chalk projects I have seen around the neighborhood.

Last night rain washed it away, but not before I had given a lot of thought to it.

I was first thinking about young people who already imagine themselves as "invincible." Or behave and take risks as if they are. They would be the ones determined not to give up a good party during Spring Break, or those who believe, during a pandemic, they have nothing to worry about. They are strong enough already.

Next, I thought about those who have been feeling weak these days. Maybe they are elderly, or frail, or have underlying health conditions that put them at great risk of death if they contract Covid-19. How would they know they are stronger than they know? Perhaps just by surviving?

If we remove the physical health part of this consideration, wondering how likely we are to get sick or die from virus exposure, I believe we are left thinking about strength in a more emotional or spiritual way.

For those who feel deeply drained emotionally from all this, maybe words like these are good encouragement. But will I be stronger simply because I read it in sidewalk chalk? What if I may am only as strong as I feel, no matter what I read?

One word that offsets "strength" (physically, emotionally, and spiritually) is "weakness." Popular culture doesn't think much of "weakness." It demands strength, encourages strength, seeks to increase strength. It wants us to believe "You are stronger than you know." In a time of pandemic that could be encouraging, but it might make you feel even weaker. How do I know I am stronger than I know?

One of the most compelling messages of the gospel is that weakness is definitely okay with God. Weakness describes being human, being vulnerable, knowing that we are never strong enough to make it on our own in this world, physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

That's why recognizing in both great and troubled times, our ultimate strength lies in the one who himself became weak for us, Jesus Christ.

When St. Paul was stricken with a terrible ailment, he had a wonderful revelation from God. It did not come as a chalk message on a sidewalk, but was something that not only kept him going, but also affirmed his complete reliance on God

“But [the Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’”
II Corinthians 12:9.

“God’s grace is sufficient for me?” Hmm. That’s good. Now where’s my chalk?

Let us pray.

Ah Holy Jesus. Thank you for being our strength when we are weak. Help us always count on your grace, power, and love to carry us through these troubled times. Please protect the weak not only with words of encouragement, but by support all the courageous health workers who give every bit of their strength to save lives. For those who cannot live through this, help their passing be peaceful and their joy complete as they awaken to your loving arms. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home Wednesday, April 8, 2020, by Pastor Mark Opgrand #18

This is my Father's World.

I wonder what songs the younger generation will be singing someday when they are walking their dogs and enjoying a beautiful spring day.

When I gaze in wonder upon the beautiful spring flower and trees or gaze a bright beautiful full moon I find myself easily singing along to an old hymn I first remember singing at Bible camp long ago.

"This is my Father's World. And to my listening ears. All nature sings and round me rings, the music of the spheres. This is my Father's world; I rest me in the thought; of rocks and trees or skies and seas; His hand the wonders wrought."

What a great song to celebrate God's wonderful creation.

The second verse continues in joyous celebration: *"This is my Father's World; the birds their carols raise; The morning light, the lily white, Declare their maker's praise. This is my Father's world; He shines in all that's fair. In the rustling grass I hear him pass; He speaks to me everywhere."*

Such wonderful imagery. Music of the spheres. Birds their carols raise. Morning light. Lily white (thinking Easter here). Rustling grass. Hearing God pass. Awesome.

At the same time, it's that third verse that always seemed terribly out of place for me. One phrase particularly.

*This is my Father's world. O let me n'er forget. That **though the wrong seems oft so strong**, God is the ruler yet. This is my Father's world; Why should my heart be sad? The Lord is king, let the heaven's ring; God reigns, let the earth be ... glad.*

As I paid attention to these lyrics as an older person, I was really puzzled. With beautiful imagery we've just sung of God's wondrous creation and now we're talking about "wrong oft so strong." What's up with that?

I remember very specifically when I saw this verse in a new light. It was May 18, 1980, when one of Pacific Northwest's most beautiful mountain peaks, Mt. St. Helen, erupted. That mountain was so beautiful. Before. After the eruption, it was a hollowed out lifeless place.

That was the first time I understood why we need verse three of "This is my Father's world." For when things like this happen. Volcanos, hurricanes, tornados, famine, tsunamis, pandemics. Our lives are not all beautiful spring days with sung tunes that cannot stand up in the face of destruction.

And that's why we need also to sing and remember: *This is my Father's world. O let me n'er forget; That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.*

We are also reminded of this in Psalm 102, verses 11-12.

My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. But you, O Lord, are enthroned forever; your name endures to all generations.

Let us pray.

In the midst of recent beautiful spring days, we sing your praises and give thanks for the wonder of your creation. We are also aware of its fallenness, where "the wrong" not only seems oft so strong," sometimes it is unbearable. We pray for all those sick or hospitalized who can barely breathe much less sing. Help them hear that heavenly tune that reminds them that they are loved... and *"The Lord is King; let the heaven's ring. God reigns let the earth be glad."* Amen.

P.S. I was looking for a couple good interpretations of the hymn on YouTube. *Enjoy and sing along.*

This Is My Father's World

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63r2UzN4VMc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlGHAoYJp9c>

St Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, April 9, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #19

Observing Maundy Thursday.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." --John 13:31

As a child I thought it was "*Monday Thursday*," just like in the Lord's prayer I thought we were praying "*forgive us our Grants Passes*." (Grant's Pass, Oregon, was a neighboring town about 30 miles from my hometown of Medford).

I later learned we were to pray "*forgive us our tres-passes*" and that "*Monday*" was "*Maundy*." I have no idea how many years passed before I learned what the word "*Maundy*" meant. Probably seminary, I hate to admit.

Maundy is from the Latin "*mandatum*," from which "*mandate*" or "*commandment*" comes. Therefore, we could instead call "*Maundy Thursday*" "***Mandate Thursday***" or "*Commandment Thursday*."

So what is the mandate?

When I think about how we have observed Maundy Thursday here St. Paul's, we might imagine the mandate as having Holy Communion together or stripping the altar in observance of upcoming trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Based on the service's assigned texts which describe Jesus washing the disciples' feet, we could see the mandate as doing a foot washing ritual. (Some churches do this every Maundy Thursday).

The key to discovering the "*mandate*" is to look for the word translated "*command*." And that's right in the verse printed above. In John's gospel, after Jesus takes on the humble role of a servant washing the disciples' feet, then tells them the "*new commandment*" which is to "*love one another*."

At first glance that doesn't seem new. Jesus talks about love many times in the gospels.

What is new is the context of this mandate. Jesus is about to be betrayed and handed over to death. So when he follows "*love one another*" with "*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*," (John 13: 34b-35), he is talking about deep sacrificial love rooted in humility and servanthood.

So how do people know we are Christians? By following his "*mandate*?" Well, yes, when that mandate is to love one another as he has loved us. The challenge for us is that in our culture the word "*love*" is so widely overused that it distances us from this kind of love Jesus is asking us to demonstrate.

In a time of social distancing, and when tonight we shall not be gathering in person for worship, it may be that we have a new opportunity (like a new commandment) to meditate deeply on the kind of love that Jesus shows us and the whole world.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, you give us a new mandate to love one another. It isn't really new, but during this holy day of distance and absence from each other, may we be renewed by the outcome of your sacrificial for us, which is a model of love for each other and the whole human race regularly expressed in faithful acts of love and service. Amen.

P.S. Here's a link to a beautiful hymn/prayer that names that love, "*Love Divine All Loves Excelling*." It is performed by one of our premier Lutheran college choirs, St. Olaf.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsVnvN3EVxY>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Good Friday, April 10, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #20

Good Friday Reflections on Crucifixion

Through art, when Jesus is portrayed as dying on the cross, rarely does this convey the sheer agony of the experience. If it did, none of us would probably wear crucifixes or display images of Jesus dying on the cross. It's more horrible than most can imagine.

These days, however, thousands of people with severe Covid-19 can imagine it. Maybe not the hanging on a cross part, or having nails pierced through their palms, or a spear thrust in their sides. What they can imagine is the breathing part.

They can imagine death by crucifixion because one of the most terrible effects of Covid-19 is how it attacks the lungs, causing extreme shortness of breath. For the most vulnerable, without ventilator intervention (and maybe even with intervention) death by suffocation may follow. It's a horrible way to die.

During the time of Jesus, crucifixion by the Romans was intended to do just that. It caused death by asphyxiation. Whippings and beatings became pre-existing conditions that would weaken the one being hanged on the cross. The hanging position made it increasingly difficult to take breaths and exhale. Depending on how strong the person was, it could take a long time. Piercing Jesus in the side with a spear was likely intended to hurry this along by piercing a lung.

The strength of Jesus through all this is seen in John's gospel, particularly through the last word, *"It is finished,"* followed by *"Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."* Jesus did what he needed to do. This part of the mission is over. The next part belongs to God.

Because we know that death was not the final word and that Jesus rose on Easter, we probably don't need to dwell on the gory details of his death. Not dwell. But certainly remember.

On this Good Friday, as thousands of people have struggled or are currently struggling to breathe ... while some are on ventilators that may or may not give them time to heal... and while loved ones cannot be close to offer love and comfort to those who may be about to take their final breaths...

... we can remember Jesus dying on the cross. We can remember how Jesus understands living and dying and how, exhaling his final breath, he trusted God for what next was to come.

When we imagine Jesus breathing with us even to our dying breaths, and trusting that God will also bring us through, (maybe with more time here, maybe with more eternal time), we shall be ready for whatever comes next.

During these scary and unknown days, this is a very "good" part of Good Friday.

Let us pray.

Dearest Lord Jesus. On this day when we remember your dying, we entrust ourselves and the whole human race to your care. We pray for healing. We pray for cure. We pray for all the care givers and health professionals. We pray for all those who do not have access to care or today, even essential food or water. By your living and dying, you modeled for us what devoted love for all looks like. We remember those who first watched all this die with you on the cross. We are glad we know what happens next, but we shall not forget what you have gone through for us so that we can face the difficult present and the frightening times to come. Help us trust you, like you trusted your Father in heaven. And help us, through the wonder of what is ahead through the resurrection, become part of global healing in your holy name. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, April 11, 2020, by Pastor Mark Opgrand #21

Holy Saturday Waiting.

Between Good Friday and Easter is Holy Saturday. Before it was occupied with church or community Easter Egg Hunts, Holy Saturday was a day when nothing much happened except waiting.

The difference between the disciples waiting on that first Saturday... and our waiting this Saturday... is that we know what happened next. Easter always follows Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

Therefore, our waiting is always with a kind of happy expectation. Easter is coming, and unlike the disciples, we will not be surprised because we already know the tomb is empty... "Christ is risen. He is risen. Alleluia."

Our Holy Saturday waiting is not difficult. Not like it was for the disciples. Besides, on our Saturdays, we always have so much to do.

Most years, anyway.

Most years the Saturday before Easter seems less like a Holy day, and more like just the day we need to get ready for Easter egg hunts, Sunday services, and preparing for traditional family gatherings. Waiting hardly registers.

Not this year.

This year, because of the pandemic, "waiting" has become an experience shared by all people in every corner of the world. It's not waiting for Easter Sunday but waiting for some kind of intervention (maybe divine) that can put an end to infection, death and economic loss.

Waiting has become an acute shared experience.

On that first Holy Saturday, none of the disciples knew what next was going to happen to them, or their world. If Jesus, their Messiah, was going to be the cure, that cure failed. They had waited for a deliverer, and he was dead. Their only waiting now, was waiting to figure out what they were going to do next. Go back to fishing? Tax Collecting? (What else did they do... before?)

They didn't wait long to discover their new life in Christ wasn't over. Imagine their joy.

I believe we can.

The disciples discovering that Jesus had risen from the dead would be like us waking up tomorrow and hearing that a Covid-19 cure has been found and immediately will be available to all. That would be some kind of wonderful news, wouldn't it? He lives. And so shall we.

Between the days of Good Friday and Easter, there isn't much waiting "*On the third day, he rose from the dead.*" Even though the world still experiences all sorts of calamities that require waiting for healing, we believe this changes everything. Or at least can. Many of our crises would be lessened if we used the gifts God has given us, and if we practiced the kind of love, kindness, and devotion that Jesus revealed to us.

So on this Holy Saturday, as we wait for a different kind of Easter this year, and while we wait for good news that there will be an end to this global pandemic, maybe we can experience something we often miss because of all the busyness and activities of our days.

Maybe we can experience more clearly what Jesus does for us, how Jesus shows us that death is not the final word, how embracing his love for us in turn helps us see all the others around us whom Jesus loves and for whom he also died. Maybe there is a new fullness that comes through the emptiness of our waiting, and as we discover that it is outside an empty tomb that risen Jesus waits for us.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, on this Holy Saturday as we wait for an Easter message that will lift our spirits and give us hope, we turn to you. Grant us all what we need to take next steps in faith. May those who have never heard the gospel, hear it through those who are now living it through their acts of love and faithfulness. May those who have always been with you since their baptism find renewed strength in facing the challenges of this day. Help us recognize our prayers are joined with millions, and give us all strength as we are united with you and each other. Amen.

P.S. There are no Bible verses that directly specifically speak to what the disciples were doing on that first Saturday. We might imagine that from John 20:19 that they had been in seclusion also the day before: "*On the evening of that day, the first day of the week [Sunday], the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said 'Peace be with you.'*"

And one more P.P.S.S. There aren't any obvious "Holy Saturday" songs, but here's a link to one that can be imagined either before or after the resurrection. It can also be one with special meaning as we anticipate the next time, we can all be together in worship. It is sung in Russian, but the subtitles are below, and many of you already know the lyrics: *God be with you till we meet again.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGWOKT7Hfvs>

St. Paul's In Your Home Daily for Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #22

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

28 Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he^{laid} lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." ⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." (Matthew 28:1-10)

Even though we follow a cycle of lessons which includes Easter Sunday, almost always the preferred choice for the Easter Gospel is from John's gospel, which included the tender meeting between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden.

What is above and will be read by Pastor Jonathan during our Easter Service, is this account from St. Matthew. What I like about this reading is that our beautiful resurrection window at St. Paul's, is based on Matthew's resurrection story. If you look at our window how can you tell? Because the two women have fallen at the feet of Jesus after they have left the empty tomb as directed by the angel. It's a beautiful window and a beautiful story of wonder and awe at the glorious resurrection of our Lord.

With *fear* and *great joy*, they departed from the tomb. Fear and joy. That sounds a lot like how we are approaching Easter this year. Our fears today were different from theirs, of course, but our joy is the same. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Their fear seemed to change when Jesus met them on the road with something as simple as "Greetings." "Greetings... Good morning... Hello... Hi... How's it goin'...?" Such a simple thing, but the beginning of an "Oh Wow" that is about the change the world.

In the name of the Risen Lord Jesus. Greetings.

Let us pray:

Thank you, O God, for the joy and glorious wonder of Easter and all the hopefulness it brings us. With grateful hearts we praise you for how you meet each of us where we are with the same message, that you have lived for us and died for us and were raised for us that we might not be afraid and live for you. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. I Hope you can share in our Easter service and all its wonderful music (YouTube “stpaulslutheranwilmingtonnc.”) I found two videos that really express Easter’s joy. Both are John Rutter’s “*The Lord Bless You and Keep You.*” What is special about the first is that we see John Rutter directing a massive choir and orchestra. Imagine the joy of a melody forming first in his head to this years later. The second link is the same song but absolutely stunning in its own way, as it performed by an incredible children’s choir from Indonesia. Enjoy. Happy Easter.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICpxgEHqjFA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQFYeWBL0gY>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, April 13, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #23

"Halleluia is back." Where'd it go?

It's a old custom to suspend saying or singing "*Halleluia*" or "*Alleluia*" during Lent.

Historically that has to do with the penitential and self-reflective nature of Lent. Lent invites looking inward and reflecting on the quality of our baptismal faith and life. Simply put, *Halleluia* just doesn't fit. During Lent, anyway.

The word *Hallelu yah* derives from the Hebrew, meaning "*Praise the Lord.*" So joyful is this word that it makes sense that it is more of an Easter word... or Pentecost... or Advent... or Christmas...or Epiphany word than it is a Lenten word.

"*Halleluia*" is sung in a lot of songs and hymns. One of the most popular and beautiful songs ever composed prominently featuring the word "*Halleluia*" is Leonard Cohen's "*Halleluia*." It is truly a great song, with stunning "*Halleluia*" harmonics and an incredibly beautiful melody.

For Christians (and Jews), however, putting "*Halleluia*" with the rest of the lyrics really cheapens the power and witness of that word. If Cohen had substituted "What's it to ya?" for "*Halleluia*" it would have made more sense. "*Halleluia*" belongs to praising God, not crooning "Baby I've been here before, I've seen this room and I've walked this floor, you know I used to live alone before I knew ya....."

This song has even been sung in church. (Not by us). I guess "*Halleluia*" was the only word that mattered. Well, here's a big "Thanks be to God!" for a women named Kelley Mooney, who when asked a number of years back by her priest if she would sing Cohen's "*Halleluia*" for an Easter mass, reviewed the words and said "Oh, no, Father." That began the process of writing new words appropriate to Easter faith and Christian witness. Stunning new words to fit with an already stunning melody.

I found two YouTube videos of the Christian version of this song for you to enjoy. In one, singer/lyricist Kelley Mooney is singing it publicly for the first time and describes how she was also able to secure legal rights for her version. She tells that story. The other video is her singing the song but with images of the Passion and Easter story to go along with it. This is a song filled with proclamation and Easter joy -- one that truly fits the meaning of "*Halleluia*."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC1Nvn4Bk0Y>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC1Nvn4Bk0Y>

Let us pray.

We thank you for the gift of words like Halleluia that give honor and glory to you, O God. We need to sing your praises O God, not just for you but for us. We are so grateful for Easter's message of

hope amid a world that struggles to live as we were created to live. We confess our brokenness. We confess our fears. But with joyful hearts we are also bold to sing out Easter' proclamation that "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Halleluia!" And so in faith we embrace another day. Thank you Jesus. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday April 14, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #24

Forty-eight Days till Pentecost.

I have spent more time thinking about the time between Good Friday and Easter than I have been thinking about the time between Easter and Pentecost.

Now that's changed. Easter "Season" is now upon us and with it the seven Sundays of Easter. This reflects the time between the first Easter and the first Pentecost. Pentecost is celebrated fifty days after Easter.

Imagining the disciples during those fifty days, I have wondered about how they thought about the "What next?" Jesus' glorious resurrection confirmed he was Emmanuel, God With Us, the Messiah and Son of God. What next?

During those first fifty days, Jesus appeared to the disciples a few times, though not many stories are written about that. St. Paul sums up what happened this way:

³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor. 15:3-8 NRS)

Exploring the scriptures, we discover the first post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the women and the disciples (in all gospels); then the appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24); Jesus showing himself to "Doubting" Thomas (John 20); Jesus cooking breakfast for the disciples after they fished successfully on the Sea of Galilee (John 21); Jesus final appearance in Matthew (chapter 28) was on the mountain in Galilee.

During the fifty days, it doesn't seem like Jesus was with the disciples in the same manner he had been. I wonder what those days were like. Were they just on a constant spiritual "high?" When did appear, did Jesus do more teaching, or perhaps go over his lessons once again with a fair amount of "I know you weren't listening the first time... so let me repeat this again... you're going to need to remember this!"?

There must have been days, or parts of days where they wondered "What are we going to do now?" Or maybe not. Maybe they didn't feel they needed to know "What's next?" because "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia," and besides, for those first days, he was still with them.

But they had to wonder. I am probably thinking about this more this year because our days are regularly filled with lots of "What next?" What next for our church? What next for our schools? What next for our hospitals? Communities? Country?

After the resurrection, the disciples had fifty more wonderful days with Jesus, though not every day all the time. They really didn't know "What's next?"

All they knew was their world had forever changed. And God was still with them. A lot of unknown was ahead, but they had what they needed to face it. Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia. (And fifty day later a surprise was coming)

Let us pray.

First, and always, O God, we thank you for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, upon whom our whole faith depends. When we wonder about "What's next?" help us hold tight to all your promises that you are with us always. We pray for our world, and the world's peoples, all those who wonder "What's next?" By your grace and love, keep us moving forward in faith. In Christ alone. Amen.

P.S. As you are discovering, whenever possible I look for YouTube videos that resonate with these devotionals. Many of these "pop up" when I am looking at something else. One great discovery has been a Scottish singer named Steph Macleod. His is an amazing story of being found by Jesus when he was in the throes of addiction. This version of "*In Christ Alone*," is the most beautiful version I have ever heard. I can imagine the disciples singing it during those fifty days after the resurrection.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kvFtXphmMU>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, April 15, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #25

Life's Too Short.

¹⁰ The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. (Ps. 90:10 NRS)

Don't be surprised if this devotional goes a different direction than you imagine based on title and verse.

I'll be bet some of you during this "stay sheltered at home" time are doing some sorting projects. Like sorting through closets or pantries or garages. If not that, then just paper that piles up.

Among my pile of paper in my church office was something I had printed out at the end of January. It was an article entitled "Life's Too Short" by a United Methodist Church minister Talbot Davis writing for wesleycovenant.org. What the article was about was his distress over what was happening in his denomination about to come apart over irreconcilable differences between the liberal and conservative "tribes" in his denomination.

He admitted his own anger about all this; he confessed that he had been participating in "indignation-fueled Metho-speak." While claiming the righteous high ground, he described how doctrinal purity was his mission, anger his fuel.... and "that's the way, uh-huh, un-uh, I liked it."

Then came this: "But now I know better. Life's too short to waste being angry."

It was then he fully endorsed the recommendation put forth by leaders on both sides of the disagreements that the church completely divide into two new churches: The Progressive's and The Traditionalists. As a traditionalist, he imagined how wonderful it will be to leave behind a season of frustration and enter an era of proclamation.

Life's too short.

This sure takes on a new perspective when dealing with a life-or-death global pandemic. Not picking on the Methodists, many "mainline" churches have been struggling with lots of difficult issues that have divided brothers and sisters in Christ one from another.

I believe I can now state with some certainty that "Life's too short for that too."

Life's too short to dwell on or be pre-occupied with anything that distracts us from the heart of Christian mission, which is to proclaim our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, he who is the heart of God and whose sacrificial love for us all is what reconciles us not only to God but to one another. Life's too precious to be distracted from this essential proclamation. The Psalmist of Psalm 90 understood this.

That copied article is now in recycling. We have a new world to deal with, and I for one, am rejoicing to begin recognizing affirmations of common faith emerging from those who have spent a lot of time being angry with each other about things that “these days”, seem less and less important. Blessings.

Let us pray:

These verses in Psalm 90 hit home, especially when we face a pandemic. But even more so do the words from the angel at the empty tomb of Jesus in Matthew 28, “He is not here; for he has been raised.” May the heart and joy of this proclamation direct us to use the precious life we have, however short or long, to it’s best use. Keep us focused on that which is essential to you, O Lord, so that we can be free from those things that pull us apart, and then free to experience the joy of being drawn together for service and love in your name. Amen.

P.S. Today’s link will take you to a wonderful group called Anthem Lights singing an Easter song, “Because He Lives.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f26P1ftbCco>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, April 16, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #26

¹⁹ *In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.* ²⁰ *On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.* (John. 14:19-20 NRS)

Spoiler Alert. He's Alive.

A *spoiler alert* is what people write when reviewing a book or film that warns the reader they are about to reveal information that might ruin the surprise. In a mystery, it might be "who done it." In a romantic comedy, it might be "the one who got the girl was not who you might have imagined." In a thriller it might be "who really was the bad guy."

To learn that "Christ is risen" that is, "alive" doesn't spoil the story. Rather it gives the complete story of Jesus life, death and resurrection an ending that also marks the beginning of living sequels for all who hear and believe. For it is now that he lives in us, through his Holy Spirit.

It is also the resurrection that makes the celebration of his birth not just another birthday party, but part of God's divine plan to enter our lives in a way that gives our lives meaning and direction.

Here's another spoiler alert. For years our seniors have attended the Carolina Opry's Christmas, blending secular Christmas music with sacred Christ centered songs and hymns. For years they have ended their show in a most surprising (until you realizing what they are doing) way. They finish not with a Christmas Carol, but with an Easter song.

The first time I heard this I couldn't figure out what was going on. "That's not a Christmas song." But then I realized that no Christmas song or carol has real meaning without connection to Jesus' death and resurrection. I was stunned in the best possible way. This was not just a show, but real proclamation of the gospel through performers expressing their faith.

"He's alive" was written in 1977 by Don Francisco and has been performed by multiple artists, most notably Dollie Parton. It is song expressed through the voice of St. Peter describing his resurrection experience. As such, even words alone, it is a powerful proclamation.

I'm going to include lyrics below, and three links to a performance. Two will be Dollie Parton. One was performed a number of years ago, a second at her home this past Easter Sunday, and the third a clip of the Carolina Opry's rousing Christmas show finale.

"The gates and doors were barred and all the windows fastened down,
I spent the night in sleeplessness and rose at every sound,
Half in hopeless sorrow half in fear the day,
Would find the soldiers crashing through to drag us all away.
Then just before the sunrise I heard something at the wall,
The gate began to rattle and a voice began to call,
I hurried to the window and looked down to the street,

Expecting swords and torches and the sound of soldiers feet,

There was no one there but Mary so I went down to let her in,
John stood there beside me as she told us where she'd been,
She said they moved him in the night and none of us knows where,
The stones been rolled away and now his body isn't there.
We both ran toward the garden then John ran on ahead,
We found the stone and the empty tomb just the way that Mary said,
But the winding sheet they wrapped him in was just an empty shell,
And how or where they'd taken him was more than I could tell.

Something strange had happened there but what I did not know,
John believed a miracle but I just turned to go,
Circumstance and speculation couldn't lift me very high,
Cause I'd seen them crucify him and then I'd watched him die,
Back inside the house again all the guilt and anguish came,
Everything I'd promised him just added to my shame,
But at last it came to choices I denied I knew his name,
Even If he was alive it wouldn't be the same.

But suddenly the air was filled with a strange and sweet perfume,
Light that came from everywhere drove shadows from the room,
Jesus stood before me with his arms held open wide,
And I fell down on my knees and clung to him and cried,
He raised me to my feet and as I looked into his eyes,
Love was shining out from him like sunlight from the sky,
Guilt and my confusion disappeared in sweet release,
And every fear I'd ever had just melted into peace.

He's alive, He's alive, He's alive and I'm forgiven,
Heavens gates are open wide.
He's alive, He's alive, He's alive and I'm forgiven,
Heavens gates are open wide.
He's alive, He's alive, He's alive and I'm forgiven,
Heavens gates are open wide.

He's alive!"

Let us pray:

Thank you Oh God, for all the ways the resurrection has been proclaimed. For the eyewitnesses, the gospel writers, and singers and composers who proclaim to us that Jesus is alive. May the joy of the resurrection hope lift the spirits this day for all who suffer or feel overwhelmed or fearful. Heal our world we pray, and give all those who have devoted their lives to the healing arts everything they need to support healing and hope for the future. In Jesus name. Amen.

Dollie Parton's *He's Alive*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4A5ep5KGng>

Easter 2020

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJtEkXbeupw&list=RDLJtEkXbeupw&index=1>

Carolina Opry Finale Clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TWtIQWbInI>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, April 17, 2020, by Pastor Mark Opgrand #27

¹³ *Your name, O LORD, endures forever, your renown, O LORD, throughout all ages. (Ps. 135:13 NRS)*

Not one of us has ever been through this before.

As we face the new and unknown challenges of dealing with a global pandemic, we say things like this. Not one of us has ever been through this before.

Actually, at least one of us has.

I was watching an interview on CNN with Cardinal Timothy Dolan during Holy Week. He shared this story:

"A pastor just wrote me about a one hundred and eight-year-old woman in his parish in Yonkers, Theresa Cattachore, who said to him 'Oh Father, don't worry. I lived through that flu back in 1919 and we all came out stronger than ever.' She remembers that and she remembers how physically we conquered that and how morally we got a little stronger afterwards."

In 1919, this remarkable woman would have been seven years old. She would remember. She would remember living through a global pandemic that infected 500 million people claimed 50 million deaths; she was part of radically affected world that was already torn apart by a World War that also claimed 40 million casualties. Even if some war deaths were flu deaths, the effect of all this death on the world was catastrophic.

None of us has been through anything like that before. Except Miss Theresa. And I love how she comforted her priest with words of hope. *"Oh, Father, don't worry."* Sweet.

The fullness of Theresa's years also affirms God's help in ages past and hope for years to come. God is good. God is with us. Through it all. That's how it has always been, and for that we give God thanks.

Let us pray:

O God, you are our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. You are our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home. Help us remember your promises and sing hymns with this hope as we face each day. In all times and places you are with us, and this time, too. Help us find a deeper sense of peace trusting that you are always close. In Jesus Name we pray.

Today's link is to a lovely version of *"O God Our Help in Ages Past."* As Miss Theresa reminds us, *"Don't worry. With God's help, we can live through this and come out stronger than ever."*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-hN740J6qA>

Thinking about Judas and the Resurrection.

³ *When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴ He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." ⁵ *Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. (Matt. 27:3-5 NRS)**

Why think about Judas? Isn't he the ultimate lost soul for betraying his Lord? Besides, he even killed himself before he had a chance to have a second chance. It's a tragic story, but Jesus is risen, so maybe we should just move on.

I don't think often about Judas, but I do wonder what might have happened if he, like Thomas and the disciples, had one more meeting with Jesus and Jesus had risen from the dead. I will not presume to know how God dealt with him, or if his drastic action of repentance (you don't kill yourself because you're happy) made a difference.

One of my favorite authors, Fredrick Buechner, pondered this in book *"Wishful Thinking: A Biblical Who's Who."* One of Buechner's most moving reflections is on Judas. Let me share it with you:

Judas

Nobody can be sure, of course why Judas sold Jesus out although according the John's gospel, he already had a reputation for dipping into the poor box from time to time so the cash may have been part of it.

If, like the other disciples, he was perennially worried about where he stood in the pecking order, he may also have been reacting to some imagined slight.

Maybe he thought his job as treasurer to the outfit was beneath him. Another possibility is that he had gotten fed up with waiting for Jesus to take the world by storm and hoped that betraying him might force him to show his hand at last. Or maybe, because nothing human is ever uncomplicated, something of all these was involved.

Anyway, whatever his reasons were, the whole thing went sour for him soon enough.

Slipping out of the last supper before the party was over, he led the way to the garden that he knew they were planning to adjourn to afterwards and said to lay low till he gave the signal.

It was dark by the time his former associates showed up and maybe or fear that he might scare them off if he used any other method, the way he showed the soldiers which was the one to jump was by kissing him. That was all he was paid to do, and as soon as he'd done it, there was no earthly reason why he couldn't have taken off with his cash and found a place to spend it.

But when the time came, he wasn't in the mood.

There are several versions of what he did instead, of which the most psychologically plausible seems to be that he gave the money back to the ones who'd given it to him and went out and hanged himself.

This time there doesn't seem to be any ambiguity about the motive.

There is a tradition in the early church, however, that his suicide was not based on despair but on hope. If God was just, then he knew there was no question where he would be heading as soon as he'd breathed his last.

Furthermore, if God was also merciful, he knew there was no question either that in a last-ditch effort to save the souls of the damned as God's son, Jesus would be down there too.

Thus, the way Judas figured it, Hell might be the last chance he'd have of making it to Heaven, so to get there as soon as possible, he tied the rope around his neck and kicked away the stool. Who knows?

Om any case, it's a scene to conjure with... Once again they met in the shadows, the two old friends, both of them a little worn after all that had happened, only this time it was Jesus who was the one to give the kiss, and this time it wasn't the kiss of death that was given."
(John 12:1-8, 13:21-30, 18:1-12, Matthew 27:3-11)

Buechner's consideration of God's grace really speaks to me whenever I think of lost or faltering souls, especially those who take their own lives. How far does God's grace go in a situation like that? I believe Jesus show us just how far ... when he died... for ... our... sins.

Let us pray.

Dearest Lord Jesus. Thank you for your amazing grace, grace that you showed that you died for us when we were yet sinners. We pray for all the lost (but hopefully found) souls today, and for encouragement as we face the days ahead. As we struggle, help us know and trust that you are always holding us close. Amen.

P.S. Of course a link must take us to a version of "Amazing Grace." This one is by great acapella singer Peter Hollens with support and harmony by Home Free:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n145-J8eig>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, April 19, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #29

Twenty Centuries of "Doubting" Thomas. And he never "doubted." Not once. Unfair?

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (Jn. 20:24-25 NRS)

The Second Sunday of Easter always remembers the experience of Thomas ... forever known as "Doubting Thomas" until he saw for himself that Jesus had risen from the dead. Thomas was absent as Jesus visited the disciples on that first Easter Sunday evening. A week later when Jesus returned, he too saw him. and believed. And that's why we always read this lesson on the second Sunday of Easter.

However, we have the "doubting" part of this all wrong. See, everyone thinks that Thomas doubted Jesus had risen from the dead (probably more because of his nickname than because of what was written in the Bible).

To doubt means to be uncertain or unsure about the truth of something. But look closely here. Thomas was certain and sure beyond a doubt that Jesus was dead.

Thomas was no *doubter*. He was quite simply an *unbeliever* (see above scripture). "Unless I see.. I will not believe." Where's the *doubt* in that? That's flat out *unbelief*. And that's what Jesus addressed when he said to Thomas upon seeing Jesus risen and in the flesh, "*Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*" (Jn. 20:27 NRS)

But wait, you say. It says "*doubt*" right there. "Do not *doubt* but *believe*." Actually, the Greek manuscripts use a form of the word "*apistos*" which means "*unbelieve*." Some translations are more accurate, like: "Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe." (Jn. 20:27 NET); or "*Do not be unbelieving, but believing.*" (Jn. 20:27 NKJ); or "*and be not unbelieving, but believing.*" (Jn. 20:27 NAS). You get the picture.

So what does it matter if, after all, "*Doubting Thomas*" became "*Believing Thomas*" in the end?

It matters because by demanding physical proof of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Thomas put himself in a position where the only way he could believe was by seeing. In his unbelief, Thomas closed the door. Jesus opened it, of course and Thomas then believed.

As an unbeliever, Thomas was lucky. And blessed. He saw and believed. But then Jesus uses that experience by naming what will be important for all those for centuries to come, will doubt. The great theologian Paul Tillich expressed it this way, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."

Every Christian who has ever lived will have doubts, because that is also the nature of faith. To believe without seeing. To trust the eyewitnesses and the scriptures.

Through the scripture, we learn that Thomas wished he had trusted his friends. It was downright embarrassing to have to examine those wounds of Jesus up close and so personal. But for Jesus this also became an opportunity for a great lesson of encouragement for us all.

So the lesson here is not “*Don’t doubt, but believe*”. However awkward in translation, the message is “*Do not **not** believe, but believe*”.

Thankfully, we can trust the Holy Spirit for help with that. (see preview in John 20:21-22). Peace be with you.

Let us pray:

Take away our unbelief O God and help us believe. Help us trust the witnesses of scripture and point us to those experiences that bring us a keen sense of your presence in our own lives. Help us also make peace with doubt as a part of faith, not its opposite. So many things continue to challenge faith these days, but in the midst of even darkest doubts, you surprise us with signs that point to your ever-present love. Strengthen those who look to you this day. Heal our world. Bless, we pray, those who are instruments of your healing touch. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. I found a nice song by Nickel Creek called “*Doubting Thomas*.” Interesting. I also wanted to add the great Easter hymn, “*Christ, the Lord, is Risen Today*.” This version, however is performed acapella by Home Free founder Chris Rupp, who also sings all the tracks (ah, modern technology). I don’t know if Chris grew up Lutheran, but he is from Minnesota and graduated from Gustavus Adolphus, a Lutheran College, in St. Peter, Minnesota.

Christ the Lord is Risen Today: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2xZ9Urag0>

Doubting Thomas: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3c_8hYK0eo

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, April 20, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #30

"You raise me up." And who is the "you"?

"But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." (Matt. 28:5-7 NRS)

Easter is all about resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, and "raised" is the operative word here. Jesus was raised from the dead, just as the angel said Jesus had said. Hold that thought.

Fast forward a couple of thousand years and think about "You Raise Me Up," a very popular song originally recorded in 2002 by a Norwegian-Irish duo named Secret Garden but made most popular by tenor Josh Groban. In nearly twenty years, it has been recorded by over one hundred twenty-five artists.

It's a beautiful song which invites singing along: *"You raise up, so I can stand on mountains; you raise me up, to walk on stormy seas; I am strong, when I am on your shoulders; You raise me up, to more than I can be."*

The song never says who the "you" is, though I would think that would be important to know, especially as the song begins: *When I am down and, oh my soul, so weary; When troubles come and my heart burdened be; Then, I am still and wait here in the silence; Until you come and sit awhile with me.*

I suppose the "you" could be just a human friend, though that friend would have to pretty amazing to be able to lift you from such a troubled low place and raise you up to stand on mountains. It makes much clearer sense to us Christians, in light of the resurrection, for the "you" to be Jesus, who himself was raised from the dead so that we could have new life.

I don't know if Secret Garden had this in mind when they first recorded the song, but we do know that when Mary first saw Jesus in John's gospel, she mistook him for a gardener, and soon enough, the secret was out.

When Jesus was raised from the dead, a power to lift us to new places was unleashed, especially to be more than we could be.

Let us pray:

When we sing of being raised up, O God, we know it is you, through Jesus Christ, who does it. Thank you for meeting us in the depths of our loneliness, suffering, and discouragement, and bringing us the hope we need to keep taking steps and leaps of faith. Help us sing those songs that take us to heights of hope, and journeying places we thought we could never go. You know how

much we need these good words and good melodies written on our hearts these days. We pray for all who look to you for hope and healing today. In YOU we pray. Amen.

P.S. I won't send links to 125 versions of "You Raise Me Up," but I will do four. The first will be to Secret Garden's first recording, second to the most popular Josh Groban, and two I found that made me happy to hear them: Peter Hollens and 200 kids, and a youth choir called Color Music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vdkqeshXJM>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oni0tO_HN30

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13_nXuJ6dX8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRcIEMgppK8>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, April 21, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #31

To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: (Eccl. 3:1 NKJ)

20:20:20 2020

I missed it. Did you?

Late last night I received an email from my west coast friend sharing that we were about to have a one time in all of history event. It happened at twenty seconds past twenty minutes past eight o'clock P.M. For just one second (in military time), the time would be **20:20:20 2020**.

It would be interesting to imagine what people were doing at **20:20:20 2020**. Eating, praying, watching TV, emailing, working, cleaning, driving, walking, sleeping? Someone probably died at that moment. Time of death: 20:20:20 2020.

I was reminded of something that C.S. Lewis wrote as he pondered time. It was in a chapter of his book "**Mere Christianity**" entitled "**Time and Beyond Time.**" I am glad for the **20:20:20 2020** moment so I could recall and hunt for Lewis's thoughts on time.

In that chapter, Lewis was talking about prayer specifically and named the difficulty some people have about the whole idea about prayer. He referred to a man stating, "*I can believe in God all right, but what I cannot swallow is the idea of Him attending to several hundred million human beings who are all addressing Him at the same moment.*"

In pondering "*at the same moment*" he started thinking about how we likely experience moment by moment in an entirely different manner than God. Our assumption is that we travel through time the same way God does. Lewis challenges this:

"Almost certainly God is not in Time. His life does not consist of moments following one another. I a million people are praying to Him at ten-thirty tonight, God need not listen to them all in that one little snippet we call ten-thirty."

Lewis then suggests that this moment, and every other moment in history is always the present for God. "*He has all eternity in which to listen to the split second of prayer put up by a pilot as his plane crashes in flames.*"

Lewis realizes this is difficult to think about from our reference, so he tries an analogy.

"Suppose I am writing a novel. I write 'Mary laid down her work; next moment came a knock at the door!' For Mary who has to live in the imaginary time of my story there is no interval between putting down the work and hearing the knock.

But I, who am Mary's maker, do not live in the imaginary time at all. Between writing the first half of that sentence and the second, I might sit down for three hours and think steadily about Mary. I could think about Mary as if she were the only character in the book and for as long as I pleased, and the hours I spent in doing so would not appear in Mary's time (the time inside the story) at all.

He goes on to say, "This is not a perfect illustration, of course, But it may give just a glimpse of what I believe to be the truth. God is not hurried along in the Time-stream of this universe any more than an author is hurried along in the imaginary time of his own novel. God has infinite attention to spare for each one of us. God does not have to deal with us in the mass. You are as much alone with God as if you were the only being God had ever created. When Christ died, He died for you individually just as much as if you had been the only person in the world."

20:20:20 2020. I missed it. God did not.

We can only imagine what Author of All Creation God did in that moment of God's time. But we trust that God has all the time in the world and all the time in all eternity to do what God promises, which is to fulfil his purpose for all creation. We'll never know the how and the when of all this, but as we hold fast to all God's promises, we trust that in God's time, all will be well. For God in Jesus Christ has written a good end to this story.

Let us pray.

God of all time, it is impossible for us to comprehend how you are present in our lives, and how you answer prayer, and how you have time to give each and every one of us your undivided attention. Help us live with that mystery and trust in your mercy. Thank you for the imagination of your servant C.S. Lewis who stretches our imaginations to believe that with you all things are possible. In each and every second of our lives, and the lives of all your beloved children, help us recognize your heart is big enough for all of us. As we keep turning to you, hear our prayers and hold us close. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. "In His Time" is a thoughtful hymn not often sung in our tradition, but when paired with Ecclesiastes 3:1, it is sweet to ponder.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C80d6h1fMNo>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, April 22, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #32

When St. Paul wrote, he did not have email.

Therefore, his CC: was in his greeting.

***Greet** Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus,⁴ and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.*

***Greet** also the church in their house.*

***Greet** my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ.⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you.*

***Greet** Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.*

***Greet** Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.*

***Greet** Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.*

***Greet** Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus.*

***Greet** my relative Herodion.*

***Greet** those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. ¹*

***Greet** those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa.*

***Greet** the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.*

***Greet** Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother-- a mother to me also.*

***Greet** Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them.*

***Greet** Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.*

***Greet** one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ **greet** you. (Rom. 16:3-16 NRS)*

This is not one of our lectionary readings, but not unimportant or irrelevant because it reveals that Paul is writing to real persons with whom he had relationships and with whom it was vital to stay connected when he was separated from them. We share that experience today as we are separated from each other.

We don't know just how long it was between letters, or if there were other letters. We don't have any letters that churches wrote to St. Paul expressing the good things that had happened to the as well as their concerns. We know some of their concerns by reading what Paul had written back to them. Given the world they lived in, it is quite remarkable that we have this record of what has become our sacred scriptures.

It seems less sacred to be adding simple "hellos" or "say 'hi' from me to all those people by name. But again, the good news of Jesus Christ made sacred changes in the lives of real people who had names. Wouldn't we have loved to be part of how that happened?

Actually we are. Every time we greet each other, whether in person, or by phone, letter, email, Face-time, text, or zoom, we stand in a long line of real people whom Christ died and was raised with whom he stays connected. Greetings.

Let us pray:

When we read names of people Paul greeting in his letters, we are reminded that the church is made up of real people with names and faces and personalities and stories. Thank you for all who have been drawn together in the name above all names, Jesus Christ our Lord. Help us, during this time of distance and isolation, not to forget about each other, to reach out in Jesus name, and greet each other in the name of the Lord. We pray for all who are sick and especially those who are waiting for you to call them by name, to their heavenly home. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. The song I'm linking to here is a joyful one obviously done long before social distancing. It is a hymn we have song when we've been together – "Christ Be Our Light." This is sung in a church by the Notre Dame Folk Choir. What joy on their faces! You won't be disappointed taking a look and a listen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g0c4YeABTs>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, April 23, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #33

Compassion.

When we take time to think of all the health care workers, a word that surfaces for me is “*compassion*.”

In English we can think of this as “*with suffering*,” as “*passion*” means “*suffering*.” Philippians 2:1, Paul encouraged his brothers and sisters to demonstrate this Christ-like quality as he uses the words sometimes translated compassion and mercy. *Splagxna* and *oiktirmoi* (σπλάγχνα καὶ οἰκτιρμοί), (Phil. 2:1 BYZ).

Those words together literally convey a deep in your gut kind of compassion and mercy/sympathy.

The verses around “*splagxna*” and “*oiktirmoi*” are these:

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any **compassion** and **sympathy**,² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:1-4 NRS)*

Except for HIPA rules, we might be aware of much more Christ-like behavior happening daily in our hospitals and care centers. Sometimes eyewitnesses tell us stories about this that they wish we could fully comprehend. Enough images have come through that we have a picture at least.

Frederick Buechner had a very thoughtful way of describing “*compassion*” in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*: “*Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it’s like to live inside somebody else’s skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.*”

It's been said by experts that the pandemic will not ever be over until there is a vaccine. Until then the best chance we have for survival is practicing compassion. Not just those in the medical community who serve tirelessly and risk their lives to serve.

This would include those who will choose to wear a mask in a public place because if they are asymptomatic carriers of the virus, they could infect others. It includes those who practice social distancing the best they are able because we know this slows the spread. It includes everyone who is looking out for others, not just thinking about what’s best for themselves. It includes those who have enough to share with others.

Buechner says this is “sometimes fatal.” He wasn’t thinking of a virus when he said this, but rather something we experience that changes the way we look at the world and the world’s people around us. That kind of fatal is good.

Let us pray:

You call us O God to be of one mind and live as Christ calls us, as compassionate and merciful people. We won’t pretend we can be as good at this as you want us to be, but we also believe that every single day you pull forth from people heroic acts of compassion and mercy. Thank you for that, and may the good we are seeing help us to trust that we can live with an openness to life in Christ that is stronger than fear, stronger than illness, stronger than death itself. In Jesus Name.

P.S.

Last summer many of us got to know Clarina Emanuel while she was visiting her daughter Louise Jacobson and family. Clarina and her husband and family live in Gabarone, Botswana. With email, I have learned they are sheltering in place much as we are. When I decided to google “Covid 19 Botswana”, I discovered a beautiful video, a tribute to health care workers and hope for healing. Follow the link below. I will also add a link to a beautiful version of “*The Prayer*” done this past weekend by One World Together.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkoVcdnBd2M>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYJCYr1I-Sk>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, April 24, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #34

PPEs and the whole armor of God.

¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh*, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*. (Eph. 6:11-12 NRS)

(*, with the exception of the coronavirus --Eph. 6:12 TRVV... Today's Revised Virus Version).

Pre-virus, I never knew what PPE meant. Now I do. Personal Protective Equipment. It's masks and face shields and coverings and gloves that protect hospital workers and other care givers from viruses. If St. Paul was dealing with Covid-19, I suppose the full armor of God would look like PPE.

When Paul goes on to describe the fight against the powers of darkness, he amplifies the full armor to describe a "belt of truth," a "breastplate of righteousness," "shoes" to proclaim a gospel of peace, a "shield of faith", "helmet of salvation", and "sword of the spirit." With this armor we will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. (vs. 16).

When dealing with coronavirus, one metaphor of defense regularly used is "magic bullet," something that is quick and deadly. But experts also tell us there are no magic bullets yet. PPE is the best defense, along with physical distancing, and staying at home.

But what protects us from our fears about the future, the reality of financial hardship, and a struggling economy?

St. Paul would say the "armor of God." But again, his struggle was not with a virus, but against the powers of darkness and spiritual forces of evil.

So maybe there are two fronts in this war. The fight against the actual virus, and the fight against all those forces that would tear us apart in trying to find common ground in the fight to save the world. Therefore we support science and good medicine to find a cure, and protect ourselves with PPE and the essential practices, at the same time affirming on a deeper spiritual level that only God can equip us against the powers and forces of darkness that also seek to destroy us.

Luther understood this when composing the last stanza of "A Mighty Fortress":

*That word above all earthly powers,
No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through Him who with us sideth:*

*Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His Kingdom is forever.*

I pray that God will “arm” us all well.

Let us pray:

Grant us, O God the equipment we need in order to protect ourselves and each other from all that seeks to harm us. We pray that all those who are serving those who are sick will have access to personal protective equipment. And us all, we pray that armor that St. Paul talks about so that the forces of evil shall not overpower us. Grant us your protection, O God, so that we can continue to live and serve you. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. One of our gentler hymns is “*As the Deer.*” In a quiet way it affirms “You (God) alone are my strength my shield; To you alone may my spirit yield. I found a video of an Indonesian Choir who shares this beautifully in several languages.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnIYWkfw74E>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, April 25, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #35

What follows is an updated version of an old newsletter article first printed in October, 2011. This is the one my late mother Beth had copied and given to all her friends because she liked it so much. It would have been her 97th birthday today. Rest in Peace, Mom.

“where troubles melt like lemon drops, away above the chimney tops...”

One of my favorite songs is *“Over the Rainbow.”* Since I first heard Judy Garland belt it out in *“The Wizard of Oz”* many years ago, it always brings a smile to my face. Since then, there have been hundreds of recordings of this iconic song.

“Over the Rainbow” expresses a vision of a perfect place “where skies are blue... where clouds are far behind... and where dreams really do come true.”

I don't remember the first time I did a double take on the lyric *“where troubles melt like lemon drops.”*

I do remember I had recently purchased a bag of actual lemon drops. It was then I realized that lemon drops are really hard pieces of candy that can break your teeth if you are not careful. Not only that, but they melt.... very... very... slowly.

That means even in the idealized *“over the rainbow”* land of OZ, troubles do not instantly go away. Perhaps the lyric should have been, *“where troubles melt like cotton candy, that's a place that would be dan-dy...way... up high...”*

When the movie version of *“The Wizard of Oz”* concludes, Dorothy discovers that even her dream world has plenty of troubles and there is no place like “home” (even when home also has its own share of troubles).

That started me thinking.

If there is no escaping *“troubles,”* how then shall we deal with them? I looked up all the forms of *trouble* in the scriptures, and found this gem: ⁶ *Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace.* ⁷ *In the day of my **trouble** I call upon you, for you answer me.* (Psalm 86: 6-7 ESV)

This confirms the good news that God listens and offers grace so that we shall not be overcome by any kind of trouble. This is wonderfully expressed in a great hymn of the church, *“Abide With Me.”* Consider the lyrics by Henry F. Lyte:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see—
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's pow'r?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;
Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Contrasting this powerful affirmation of God's abiding presence with the utopian vision of that place where "troubles melt like lemon drops" I am far more drawn to the hope that comes from Jesus who says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my father's house there are many rooms" (John 14:1-2)

Did you notice that Jesus speaks of *home* here... as well, and there's no place like it! Blessings.

Let us pray:

Thank you, O God, for making your home in us, and for being our constant companion amid all the troubles of this life. When we wish our troubles would quickly melt away, give us patience to trust that neither troubles nor a coronavirus will last forever. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. I have enjoyed these two versions of "Abide with Me."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXIm-bxbPwE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZ99O28UpJo>

And of course.... Over The Rainbow.. Judy Garland

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSZxmZmBfnU>

IZ Israel "IZ" Kamakawiwo'ole

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fahr069-fzE>

and Eynne Hollens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJygl7Q2-bY>

and the phenomenal guitar artistry of Tommy Emmanuel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cHeNscKZNO>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, April 26, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #36

Remembering Waco on "Road to Emmaus" Sunday.

I hadn't set out to remember the Road to Waco, but I did take a look at some of my older Road To Emmaus sermons when I came across one, which because of Netflix this week, perked my interest.

Except for Netflix releasing "Waco" this week, I might not have taken a look. But I did.

On April 25, 1993, it was my turn to preach at Our Saviour Lutheran in West Lafayette, Indiana. It was another third Sunday of Easter. This one was different. The title gave a clue.

"On the Road to ~~Waco~~ Emmaus"

It was that week that the 51-day siege of the Branch Davidian Religious Cult compound in Waco, Texas ended, with the compound going up in a fiery inferno, killing nearly eighty men, woman, and children who were followers of cult leader David Koresh.

The day it happened I had gone home for lunch and had turned on the television. It was horrifying.

Many of us remember that time, even though we also forget much of that time as years pass.

Many are remembering now, or learning for the first time, as Netflix this week released that six-part miniseries called "Waco."

Unlike 1993, nowadays we have so much more information to draw from. Books have been written; documentaries and survivor interviews are widely available on YouTube. I even watched a recent recorded zoom memorial service for the victims, including the ATF agents who were killed. As the read the names of the deceased, they showed pictures and told stories about them. If not for the pandemic, this would have been a private affair, but because stay at home, Zoom recording, and YouTube, anyone can see it.

One comment made by a survivor was that they were glad the "Waco" miniseries was made, as they felt historically the followers have been cast in a such an unsympathetic light. This survivor wanted people to know they followed Koresh because they really believed he was the Messiah, God's anointed one.

Believing that, of course, opened them up to all kinds of abuse at the hands of one who could accurately be described as an "Anti-Christ." Koresh was a master manipulator, had memorized the entire Bible, and was obviously convincing to those who followed him to their deaths.

Even the carnage that resulted from the ATF attach and 51-day siege was seen in light of Koresh's interpretation of the End Times. His taking of all the women as "wives" was in order to procreate according to God's plan.

On the "Road to Emmaus," a stranger opened the scriptures to the disciples so that they could see God's plan of salvation. His name was Jesus, not David Koresh.

When the scriptures are not interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ, modelling Jesus' love and his ministry, they can be manipulated and cause great harm. David Koresh is a good example of how this can happen.

Listening to interviews with the survivors, including both those who still "believe" in Koresh's prophecies and those whose eyes were opened to the great evil within him, I can't help but feel a lot of empathy for them. Even as willing participants, they gave up themselves for someone they believed was God's instrument to save them. He was not. He is not.

It is Jesus, not Koresh, about whom this is written in Luke's gospel:

²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures (Lk. 24:27 NRS)

We can all be so thankful that in our baptism, we remember and affirm the one to whom we belong is Jesus. May we all be secure in this faith.

Let us pray:

We pray, O God, that we all come to know this Jesus Christ, God's Son and Messiah, and the scriptures that point to him. We pray that no one will be lured into false teachings and false teachers who would take our earnest desires to believe and abuse us for the sake of One who is not the Christ. We pray for all who have been led astray, and for all who need your grace and love this day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

P.S. Most of that 1993 sermon veered into familiar "Road to Emmaus" territory, but because the horror regarding the "Road to Waco" April 25 was so on our minds, I needed to address Waco before I could proceed. I'd like to attach that first part, so you can see why, upon reading it, I was drawn to watch "Waco" and seek information about the impact the impact all this had on the survivors twenty-seven years later.

And yes, I did find two *Road to Emmaus* songs:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOHrapKFmIU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pS9h85m1TIU>

On the Road To ~~Waco~~ Emmaus

April 25, 1993 Our Saviour Lutheran Church, West Lafayette, Indiana

Easter 3A Luke 24:13-35

Dear Friends in Christ. Grace be unto you and peace. Amen.

For much of my week my gaze has been fixed more on the road to Waco than the road to Emmaus. While home on Monday, I happened to turn on the television at noon and watched live the horrible fire that killed nearly eighty men, women and children. Twenty-five were children.

I begin my sermon this morning by naming this because many of us have had our attention focused on the road to Waco.

We have heard many eyewitness accounts describing what happened down there, with many more to come, I am sure. We saw for ourselves a heavily armed compound reduced to ashes in less than an hour. We have carried with us terrible images of children being so badly destroyed by fire that it will be very difficult, even for forensics experts to discover who they once were.

And somehow in all this, there was a man who claimed to be the Lamb of God. Not the Lamb of God we have known through our scriptures, one who was gentle, non-violent, and obedient to death, but one who would use his personal charisma and power to bend, mold, shape, control and finally destroy those who would follow him.

As a people of faith, we hurt over this. We weep, especially for the children, and maybe more and more for the others as we read about those who lost their lives to this ministry —to this madness.

Maybe you have been reading about some of those people, and heard others talk about them. And you know, they don't seem so different from anyone who would earnestly and sincerely give their lives over to Christ. The problem was it was not Jesus the Christ whom they gave themselves to, but to an antichrist, one who would suck their lives from them to feed his own lust for power and control. That much is certain.

And now, more than three days have passed, and there is no risen Christ named David Koresh who walks among us. He is dead. He is not risen. He will not come again.

I will not pretend this morning to give an insightful analysis to the Branch Davidians or. It is difficult to fathom how it is possible for anyone to so give themselves and their children over to this apocalyptic paranoia.

Even so, I still believe it is important for us, as the body of Christ, to think about and remember the Branch Davidians. It is not enough simply to dismiss these people as religious nut cases or David Koresh as simply evil—even though I, among many, believe he was evil.

I have no hesitation in naming David Koresh as an antichrist, especially for those who believed in him). I hope we can think about them and remember them, however, so that it might help us be ever clearer in our witness (through words and deeds) to the Christ of faith and the church, who comes not to manipulate and destroy, but to give us abundant life.

I hope we can remember them as we embody and share with rest of the world, a living Christ, a living Christ—who will be identified not by his legion of angels, armed with hand grenades and assault rifles, but rather by a gathered community dedicated to acts of love and carrying the message of peace to all people.

So today, we are not on the road to Waco, but Emmaus where we meet the one who is our risen Lord.... the rest of sermon follows....but I have not included it here...

I cannot tell. But this I know.

*⁵¹ Listen, I will **tell** you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed,⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you **know** that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:51-58 NRS)*

There is much mystery in how God has chosen to interact with his world. There is much we will never be able to understand. Why has God chosen certain prophets through whom God speaks to us? Why has God chosen to enter into our lives as a human being. Why did this word of God made flesh have to suffer and die for our sins?

To these why questions, we may never understand. But we can know enough to trust God with our lives.

The poet William Young Fullerton (1857-1932) sought to express the dynamic between "I cannot tell" and "But this I know," with this beautiful poem:

I cannot tell why He, whom angels worship,
Should set His love upon the sons of men,
Or why, as Shepherd, He should seek the wand'ers,
To bring them back, they know not how or when.

But this I know, that He was born of Mary,
When Beth'hem's manger was His only home,
And that He lived at Nazareth and labored,
And so the Savior, Savior of the world, is come.

I cannot tell how silently He suffered
As with His peace He graced this place of tears,
Or how His heart upon the Cross was broken,
The crown of pain to three and thirty years.

But this I know, He heals the broken-hearted,
And stays our sin, and calms our lurking fear,
And lifts the burden from the heavy laden,
For yet the Savior, Savior of the world, is here.

I cannot tell how He will win the nations,
How He will claim His earthly heritage,
How satisfy the needs and aspirations
Of east and west, of sinner and of sage.

But this I know, all flesh shall see His glory,
And He shall reap the harvest He has sown,
And some glad day His sun shall shine in splendor
When He the Savior, Savior of the world, is known.

I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship,
When, at His bidding, every storm is stilled,
Or who can say how great the jubilation
When all the hearts of men with love are filled.

But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,
And myriad, myriad human voices sing,
And earth to heaven, and heaven to earth, will answer:
At last the Savior, Savior of the world, is King.

I'm calling this a poem only because the verses rhyme. Fullerton himself would not describe himself as a poet. Rather he was an Irish Baptist evangelist, administrator, and writer. His writings were mostly sermons, biographies, history... and ... hymns.

So what you have just read was a composition that he wrote to accompany a familiar Irish folk melody whose origin is unknown but was first submitted to a publisher in the mid 1800's. It's a lovely melody most often identified with the very popular "O Danny Boy."

In this form, "*I Cannot Tell*" is not in our hymnal (perhaps not German or Lutheran enough... or perhaps too associated with "Danny Boy"), but in the spirit of love and support for a variety of musical and theological traditions, it should be. Even now, in this time where we seek clarity in faith, it is a wonderful hymn to ponder as a daily devotion. Here are the links: One is performed by Celtic Worship, and the second is by EMU Worship. The third link is a to a beautiful instrumental version on a magnificent pipe organ (just don't imagine it as "Danny Boy.")

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDLj8UQG9V8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4u1gW8Acbg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkvesjlemoE>

Let us pray:

There are so many things we cannot tell, O God, but many more things, by your grace, that we are thankful to know. Teach us to receive your blessed mysteries with grace and joy, trusting that what we do know, through Jesus Christ, is sufficient for this day. Bless all those who look to you for health, hope, and healing this day, all those who care for the sick and work for the cure. Grant wisdom to our leaders who make choices that daily affect people's lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

"Going Viral."

The phrase "*going viral*" was first observed in the late 1980's and was first used to describe how those cute photos or videos of pets or kids were shared via social media or "*viewed*" on YouTube or "*liked*" on Facebook. Rapid spread was required to go viral.

Until a few months ago "*going viral*" had a pretty positive connotation. Something that had "*gone viral*" was something that garnered interest. YouTube especially became a place where things posted could go viral.

It was a good phrase to describe how something could spread so quickly. The word *virus* entered into the English Language before scientists understood much about how viruses functioned, but in time *virus* became applied to describe those insidious germs that multiply themselves in hosts, and spread to other hosts.

It was also in the 1980's that the term "*computer virus*" was first used, because it was self-replicating bad code that could "*infect*" and damage or disable computer systems.

These days we cannot help but pause when we use the term "*going viral*" describe another cute puppy video, even if its views have spread to millions in just a short time. That's because now we understand why exactly "*going viral*" was such a good description. We are now seeing a living organism-destroying virus that has gone viral and continues to spread and infect each day.

With the coronavirus going viral many other things have *gone viral* as well. Fear. Worry. Loss. Hardship. Uncertainty. Dread. This list is long.

To this, where's the "*antidote*?" And is that even the right word?

An *antidote* by definition is a remedy that counteracts the effects of poison. For a virus we need a *antibodies*.

An *antidote* is not an *antibody*. "An *antibody* a blood protein produced in response to and counteracting a specific antigen. Antibodies combine chemically with substances which the body recognizes as alien, such as bacteria, viruses, and foreign substances in the blood."

For a virus we need antibodies, and we pray that God, science and medicine will help us produce antibodies so we can end the pandemic.

At the same time, I wonder if maybe for all the other "*poisons*" that accompany the virus we actually need an "*antidote*."

Do you think its fair to describe the “*gospel*” as an “*antidote*” to fear, worry, loss, hardship, uncertainty and dread, among other personal poisons?

Two thousand years of faithful witness to Jesus Christ as Lord would say “yes.”

The “antidote” to the world’s poison is the love of Jesus and the gospel by which his love spread to all the nations.

St. Luke speaks to this in Acts 10;

³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.
(Acts 10:37-42 NRS)

The love of Jesus is beautifully sung about in a great hymn of the church: “*What Wondrous Love Is This.*”

1 What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul,
what wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul!

2 When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,
when I was sinking down, sinking down;
when I was sinking down beneath God's righteous frown,
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul, for my soul,
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul!

3 To God and to the Lamb, I will sing, I will sing,
to God and to the Lamb, I will sing;
to God and to the Lamb, who is the great I AM,
while millions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing,
while millions join the theme, I will sing!

4 And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
and when from death I'm free, I'll sing on;
and when from death I'm free, I'll sing and joyful be,
and through eternity I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
and through eternity I'll sing on!

The love of Jesus is not a “vaccine,” or an “antibody”, but certainly has become an “antidote” to those things that poison us on the way to being well. Go viral with that message, and feel free to take the love of Jesus internally as you hear it, pray it, sing of it, and live it.

Let us pray:

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your wondrous love that becomes the antidote to the poison that would destroy our relationship with you and others whom you love. Bless those who express your love in daily life, especially those who minister to those who are sick. Make well, we pray, all who look to you this day, and keep us strong and confident in your abiding presence. May your love go viral and heal this ailing world. Amen.

P.S. Of course you need to listen to “What Wondrous Love.” Here are four I found, one from the St. Olaf Choir, another from someone I hadn’t known of before, Chelsea Moon. Also Sounds Like Reign and Blue Highway. I think you’ll like this nice variety. And as an added bonus, I want to share a video that actually went viral. How viral? When I first saw it, it had 3 million views; now it is nearly 9 million. It will make you smile and laugh, especially those of you who are trying to make facemasks these days.

“What Wondrous Love.”St. Olaf Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsVnvN3EVxY>

“What Wondrous Love.”Chelsea Moon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1g26dbNJYJI>

“What Wondrous Love.”Sounds Like Reign

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVNktRGU3As>

“What Wondrous Love.”Blue Highway

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_RtGQtHJ9Y

and for fun.... Do It Yourself Sewing with Kay

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4c5eo_3-y0

The "New Normal?" Don't you mean the "New Abnormal?"

One thing that was new for me when I joined St. Paul's as a new associate pastor in 1997 was greeting parishioners at the end of the service with hugs.

When I extended my hand and I was then hugged, I quickly realized the south was a friendlier place (that way) than what I had been used to in Indiana. I used to joke that we hugged in Indiana too. I tell them that everyone at Our Saviour Lutheran Church hugged me. But that was as they said "Good-bye" my last Sunday after serving as their campus pastor for eleven years.

I also came to understand why one of our students from South Carolina believed people from Indiana were cold. Nobody hugged. She later learned there was actually much affection among the Hoosiers; it just wasn't expressed by everyone hugging each other every Sunday.

When I met (then) Senior Pastor John Misenheimer's mother Margaret, (who hugged everyone, including people she just met), I realized Pastor John was raised that way, and that way was also how many in the south greeted each other.

Soon into my ministry here, hugging everyone after worship became my "*new normal*." For a long time, it felt like the new "*abnormal*," but in time became so normal that sometimes I forgot that when visitors or newcomers from "*up north*" extended their hands in greeting or sharing the peace, the handshake was their "*normal*." Oops. Sorry.

With the Coronavirus pandemic, both hugs *and* handshakes have become casualties of how we greet each other. And don't even consider doing as St. Paul encouraged: "Greet one another with a *holy kiss*. (2 Cor. 13:12 NRS)

Physical distancing is the "new normal". And that sure feels like the "*new abnormal*"... for now.

However, that does not mean that we have any less love for one another. Maybe without the handshakes or hugs, we may need to speak "*I love you*" more often.

In Romans, St. Paul describes the love we have for each other as "*mutual affection*." It's right in the middle of this passage:

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another **with mutual affection**; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. (Rom. 12:9-13 NRS)

These days, as we love one another with *mutual affection*, we'll have to do it (for a while) without the hugs and handshakes. But the mutual affection is still there, because when love is genuine, it shows. Despite the number of feet between us, it shows. Blessings.

Let us pray:

O God, when we hear new words like “new normal,” it feels like we are being thrust into a “new abnormal.” It is so unsettling to experience our normal ways of living being so uprooted. Help us live with the changes so that we, and all your people can live. May our mutual affection for each other not be diminished during this time but increase as we are able. We pray for progress in finding a cure and good treatment plans for the coronavirus, and protection as we carefully try to open back our working world. Bless all those who look for healing. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. I have been looking for “hugs and handshakes” hymns. What first came to mind was “*He Touched Me*.” Because all contact with Jesus is safe, this might be the best one for today. Elvis Presley’s version is beautiful and iconic, so it’s here. But I added a couple others that are quite nice as well.

Elvis: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kp-pjIXTLOE>

Joey and Rory: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9DXlfsSGGc>

The Booth Brothers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgy7g6BCNOO>

And this little lovely little Irish children’s choir bonus.... “*The Lord Bless You.....*” with lyric “May God hold you in the palm of his hand.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vm710PWs3Js>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, April 30, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #40

Heaven Only Knows.

"*Heaven Only Knows*" could be the answer to many questions, but this time I am referring to the 1947 Movie by the same title, recently shown on Turner Classic Movies.

I wouldn't describe this movie as a classic, but it had one twist and a bonified "aha" moment, uncharacteristic of the western genre.

In a nutshell, the movie is about an angel from heaven (Bob Cummings) and a black clad minion from hell (Gerald Mohr) seeking to win the soul of "Duke," a scoundrel played by Brian Donleavy. After a climactic shootout, a reflective Duke wanders into a church nearby and stands silent for a time before a cross on an altar. Behind the altar is a stained-glass window of Jesus.

After a few moments, Drusilla, love interest, daughter of the pastor and one who is also trying to persuade Duke to see the light, has this very interesting conversation with Duke:

Drusilla: "I'm happy that you're here."

Duke: "Is that so? I don't even know why I came into this place."

Drusilla: "I do. It's because you've learned we're all on a journey together... and this... well this is ... like a post office and we come in here to get our mail from home."

Whoa!! Isn't that a thoughtful image of the church?

We have often spoken about "journeying together" as a community. But comparing the church to a post office where we come to get our "mail from home" is so very insightful. Perhaps even more meaningful when we remember those seeing the movie for the first time in 1947.

That was post-war America, where for the past several years, one of the most precious gifts for those serving their country, was literal mail from home. Speaking of the church this way would resonate.

This image of church as post office with mail from home also makes sense in respect to the early New Testament church. Those first followers were among those whose faith was shaped by the letters from St. Paul. Consider the beginning of the oldest letter we have to the new church in Thessalonica:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thess. 1:1-3 NRS)

We know the church is not the only place where we can receive word from God, but for someone like movie character “Duke,” who has never heard it elsewhere, it is a good community to trust. The church today continues to be a good place from which to be refreshed by the living Word of God in Jesus Christ experienced through the Holy Scriptures.

Because of restrictions on social gatherings, and stay-in-place orders, our church as post office has, (in some ways) been out of service. But that’s only as a place where we meet “*in-person.*”

Therefore, I am grateful for all the alternative ways to be refreshed by God’s word and by people on this journey together, whether by reading, God’s Minutes, St. Paul’s In Your Home, “Zoom” gatherings, video worship, email, regular letters, phone calls, or neighborly six feet away chats.

And sometimes, we might even get a message through an old black and white Western on TV.

Let us pray:

Thank you, O God for all the ways you reach us these days, and especially when we realize we are loved, missed, and cared about. As we journey together through this time of uncertainty, may the church always be deeply felt as home, even when we cannot share physical space. Unite us by your Holy Spirit as we reach out to each other in prayer, telephone conversation, texting, emailing, and speaking across aisles and landscapes. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. As I thought *mail* and *letters*, I thought of *words* and that took me to *God’s Word*. Then I looked for the great hymn: “God’s Word is Our Great Heritage”. Did you know there are versions of this song that do not have the *Ein Feste Burg* (A Mighty Fortress) melody? I was shocked. But it was nice. Here it is:

God’s Word Is Our Great Heritage by Koine:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrGvRtdRdno>

I tried to find the version I know, but all I could find was a “karaoke” version. You’ll need to sing along.:

God’s Word Is Our Great Heritage (karaoke)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJe7Z_-Npmg

I probably should have looked for “Lord, Keep Us Steadfast In Your Word.” Here’s a good version.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tel3ayeBxX0>

and... (spoiler alert that should not be called “spoiler”) because everything worked out for Duke and his soul at the end, I discovered a sweet song called “Heaven Came Down” by a choir in Kenya.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdjFNHLHRB4>

St. Paul's In Your Home Friday, May 1, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #41

May Day or Mayday? Or Both?

Historically, "*May Day*" is either a festival celebrating the change of season (winter to spring) or that May first in 1886 when 300,00 workers in 13,000 workplaces walked off their jobs in protest of labor conditions.

Hysterically, "*Mayday*" is a call for help, first used in 1923 for aviators in distress, adapted from the French "*maidez*" meaning "*help me.*"

Most years these words are unrelated, but not this year. This year while enjoying the change of seasons, millions have been sent home from their jobs due to the coronavirus, and the whole world is saying "*help me.*" **Mayday!** This is not the year Easter's joy is marked by a happy and prosperous spring.

Because that virus from which we are calling out "*Mayday*" on this *May Day* is not leaving us soon, we are truly globally together in our distress call. And while not everyone is yet sinking or crashing in desperation, the alarm has been sounded and we are told to prepare ourselves for some treacherous months ahead.

Therefore, it's not a bad thing to look to the scriptures for how people of faith have historically made their *distress* calls to God.

The word translated "*distress*" is written in one hundred forty-two verses like Psalm 18:6... ⁶ In my *distress* I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. (Ps. 18:6 NRS).

The word translated "*cry*" is in one hundred eighty three verses, like Psalm 27:7 ⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I *cry* aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! (Ps. 27:7 NRS).

The word *help* is written in 251 verses, like Psalm 38: 21-22... ²¹ Do not forsake me, O LORD; O my God, do not be far from me; ²² make haste to *help* me, O Lord, my salvation.

In other words, there are many "*Maydays*" in the Bible.

But for every "*Mayday*", there is also ample indication that God hears us in our distress, and draws close that we might find strength and comfort through what ever causes us to stumble in our faith.

And that takes us back to Easter's message that *Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed. Alleluia.* The joy of this good news (Gospel) then infuses our distress calls with confidence that God in Jesus Christ fully intends to come to our aid and rescue us.

We may have some concerns or issues about God's timetable here, especially when we feel ourselves sinking, but the word is always that in life and death, in calm or chaos, in strength or in weakness, we belong to God.

In Christ's resurrection, springtime has become a forever season.

Let us pray. On this May Day, we thank you for the joy of springtime. The flowers don't seem to notice that we are troubled with so much uncertainty these days. They just bloom. Help us take time to notice the beauty that is around us. We also remember May Day was once marked by a massive labor walk out, and we pray for ways today that our work force can be safe and not locked out due to the Coronavirus. Lastly as we lift up our "Maydays" to you, keep us calm, focused, and full of faith as we work together in this world to restore it and us all to good health. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. Psalm 130 might be considered one of the "Mayday" Psalms. As a P.S., I offer it to you this May 1, along with several musical selections based on the Psalm. The Psalm text follows, and then several links, beginning with the classic Martin Luther version.

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

²LORD, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
LORD, who could stand?

⁴But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

⁵I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶my soul waits for the LORD
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

From Depths of Woe I Cry To You" Return to Wittenberg "

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_Hd2GBHOHk

Out of the Depths Sovereign Grace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwKPMqxmVgC>

Popkantor Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIDfjDt4c50>

From Out of The Depths by Koine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qS2mHCZzhw>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, May 2, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #42

Shepherd Me, O God.

It was not until I first heard Marty Haugen's hymn ("*Shepherd Me O God*"), written in 1986, that I realized that "shepherd" can be both a noun and a verb.

We are most familiar with "*shepherd*" as noun, meaning "*one who tends sheep*". Adding "Good" to "Shepherd" has constructed an image for Jesus that has been around the church for as long as there has been a New Testament." This is expressed most visibly in the 10th Chapter of St. John's gospel.

"*Shepherd*" can also be a verb, as in "*tend, guide, or direct.*" So Jesus is *shepherd* (tender of sheep), and Jesus *shepherds* (tends, guides, and directs).

Traditionally, the Fourth Sunday of Easter has been named "*Good Shepherd*" Sunday and includes the 23rd Psalm, as well as the gospel from St. John, chapter 10, where Jesus describes himself as "*good shepherd*", "*gate*", and "*gatekeeper*".

Jesus as "*Good Shepherd*" has frequently been expressed in the church's art and music. One of St. Paul's most beautiful stained-glass windows depicts Jesus tenderly holding a little lamb. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, shepherds his flock. It's a beautiful image.

There are also many beautiful hymns based on John 10 and the 23rd Psalm. Internet data base "*SongSelect*" has identified 590 hymns or songs with the shepherd theme in them. That's a lot of shepherd hymns.

The ones I know best from Lutheran worship are "*Savior, Like A Shepherd Lead Us*" (ELW 789), "*The King of Love, My Shepherd Is*" (ELW 502), "*The Lord's My Shepherd*" (ELW 778), and of course "*Shepherd Me O God.*" (ELW 780).

What makes "*Shepherd Me, O God*" particularly special for me is that I not only have met composer Marty Haugen, but I am well acquainted with the place where it was composed, the retreat center in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State called Holden Village. Haugen composed it there in the winter of 1986; I spent a winter at Holden in 1974, just before enrolling at Luther Seminary.

That means I even remember the piano upon which Marty first composed and played "*Shepherd Me, O God.*" In my mind's eye, I can see him sitting there, and hear those first notes. I wonder if, when first sung during Holden's evening vespers, Marty sensed that this soon to be beloved piece would end up printed in many hymnals and sung in many churches throughout the world. Well, it certainly is that kind of good. Based on the 23rd Psalm, the lyrics are timeless; it has a beautiful melody; it's a wonderful gift to the church.

It also calls us to consider the wonderful ways that Jesus tends to us, his flock. In John 10, Jesus further describes this, talking about himself as good shepherd, gate, and gatekeeper.

Reading all of chapter 10, evidently it was difficult for the disciples to wrap their head around this concept and imagery. Jesus had to repeat himself, making it clear that the point to all this is for them to know that he came to love, protect, and be known to them so that they (and we) may have life and have it abundantly. To this end, the “*Good Shepherd*” (noun) ... “*shepherds*” (verb).

A good song probably would have helped them. (Like “*Shepherd Me, O God.*”) Blessings.

Let us pray:

Thank you, Lord Jesus for being our Good Shepherd and Gate and Gatekeeper. When we like sheep have gone astray, gather us in by your loving gestures and calm voice. Shepherd us, O God, through these days of difficulty and challenge, that we be safe and secure in your loving embrace. As always, we pray for those desperate to be held today, especially those who are hospitalized without family near them. Bless the caregivers and all those who minister to those who are sick. Keep us hopeful, we pray. Bless those who are working hard for the sake of others, and those who work has been taken away from them. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. Below are several versions of Haugen’s, “*Shepherd Me, O God.*” Look for more Shepherd themed songs tomorrow as I further ponder the 23rd Psalm.

Shepherd Me O God sung by Marty Haugen himself
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFgZGIZ5t80>

... and this great version by Sonia Salas
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXS3L-sdfPA>

... and hey that’s First Baptist, Wilmington singing the same hymn
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOIm1Ubae2A>

... and this lovely choir from Singapore
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lilyl4dc1Aw>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, May 3, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #43

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me. (Psalm 23:4)

I may be off about this simply because this is the translation I grew up with, but I believe the King James Version of Psalm 23 continues to stand as the most poetic and powerful version of this beloved Psalm. It packs a punch.

Consider verse 4: *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..."* Other translations use *"Even though,"* but *"Yea, though"* are words with which you can clench your fists (as a show of strength).

Don't believe me? Try clenching your fists as you speak The New Revised Standard Version version *"Even though I walk through the darkest valley."* Now try *"Yea, though I walk..."* See what I mean?

Not only that, but *"darkest valley"* seems less foreboding than *"valley of the shadow of death."* *"Darkest valley"* requires less strength to walk through than *"valley of the shadow of death"*. I might be splitting hairs here, but when I think of Bible verses that I am glad I memorized as a kid and can still recite today, I am grateful for 23rd Psalm in the old King James Version.

Over the years, as I have been at the bedsides of those who are dying, there are two pieces the older generation regularly can recite during their final days or hours on this earth. One is the Lord's Prayer. *"Our Father, who art in heaven..."*

The other is the 23rd Psalm. *"The Lord is my shepherd..."* I have witnessed verse four always spoken with strength, *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me."* That is followed by an equally strong concluding verse six: *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever."*

During dying days, sharing this prayer and this Psalm provides great comfort. Just be glad you hadn't grown up with the New English Version verse six: *"⁶ Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days, and I will live in the LORD's house for the rest of my life."*

For the *"rest of my life"*? And pray tell, how is this comforting when your time is up? It turns an eternally strong 23rd Psalm into a "nice knowing ya" and "good luck in the future" Psalm. Wrong! There is never a "time's up" for God's goodness and faithfulness.

Trust the King James here: *"and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever."* (See John 14:2 for Jesus' words on this ... *"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"*)

The 23rd Psalm rightfully belongs as one of our best "go to" scriptures.

It describes a Good Shepherd we have come to know as Jesus, one who promises love and care for us not only as long as we shall live, but for all eternity.

Take these words to heart. Memorize them. You *have* time (and just in case you don't have an old King James laying around, consider these six verses from the New King James Version. Packs the same punch and promises, but minus the "eth" words and the "Thous."

The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

³ He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever. (Ps. 23:1-6 NKJ)

Let us pray:

Thank you so much for words of scripture that we can so take to heart with all the hope and comfort they provide. We pray for all those who are now either walking in the shadow of death or fearing death's dark shadow. With your strength and support, give all those living in fear the means to face fears with that powerful affirmation, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." With strong confidence, may we all trust in your goodness and mercy following us forever. Help us learn these good words in scripture so that we can turn to them in every circumstance in life, trusting that you are with us always. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. Besides yesterday's "Shepherd Me O God", there are many wonderful Shepherd-based hymns. Here's a few.

The first by Acapeladrede was sent to me, a beautiful version of *The Lord Is My Shepherd*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITHr9UcvWko>

Next is a great version of *Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us* by 4HIM

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQe8sIFjX-o>

and lastly *The King of Love My Shepherd Is* by BYU Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DyS46N1KXo>

St. Paul's In Your Home Monday, May 4, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #44

Sneeze Free or Die?

Rights. Privileges. Free Speech. Right to Assemble. Freedom to Bear Arms. All amid a pandemic.

These are trying times.

I have been thinking about those protests in the Michigan capital where armed participants stormed the capital and demanded that the state government end the "lock-down" and "open up." Several were carrying "Live Free or Die" signs. The phrase has been around since the French Revolution but was made popular after Revolutionary War General John Stark's letter to veterans in 1809. It is a strong sentiment.

Seeing mask-free protesters with their armed weapons, I couldn't help but ask myself: "If your gun accidentally discharges and it kills someone, could you be charged with 'Criminally Negligent Homicide?'" I looked it up. Yep.

So what would happen if you are an asymptomatic carrier of the corona virus and not wearing a mask and you sneeze on someone and they die horribly from Covid-19?

Probably nothing. Except if you are the victim, you might wish you had been shot instead.

It's all a matter of perspective, I guess, but with all due respect to the freedom we so cherish as part of our cultural heritage, it is regrettable that increasing numbers of people are rejecting the practices that put us less in harm's way of being infected by the virus.

Like wearing face masks. Like washing hands or using hand sanitizer. Like maintaining physical distance.

It's one thing to take risks that affect only you. If you want play "Russian Roulette" with your gun turned on yourself, that's one thing. But if you point a loaded gun in my direction, even in jest, I pray you have the "safety" on.

Masks aren't perfect, but they add "safety," and do help protect the vulnerable, especially from those unknowingly carrying the virus. Let us not make this about politics and the interpretation of freedom. Make it about love and care for your neighbor.

Jesus expressed this quite clearly when he responded to question about love with these words: ³⁷ *Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."* ³⁸ *This is the first and great commandment.* ³⁹ *And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* ⁴⁰ *On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."* (Matt. 22:37-40 NKJ)

Of course, this breaks down during a pandemic when someone cares little for themselves or their neighbor. Or if freedom becomes exclusively about their own rights without regard for the safety of their neighbors.

Martin Luther frequently emphasized that freedom in Christ includes being free to serve. In his treatise "On Christian Liberty" he expressed it this way: "*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*"

There is paradoxical tension here, but care for one another is clearly a part of being a follower of Jesus Christ. That has never been more important than when we are faced with a life-threatening global pandemic. The decisions we make and actions we take have life or death consequences.

May the love of God grant us a life-giving perspective on freedom that directs us toward the love and safety of each other, so that "*Sneeze Free or Die*" won't become something that kills us.

Let us pray:

O God, we love our freedom and we thank for this free country. At the same time, we pray that we recognize how, in Christ, we are also free to care for one another. We so wish and pray that things could be "back to normal" but until then, help everyone to be responsible and learn everything we can about protecting those in our population who are most vulnerable to this insidious virus. We pray for effective treatment and cure, and better ways to live together as we keep pressing forward in faith. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. So what shall our song be for this unusually themed devotion? The first one I thought of was "Breathe on Me Breath of God," because these days I am only confident of God's breath breathed on me. We have also sung Michael W. Smith's Breathe a number of times, so I'll link to two versions of that beautiful song.

Breathe on Me Breath Of God by SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5keJHZdWYM>

Breath on Me by Steve Green

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBrImVdF1Nw>

Hasting College Choir (I noticed some coughing during the recording.... hmm)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8avdudzdpQ>

Kaleb Brasee piano solo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ro9EJqBMDWw>

Breathe by Michael W. Smith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEDcKZB7r2A>

Michael W. Smith (live)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGFeo08LkcY>

Oslo Gospel Choir's beautiful version of *Breathe*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A31k-qyxJs>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, May 5, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #45

How Can I Keep From Singing (In Church)?

It's not as bad as sneezing or coughing, but apparently the contagious "coronavirus aerosol" is also amplified through singing. That's not good news for choirs or people looking forward to returning for in-person worship.

Germany has placed a "no singing" restriction on people coming back to worship. Mendocino County in northern California has already had these restrictions. We also remember with sadness the Mt. Vernon Presbyterian choir in Washington state who learned the hard way how contagious is the coronavirus. One hundred twenty participated in a one-hour rehearsal and forty-one became infected. Two died.

Since then, the air borne transmission of this virus has been studied in more detail, confirming that it is not just one more ridiculous restriction foisted upon us. Admittedly, it sounds ridiculous (singing?!)***, and restrictions on singing makes us angry, except perhaps for all the non-singers who are self-conscious about the way other parishioners look at them during hymns (as their lips are tightly sealed). A ban on singing might actually be a welcomed relief for non-singers.

But worship without any singing? In our tradition, that seems impossible to imagine. Martin Luther felt very strongly about this:

"Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. The gift of language combined with the gift of song was given to man that he should proclaim the Word of God through Music."

And what of the scriptures?

Be filled with the Spirit,¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,²⁰ giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, (Eph. 5:18-20 NKJ)

² *Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing. (Ps. 100:2 NKJ)*

We're going to have lot to figure out in this new pre-vaccine world ("Dear God, please give us a vaccine soon... we will sing your praises like never before...").

So ... if our houses of worship cannot be filled with song, maybe it's time to make our homes even more so places of praise and worship through song. Let the shower singers sing out. Sing along while alone with "church at home" or while watching these YouTube attached videos.

And what better song to keep on singing is "My Life Flows On In Endless Song," also known as "How Can I Keep From Singing?" Spend some time with these powerful words. Especially during these difficult days of global pandemic, as they speak/sing to the heart of our faith.

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet †, tho' far-off hymn
That hails a new creation;
Thro' all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—
How can I keep from singing?
What tho' my joys and comforts die?
The Lord my Saviour liveth;
What tho' the darkness gather round?
Songs in the night he giveth.
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that refuge clinging;
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?
I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin;
I see the blue above it;
And day by day this pathway smooths,
Since first I learned to love it,
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
A fountain ever springing;
All things are mine since I am his—
How can I keep from singing?

Let us pray:

Gracious God, whether we sing along, or quietly find ourselves touched by a great melody and verse, we are thankful for the gift of music. We pray that it will not be long until we can gather in worship and song, but until then our prayers are lifted up on behalf of all who are affected by tumult and strife, that we can look through whatever clouds our lives, to the new creation in the Lord of Heaven and Earth. Help us sing with confidence that "no storm shall shake our inmost calm." Cling tightly to us, O God that we can continue to sing your praises as we await the healing of the world. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. There are many beautiful versions of this beautiful song. Here are some links:
How Can I Keep From Singing

Audrey Assad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2hddmy63U>

Enya: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RHt3EIEvHQ>

Quaker musicians Aaron Fowler and Laura Dungan
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x004IEwcYal>

Celtic Woman: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9hth14hokl>

Brother Sun: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFPNUaiKMe4>

and remember Judy Collins?: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxi4SDc48og>

How could I keep from posting so many wonderful versions of this deeply moving song?

*** Late breaking addition. At the same time I was finishing this draft, North Carolina Bishop Tim Smith posted an article on re-opening churches and linked this very interesting article about singing. Had I remembered May 4th is Star Wars Day (“May the Forth be with you.”) and writing about that, I would not have had this little opportunity to further amplify today’s theme. Peace be with you.

https://www.drheathernelson.com/singingandcovid19?fbclid=IwAR3NW1jPz9QaFAySjst9pvt3s697_kSjwEsQ7DzuP0_ywgrFSy96x9Gbkw8

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, May 6, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #46

Never Give Up.

One thing I value about writing daily devotionals is that it encourages me to keep searching for ways that God might be speaking to us through scripture, song, or other writings.

Today I found a prayer written by theologian/priest/servant of God Henri Nouwen that not long ago might only have applied to what a few people are going through. Not anymore. Humanity now has many things in common.

So today I'd like to share a very relatable prayer by Nouwen written in a book called *"All Will Be Well: A Gathering of Healing Prayers."* (Augsburg 1998).

When Nouwen begins his prayer with *"Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness..."* I cannot today think of anyone who would respond, *"Well, that certainly doesn't apply to me. I'm just fine, thank you."* Not these days. We can all relate.

Here's the prayer:

"Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience or understand. My mind is not able to concentrate on you, my heart is not able to remain centered, and it seems as if you are absent and have left me alone.

But in faith I cling to you. I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed.

Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort. I want to let you know that I love you even when I do not feel loved by you, and that I hope in you even though I often experience despair.

Let this be a little dying I can do with you and for you as a way of experiencing some solidarity with the millions in this world who suffer far more than I do. Amen. (Henri Nouwen 1932-1996)

To this we might add:

Dear God. We feel solidarity with Nouwen's prayer today. Hear us as we pray, for all those who suffer, and please say "Hi" to Father Henri from us as we thank him for this wonderful prayer. And bless you, O God, for hearing all our prayers and helping us never give up. Amen.

P.S. Susan Briehl and Marty Haugen put together a book and CD in 2003 called *"Turn my heart: A Sacred Journey from Brokenness To Healing."* On page 37, Psalm 131 was referenced, and accompanying that was an invitation to play a song from their CD. The Song was called *"Bambelela"* which means *"Never Give Up."*

Their recording is beautiful, but I also found several others that were quite also compelling.

From Turn My Heart with Marty Haugen:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Vwl5ixIWes>

Wild Goose Collective:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thFnfX9gHVs>

Ohio Youth Chorus:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puT5hdPheeQ>

Nakky Nkos'p

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWMDEOZfzEo>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, May 7, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #47

Denial. Anger. Depression. Bargaining. Acceptance.

These words will be familiar to anyone who has studied the five stages of grief first described in Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's groundbreaking work entitled "*On Death and Dying.*"

These words will also be familiar to anyone living during a global pandemic.

In our training as Stephen Ministers at St. Paul's, we were introduced to this model as applied not only to grief but also any kind of loss. We also learned that it is not a one-time cycle where you work through the stages until you get to acceptance. No, in dealing with grief and loss, we regularly move between these stages in no particular order (though *acceptance* would very rarely, if at all, be experienced without going through the other stages.

Kubler-Ross first noticed these stages when people learned they were terminally ill. Denial always began the cycle. "How can this be? I can't believe it." She also noticed that "bargaining" often had a spiritual side to it, as people tried to make deals with God. We have seen this scene play out in real life and in many movies. "Oh, God please let me live, and I'll promise never again to....." or "Please God, let my loved one live, and I'll promise...."

Anger is a relatable response to dealing with grief or loss. We hate this is happening to us or a loved one, and we're mad. I have also heard it said that depression is anger turned inward. We understand these experiences (stages) very well.

What do you think bargaining looks like in a Covid-19 world? Are we bargaining with God? Or Government? "I promise I'll be careful. Please let me open my store?" Or "I'll wear my mask every time I go out if only...."

As we deal with the coronavirus pandemic, these five stages of grief and loss are worth examining, especially beyond the personal level.

It seems like the whole population is now going through these stages at once, but not in sync with each other. Some still can't believe this is happening, or are expressing in denial that the virus is life-threatening for them. Many, at home and alone, are depressed and fearful of going out.

We are also seeing plenty of anger among those staging protests or attacking those with whom they disagree. We all understand the frustration of being forced to change the way we gather for work, play, school, or church.

What do you think "acceptance" will look like as time goes forward and the pandemic (also called the plague) is still with us?

Will acceptance mean we change our tolerance for acceptable deaths in order to sustain our economy? Will we accept that 13% of the people in this year's 2020 church directory may not be

in the 2021 directory? Or will “acceptance” mean that we will give up certain freedoms (like the choice of not wearing masks in public) in order to preserve as much life as possible until a cure can be found?

Time will tell.

I suspect if you’re still reading this, you may be thinking, “You are so depressing today, Pastor Mark.” Yes, a global pandemic that threatens to wipe out lives and livelihoods of thousands of people locally and millions globally is depressing. And it makes us angry. And we can still hardly believe it. And we are desperate to find any way out of this (Please, God!). Hence the stages.

But I have also noticed this: Acceptance is heavily shaped by a person’s personal relationship with God. When we trust that everything is in God’s hands and God will make all things well in God’s own way and in God’s own time, we can then persevere with a kind of grit, grace and determination that can change the way our whole population emerges from this.

Our life in Christ affects the trajectory of this terrible disease.

We take seriously the threat. We pray. We think not only of ourselves, but others. We trust God. We support those who put their lives at risk daily. We pray. We move through the stages of grief and loss, trusting in God to be with us and guide us. We pray. We share as we are able. We love as God loves us.

And that’s not so depressing, is it? We celebrate that God has granted us this precious gift of life, and in our pre-coronavirus world we may have taken some of that for granted. These days are granting the means for an ever-deepening relationship with God and renewed trust in Jesus.

The effect of life in Christ is wonderfully amplified in Ephesians, chapter 3 (Were you wondering when today’s scripture was coming?):

Feel the full force of this prayer as you face the uncertainties of Covid-19”

¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:16-21 NRS)

Let us pray:

During these beautiful days we are enjoying, it may be that these stages of grief and loss are distant experiences. At the same time, we are fearful of what may happen soon as people who are sick get too close to each other. We are discovering that “how we feel” is not a reliable indicator of what we carry. Relying on feelings make it so easy to disbelieve or deny what is going on in the greater world. Everyone so needs your help, O God. We pray for those who have been sick, and those whose loved ones are sick. As we move through all these stages of grief and loss, be our strength and stronghold. We need your help, and your healing power, to be not afraid, but also be vigilant and careful. Help us learn what we need to learn to deal with this pandemic. We pray for cure of the virus, but also for the sickness that is accompanying the human spirit. Bring us together for the sake of all who suffer. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S.

Linked here are two versions of a song that may speak to us. It's done by a group of musicians for the Porter's Gate Worship Project who got together for a worship recording. The first link is their live performance of "Nothing to Fear." The Second is the same song, but with lyrics amid pastoral scenes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cDyS5hWmHM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6seZhG6MWF4>

Next is Fountainview Academy doing that very hopeful "If You But Trust in God to Guide You."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFPe_G-Lqcc&list=RDzFPe_G-Lqcc&index=1

Same song sung by the National Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m-L5QcWePA>

and as a special bonus, musician David Cherwien presenting insights into this great hymn.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2meuEakLs>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday May 8, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #48

Miss meetings? How about meeting?

My only seminary professors still alive are those who were very young when I first enrolled at Luther Seminary forty-six years ago. Gerhard E. Frost was nearing retirement even then and has now been with the Lord many years.

As professor and teacher, Dr. Frost was known as much for his wisdom as his knowledge. He taught "Christian Education." Because I had majored in education in college, I recognized how he was shaping us to be teachers, not just curriculum peddlers.

Among the books in my collection is a collection of poems called "Bless My Growing." It's been one of my "keepers." I marked one of his pearls of wisdom with an old bulletin insert dated December 31, 2000. So its been that long since I took a look at it.

Contemplating this time of separation from each other, I found it timely and insightful:

*"All real living is meeting,"
said Martin Buber,
and meeting is an art.*

*It is losing and finding,
giving and receiving.*

*In meeting, persons are changed
without frontal intent or strategy,
for meeting is enjoyment,
appreciation of personhood,
uniqueness and difference.*

*Deeper than any level of dialog
is enjoyment of another person.*

*We are not friends
until we have deliberately
"wasted" time together.*

*Then intertwining growth takes place,
and we are human together.*

But such meeting cannot be measured.

*It can only be experienced
and explored."*

I know Dr. Frost wasn't thinking of tight agenda driven meetings where there is pressure to keep to a timeline and get stuff done. Or even "Zoom" meetings. But as "meeting of the minds" or "meeting of the hearts" or meetings where kindred spirits discover each other, he recognizes a joy that comes from really getting to know each other (by meeting).

Among the things we miss in this time of pandemic, is the joy that regularly happens during the kind of meeting Frost describes. We so miss that kind of time together as friends. Without the yardstick between us.

St. Paul expressed missing his Philippians friends when he wrote:

⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:8-11 NRS)

And Jesus speaks of the transformative relationship he had with his disciples after spending time with them:

¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (Jn. 15:15 NRS)

All real living is meeting, said Martin Buber. I am eager for that to happen again in person.

Until then, God bless our phone calls, our Facebook and Facetime connections, our Zoom conferences, long (enough) distance conversations, and intercessory prayer on each other's behalf.

Let us pray:

Today we pray for the gift of human friendship, for those sacred relationships that have come through meeting each other in Jesus name. We give thanks as well for our divine friendship with you, O God, who meets us in Jesus Christ. Help us during this time of separation to keep making connections, to keep a form of meeting going that will continue to shape us as community in Christ. We pray for hope and healing, in Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. So what song? How about "What a Friend We Have In Jesus."

Acapeldridge and his family

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LarFhGeE-ac>

Vison Children's Choir Africa

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwi_qKVI8lQ&t=151s

Vagle Brothers

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vlv0zzKs_rY

and this bonus “Help Me Jesus” by Bird Youmans and his 3 year old grandson Evan having a “real meeting.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfFUEc3ErOk>

And this version by composer Kris Kristopherson and friends:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f38gW5Jm-Hs>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, May 9, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #49

How Can I keep From Singing? (Part Two)

⁷ *My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast. I will sing and make melody.*

⁸ *Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.*

⁹ *I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations.*

¹⁰ *For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds.*

¹¹ *Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth. (Ps. 57:7-11 NRS)*

The coronavirus pandemic cannot keep us from singing. Even when we cannot be in each other's presence, the coronavirus cannot keep us from singing.

"Virtual Choir" technology is not brand new. Projects uniting people from around the world have been done before. Nowadays, however when choirs cannot be together, it is even more valuable. For this I say "Thanks be to God" for it is God who gives us the minds and hearts to advance the kind of technology that makes possible for musicians in isolation from all over the world to join voices and instruments and create harmony for all the world to hear.

Now, as musicians are unable to sing or play together in person, directors and technicians are able to invite singers and instrumentalists to "stream" their parts over the internet that would then be fed into sound boards and mixers and then put together in stunning ways that inspire, move us to tears, and lift the human spirit.

Today's devotion needs to be a celebration of that, with less focus on the words, and more on the music. I hope when you link to these "virtual" choirs and orchestras you can listen with some nice headphones and let yourself be swept away.

I don't have a particular musical theme today, simply some beautiful pieces that move me. Some have been done since the lockdown, others before that. Enjoy.

The first is "You'll Never Walk Alone," featuring 300 singers from 15 countries. I remember learning this in sixth grade chorus. The song was performed in the hit musical Carousel, which had been released a few years earlier, Perhaps some of you "boomers" remember it. The message is particularly timely today, and was selected by this <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gpoJNv5dlQ>

Next is "In Christ Alone." I had posted another version in an earlier devotion . This is nice, too: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY4CW5pte98>

"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" by Kottyram Choir in India: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcZxJg-3crQ>

The UK "Blessing" (Benediction): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUtil3mNj5U>

“The Blessing” from South Africa: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EPcd0B5SNs>

“The Blessing” from Pittsburg: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdxMgmN9NpA>

and lastly “Rise Up” from Women Physicians from Toronto, Canada. Please note the deeply moving comments. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wuigee-AC-o>

And now a prayer:

Thank you, O God for the gift of music that lifts our souls, especially in a time of global pandemic. Thank you for the technology that links voices from all over the world, demonstrating that we shall keep on singing even when we are separated. Bless our musicians and health care workers, our community and national leaders, the researchers and those who volunteer to be part of clinical studies. We pray for health and healing. We sing your praises. In Jesus Name. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, May 10, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #50

Happy Mothers Day. Here's what I forgot.

For this Sunday, May 10, the Fifth Sunday of Easter, it was my turn to do the Prayers of The Church and the Children's Sermon. Since we tape them ahead of time so they can be viewed Sunday morning, I had my parts done and taped on Thursday.

On Friday, I remembered. It's Mother's Day this Sunday!

On any other "live and in-person" worship, I could make the course correction, and no one would know I nearly forgot. But with pre-taped Facebook and YouTube worship, it's too late, and if I know this congregation, someone will be soon to notice: "Hey, you forgot 'Mother's Day!'"

Ironically, the title of what was going to be today's meditation (now shifted to tomorrow), is "God Can Fix Things." Come back tomorrow for a look at how Martin Luther addressed his own mistakes.

For me, I am now relying on you reading this devotion hopefully before Sunday worship begins. With the prayers, you could pause them and speak in my stead the following petition:

We give you thanks gracious God for all your love and for all your generous gifts to us. On this Mother's Day we thank you especially for mothers, for their faithfulness and devotion to their children. We give you thanks for Christian mothers, who by their witness and teaching, share the love the love of Jesus with their children. We especially remember single mothers today, and those mothers in the military who are separated from their children. We also give thanks those who have expressed motherly love as grandmothers, godmothers, aunts, sisters, and friends. Lord, in your mercy...

There, I feel better now. I am indeed thankful for mothers, and regret that so many will not be able to be taken out to their favorite restaurant for Mother's Day.

Because it's Mother's Day, I might have even done a different children's sermon, one with a Mother's Day Theme. If I had, it might have gone like this....:

Children, let me invite you to come up now.

I'd like to begin by sharing a Bible verse with you.

Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. --John 14:23

Today's verse is about love, and I've been wondering what we can do to show Jesus that we love him..... BUT BEFORE THAT

BEFORE THAT, let me ask you "What is today? It's..... MOTHER'S DAY!!

That makes me wonder what can we do today to show our Mothers that we love her?

I thought of ten things. See if any sound good to you.

10. Make your bed
9. Pick up your clothes
8. Keep your room clean
7. Take out the garbage
6. Help her fix dinner
5. Set the table
4. Help with the dishes
3. Don't be fussy
2. Give her a gift you made yourself.
1. Obey her when she tells you to do something.

What, they all sounded bad? Oh no. You're just kidding, right? Well what sounds good to you? Right, you can always say "I love you, Mom." That can be number one anytime.

So here's my next question:

"What do you think we can do to show **Jesus** how much we love him?" Let's do these with answers "yes" or "no"

What can we do to show Jesus how much we love him? **Yes or No**

1. Love each other (yes)
2. steal money (no)
3. Go to church (yes... online church counts)
4. say bad words (fore sure no)
5. Pray every day (yes)
6. tell a lie (no)
7. Help people (yes)
8. hit your best friend (heavens no)
9. Read the Bible (yes)
10. Give a gift to your church... (yes)

Good job. You are all learning not only good sons and daughters, but also to be good disciples of Jesus.

Your mothers will be proud.

Let us pray.

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for your love.

Thank you for our mothers.

Show us how

to love our mothers

and love you. Amen.

P.S. Well, it's gotta be Mother's Day themed songs today. They are more secular than sacred, but Mother's Day began as a secular observance so we'll just enjoy them....

A Mother's Love by Jim Brickman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgB-Jlk4q8>

A Mother's Love by Gena Hill: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V4PM1oL7Xs>

Thank You (Mom's Song) by Susan Acheson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMw66EwwLvs>

Because You Loved Me, Celine Dion (with Lyrics) - Dedication to Mothers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAuAi1rmk5U>

More Than Enough – A Mother's Day Song by Shawna Edwards

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7EfJRRJueY>

Isn't She Lovely by Anthem Lights: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdgn1N4lLxM>

and this cute one by Sarcalogos Christian Videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ce8yBOXjI7s>

God Can Fix Mistakes

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Good Sense is shown by everyone who follows [God's guiding principles]. His praise continues forever. Psalm 111:10

This begins the selection for July 8 in ***By Faith Alone: 365 Devotional Reading Updated In Today's Language*** by Martin Luther. I've enjoyed this devotional a lot, and there are many thought-provoking readings. I want to share this one with you, (but in a non-traditional way).

Instead of simply reprinting it, or reprinting with my own endnotes, I will be adding my own commentary between the bold lines (literally). My comments will be italicized. If that's distracting, just ignore the italics and read what Luther wrote. Let's give it a try:

Luther writes: **You should beware of two extremes. One is becoming arrogant about your wisdom and plans. The other is becoming depressed when things go wrong.**
(This grabs my attention right away. Was this written in the 1500's or 2020? We certainly are living in a time of extremes, especially opinions which we believe rooted in wisdom).

God forgives and even blesses the mistakes of faithful people.
(I want to know more about that, but it glad to know.)

In my ignorance, I often made the biggest mistakes and did the most foolish things when I was sincerely trying to help pole and give them good advice.
(One of the things I always like about Luther is that he isn't hesitant to admit mistakes. He had huge opinions but could admit when he was wrong. I like being "Luther"an that way.)

When I made these mistakes, I prayed fervently to God, asking him to forgive me and correct what I had done.
(Good thought! Prayer is an important part of reconciling mistakes. Repentance offers course correction.)

Important and faithful leaders often cause great harm through their advice and actions.
(How true. I might separate "important" leaders from "faithful" leaders, though. While both can cause great harm, a faithful leader will have a different approach to making mistakes.)

If God didn't have mercy on them and didn't straighten them out, the world would be in a terrible mess.
(I wonder how the world would be less of a mess if leaders in humility turned more often to God. I recognize that many leaders would not admit to making mistakes so they would not need to be straightened out by God or anyone).

All of us make mistakes.

(It's okay to be human. God made us human. We are neither angels nor robots. Making mistakes are a part of life we must live with. It helps to admit it, though. All of us.)

We consider ourselves wise and knowledgeable. Yet, in our sincere desire to help, we can end up causing a lot of damage.

(This resonates with Romans 12:3 ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. It also causes us to think about unintended consequences that sometimes result from "good intentions.")

If God in his wisdom and compassion didn't correct our mistakes, we would make a mess out of our lives.

(We need help all right. I am glad "Confession" begins worship, clearing the path for God's compassion to bring us back to him through the grace of forgiveness.)

We are like the farmer whose horses had trouble moving a heavy load. Thinking the wheels on the wagon were too wide, he sharpened them. This only made the load sink so deep into the mud that the wagon couldn't be moved at all.

(Well, that sounds more like 1525 than 2020. Good thing we have all those old wagon train movies to watch, which always has a scene with the wagon getting bogged down. Oh, now I get it.)

Does that mean that people should do nothing and just run away from their responsibilities? Not at all. You should faithfully do the job that God has given you to do.

(I imagine doing nothing is an outcome that comes from depression. Luther says "Get up.")

Don't rely on your own wisdom and strength, and don't pretend to be so smart and important that everything has to be done your way.

(We see a lot of people very sure of themselves these days. This is sound advice.)

Don't be ashamed to get on your knees and pray, 'Dear God, you gave me this job. Please teach and guide me. Give me the knowledge, wisdom, and strength to perform my duties tirelessly and well.

(Amen to all that. We all have our jobs to do, often difficult jobs. It is good to pray for help, Luther says, and important for the sake of the world that each one of us does well the jobs God gives us to do.)

Let us pray.

Thank you, God not only for forgiving our mistakes but for your grace that allows us to admit them. During this time when so many voices compete to be "right," and when many resist admitting failure for fear of appearing weak, we are thankful for being so centered in Christ that we can accept not being perfect. In our imperfections thank you for your perfect love. Amen.

P.S. O Perfect Love is a good accompaniment song, but are the others. I think you'll find one or more that speaks to you.

O Perfect Love John Wesley Slider :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPxr06tkYcl>

O Perfect Love by Worship Team:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIs0SrJYJUk>

Forgiveness Matthew West:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olbCpy0CQEO>

A Heart that Forgives by Kevin Lavar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUV5T9JIJZ0>

Create A Clean Heart In Me Maranatha Singers:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fvliokreqE>

Create In Me A Clean Heart (Eric Lagerstrom & Bertina Grijpstra)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GR8PyKeznmo>

and... just because we're reading Martin Luther here's a lesser-known Martin Luther Hymn (very medieval)

O Lord, Look Down From Heaven Behold.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uC3kMZz73mc>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, May 12, 2020 not by Pastor Mark Opgrand **but by Pastor Michael Megahan #52**

(Note from Pastor Mark: Pastor Michael Megahan and his wife Jo Ann joined St. Paul's this past year. He and Jo Ann were Lutheran missionaries and Bible translators for 37 years in Tanzania, Botswana, and Kenya. Pastor Michael continues to be active in translation work, here and abroad. After returning from his latest trip, I invited him write a devotion for us whenever he felt moved. He felt moved. Here it is:)

Have you heard the sound of God?

After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13 v. 12-13 NIV):

After sinning, Adam and Eve heard the sound of God walking about the garden and they hid in fear (Gen 3:8). In 1 Kings 19:13, the prophet Elijah heard the soft sound of God, and he covered his face in fear. Eliphaz the Temanite heard a "whisper," a "hushed voice" (Job 4:12, 16) that set him into a state of fear of trembling, even made the hair of his body stand on end.

In these passages, the Hebrew word *qol* is used and in each case can be translated into English either as "sound" or as "voice." A translator must decide what was heard and how to translate it. But, because we were not present, we cannot truly know, can we? Did they hear a sound? Did they hear a voice?

Although we cannot say specifically what kind of sound or voice they heard, it is certain that they heard something that they knew beyond doubt to be the presence of God. What they heard was not the normal, roar of thunder or, as in Elijah's case, the earthquake, wind or fire that usually accompanied theophanies (appearances of God).

Rather they all heard a soft, hushed whisper or quiet sound.

Now one cannot hear a whisper unless one is listening for it, and one cannot recognize who is whispering unless one is familiar with the person speaking.

In other words, Adam, Eve, Elijah and Eliphaz had one thing in common: they were familiar with the voice or sound of God. They were able to hear and recognize God's whisper even amid the noisy, chaotic banter of life.

Have you heard the sound of God in your life? Remember, it might come to you as a whisper, not a roar of thunder. To hear it, turn off the news, go to the inner-room, take time to go to a quiet place and listen. In our prayer life, we should listen as much as speak. God already knows what we need. Listen to what God has to say.

Listen long and often until you become familiar with the Creator speaking.

In these days of sorrow and fear, I have tried to listen for and to God's voice, and I have heard the soft voice of Christ of the Cross saying, "Fear not, for I am with you, even to the end of this age." Fear not!

What have you heard?

Let us pray:

Father God, Creator of all that is seen and unseen, you love us so much that you sent your own Son Jesus to die for us. He promised that whatever we ask in his name you will accomplish for us to your glory. In the Name of Jesus, remove our feelings of guilt and give us a heart to forgive others. Take away all fear from our hearts and minds. Heal those who are sick. Comfort those who mourn. Grant us a moment of quiet each day so that we can hear your gentle voice calling us, loving us, healing us, encouraging us. By the Power of the Holy Spirit and in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

P.S. I asked Pastor Megahan for some music selections, and he suggested the beautiful "Now the Silence Now the Peace." There aren't a lot of YouTube recordings of this (there should be more) but I did find several, one being instrumental. It's a lot of music today, but I think you'll find some great pieces to guide your praying and meditating.

"Now the Silence Now the Peace"

Redeemer Morristown: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dycbfRiP4I&t=33s>

Hymns and More: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sPp4AH3Pc0>

Carson Cooman playing Carl Schalk arrangement on organ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRr-yMlwxE>

I also thought of "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent," and there are several nice pieces.

Church Folk Project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUdzMtVYIZo>

Stone's Throw Band <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxKtiR3bUac>

Concordia University Ann Arbor <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHMYwvGMLol>

Nigel Kot <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EApd6omsoA0>

Kin Collective

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWTdLD5w92c>

Be Still My Soul by Elipse 6 (you'll like this harmony)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqKVFYD8Obc>

....and lastly...I thought about one very familiar to Michael and Jo Ann, as it is from Tanzania:

Listen God is Calling by the Mwiki Lutheran College Tanzania (In Swahili and English). They are our only members fluent in Swahili, so that needs no translation for them (but we also sing this in English) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMFFj_4WR1I

Children's Choir USA <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PACR8IenUqk>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday May 13, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #53

"Remember the Secret Weapon!"

As her six children left for school each morning, my grandmother Olga Opgrand would always follow her "Bye" with "Remember the secret weapon". Years later when I was in seminary, she made sure I knew it too.

And what was the "secret weapon?" It was simply this: Philippians 4:13 *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

Back then (as well as now), this "secret weapon" was neither sinister nor damage-inflicting. It was an encouraging word of hope for everyone to trust. It was empowering, just as every promise of God is empowering. Freely offered to help us be confident in our daily lives.

Remembering the "secret weapon" was always a fun way to affirm that God is with us. Remembering it, we are stronger. Not in an absurdist way, as if believing the secret weapon will allow us to walk through walls or levitate tall buildings. Rather, in remembering it, we are stronger emotionally and spiritually, confident that we can be trust God especially when hard things come our way.

In this age of global pandemic, we need everything at our disposal to fight this devastating disease. This might be one to remember. *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

It was St. Paul who first wrote this to the Philippians. And while this has become one of those wonderful "stand alone helpful for all time" verses, he did not write it in a vacuum, nor send it to them on a postcard to be taped to their refrigerators.

Paul was writing from prison. Much more than now, prisons were places of much suffering. Paul's own personal struggles are revealed in his writings, but he also writes to assure those who are also going through hardship or struggles or attacks on their faith that they have strength particularly to stand against those who would lead them astray.

Here is the context of that great verse about *"the secret weapon."* St. Paul writes:

⁸ *Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

⁹ *Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.* ¹⁰ *I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.* ¹¹ *Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.*

¹² *I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in*

need. ¹³ *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.* ¹⁴ *In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.* (Phil. 4:8-14 NRS)

So this is not about acquiring a “super power.” It’s about holding fast to “super faith.” Remembering this, Paul assures us that we be strong against those forces that would wrench faith from us.

In a time of global pandemic when we face an enemy that would seek to overpower immune systems, force a change in economic systems, further tear apart an already polarized nation that must come together for the sake of physical, emotional, and spiritual healing, this verse encourages us.

Remember the “secret weapon.” Remember it’s not secret, and it’s not a weapon (but will feel like that to all those forces (and viruses) who would oppose God’s sovereignty over the whole creation.

I admit that “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*” might have a stronger personal connection if you heard it from your own little grandmother who, with a powerful faith never faltered in her confidence in Jesus. But even without that, we all have the one who first said it, St. Paul. Paul faced powerful forces that would destroy faith and the church and he never faltered.

Remembering Christ who strengthened him was all Paul needed to do the things God called him to do. That might be just all we need, too. Just remember.
Let us pray.

Thank you, O God for all those powerful promises that sustain us through every part of our lives. Thank you for those who shared these promises, like those grandmothers and grandfathers and moms and dads and dear friends in Christ. Help us remember “the secret weapon,” that strong promise that nothing will tear us away from you. Bless those who suffer this day, and hold them close. Bless the caregivers and those who work for healing. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. *Healer of Our Every Ill* seems right today:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rZDfEKttMI>

So does *Be Not Afraid* by John Michael Talbot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ptZV4s4qRY>

Cat Jahnke’s *Be Not Afraid*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQr4udSiEew>

Be Not Afraid: Catholic Artists at Home

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RF0DlpFOoBg>

St. Paul's In Your Home Thursday, May 14, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #54

Prayer 96. For Guidance. Among the "second best" prayers ever composed.

The first time I encountered this prayer was at Holden Village, our Lutheran Retreat Center high up in the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area of Washington State. Beginning in the early nineteen sixties, the prayer was posted in every guest room throughout the village.

At Holden Village, it was referred to as the "*Holden Prayer*". It wasn't until sometime later in seminary that I discovered that it was one of 138 topical "*Collects and Prayers*" in the Lutheran Church's "*Service Book and Hymnal*" (the old red hymnal) published in 1958 and used for the next twenty years. The prayer was #96 "For Guidance."

So why do I believe Prayer 96 is among the "second best" ever written? (And what, then, is #1?). Here it is, as originally published and posted at Holden:

***O Lord God, who has called us thy servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending
by paths as yet untrodden
and through perils unknown:
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing whither we go,
but only that thy hand is leading us
and thy love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

"*The Lord's Prayer*" will always be number one. Luther's morning and evening prayers are beautiful, and along with many others, complete for second best.

But this one is special.

Out of the 138 prayers in the *Collects and Prayers* section of the old red hymnal, it was the only one to be printed in the *Morning Prayer* and *Evening Prayer* Services of the next hymnal, the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and the newest hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006). *Thy* became *your*, *whither* became *where*, but it's essentially that same almost hidden gem in the old red hymnal.

People coming in and out of Holden Village, learning and carrying this prayer, is probably why it was discovered and then published in future hymnals.

But being published isn't what makes it special.

What makes it special is that it so gets at the heart of what it means to be called as a Christian... to ventures where the ending is unclear... by paths untrodden... through perils unknown. It asks God for courage and trust in the face of uncertainty, without knowing where life will take us.

It asks only that God's hand will lead us, and Christ's love will support us.

For someone young and discerning what God has in store for them, this prayer can be carried and prayed for a lifetime. For someone old, or someone at the end of their life, it readies us for the life of the world to come. Living in this new time of uncertainty, it's a gift under any circumstances.

Let us pray: *O Lord God, who has called us thy servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, and through perils unknown: Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing whither we go, but only that thy hand is leading us and thy love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Furthermore, grant us, and all who call upon you today, pathways to hope and healing as we walk in faith with you and our brothers and sisters in faith. Bless those whose callings serve those with greatest needs. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. I was pleased to learn that the text of this prayer has been published as a choral piece. Lord, you have called you servants by J. Arron McDermid, sung by National Lutheran Choir.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_EC6HAGeww

another tune sung by a youth choir before supper.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB_JQ3alxW4

And here's a related peace that describes change
Through All the Changing Scenes of Life (British Congregation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ox1r0Ozlwoo>

Finally, another great hymn of the church, originating in Wales, sometimes using "Great Jehovah," and other times "Great Redeemer." Stirring in any language or setting!

Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah British Festival of Remembrance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ofp6rdAgRrY>

Guide Me during Welsh Baptist Church Service

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT4n1hGjDDg>

Guide Me contemporary version

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN_xKwxVktQ

Charlotte Church: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XSHiggeXgw>

Guide Me at another British church service: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkVT8O5E1rM>

St. Paul's In Your Home Daily for Friday, May 15, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #55

Getting God's Attention? Call him.

¹³ But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exod. 3:13-14 NRS)

I discovered Frederick Buechner's *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* in the seminary bookstore shortly after I was enrolled. It became a personal favorite. In a most winsome way, Buechner discussed a variety of terms, like "Angels, Agnostic, Annunciation, and Averice. He went through a whole alphabet. The one that surprised me was under "B" for Buechner. What? "Buechner?" What does that have to do with anything?

Here's what he wrote: **Buechner**. *It is my name. If somebody mispronounces it is some foolish way, I have the feeling that what's foolish is me. If somebody forgets it, I feel that it's I who am forgotten. There's something about it that embarrasses me in just the same way that there's something about me that embarrasses me.*

I can't imagine myself with any other name – Held, say, or Merrill, or Hlavacek. If my name were different, I would be different. When I tell somebody my name, I have given them a hold over me that they didn't have before. If they call it out, I stop, look and listen whether I want to or not.

In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses that his name is Yahweh, and God hasn't had a peaceful moment since.

In a whimsical way, Buechner has identified something simple yet profound. When God revealed himself to Moses, not as just the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "but as YHWH (I AM), he now became accessible in ways that truly hasn't given God "a peaceful moment since."

Of course, God has also been identified and named as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" as well as Jesus. The most important part of all this is that we have a God to whom we can call upon. We have God's attention. Call him.

Let us pray.

Thank you, O God, that we can call upon you by many names, but always getting through. We thank you for the peace we have knowing you are near and hear our prayers. Guide us, we pray as your bearers of your invitation to call upon your holy name at all times. In these times of trouble, draw close we pray to all who need hope and healing. In God's holy name. Amen.

P.S. Just one song today, but offered in a variety of styles (and one tune change). Enjoy.

"Holy God We Praise Your Name" Irish Philharmonic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DII6ap7bj0Q>

Anyone remember Perry Como? Nice job.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5yov08Oqms>

Matt Maher contemporary version.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3W-VIP81Xdo>

and Hey, that's at the St. Olaf Lutheran College Chapel (Diadem Tune)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgQ9ER-fdWQ>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, May 16, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #56

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. (Exodus 20:7)

Consider this a follow up (or **part 2**) to yesterday's devotion where I shared Frederick Buechner's discussion of his name in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. Buechner shared how someone knowing his name gives them some power. If he's crossing the street and hears his name called, he turns to look whether he wants to or not.

Buechner followed that observation with a thought about God's name when he wrote, "*In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses that his name is Yahweh, and God hasn't had a peaceful moment since.*"

I still love that whimsical quote in respect to God listening to us when we call, but there's more to it than that.

First, about that name. Buechner writes *Yahweh*, but in Hebrew it would be written in a way that would not be pronounced or spoken. YHWH is a way it is often written, and many times we find references to God's name as *Elohim, Adonai, Jehovah, El Shaddai, The Lord*, or just *God* (Capital G).

In ancient cultures, there was widespread belief that invoking the deities' names gave power. The people of Caanan invoked the names of their gods *Marduk* and *Ba'al* for their own purposes. Therefore, when God revealed his name to Moses, this came with clear instruction not to misuse it.

When Pastor Jonathan read yesterday's devotion, he was reminded of the evil wizard in the Harry Potter books. While the wizard's name was "*Voldemort*," saying his name aloud would break protective spells against him. Therefore, Harry and friends always referred to the evil wizard as "the one who must not be named."

That reminded me of something I experienced during one of my summers in seminary when I worked for a parish in rural North Dakota (Noonan). It happened as I misspoke the word "*hail*" when asking about a weather forecast. I was quickly corrected, "We never use *that* word, Mark. We always refer to it as "*the hard stuff*." I learned they had a belief (superstition?) that to speak the word would invite its presence. I assure you that I never said "*hail*" again, and to this day, whenever I say the word "*hail*" I always think those farmer's fear of crop damage from "*the hard stuff*."

Exodus 20:7 is part of the Ten Commandments, where taking the Lord's name in vain, (or trying to invoke God's name for your own selfish purposes) would be a grave sin. You can refrain from properly invoking God's name by referring to "*The Lord*" or other reference names.

I wonder if this is a little like wearing a mask during a pandemic. It offers protection, but also reminds you not to touch your nose. (For you Lutheran scholars out there, would this be Martin

Luther's "First Use of the Law?" Maybe the topic for another devotion... with "second use" meaning you have touched your nose and now you are sick and need help for healing... dang, did I just give away the whole devotion?)

Where was I. Oh, yes. Christians typically have not been fearful of using the Lord's name in vain, though we should be. It's not about cussing. It's about observing respect for God by not trying to use God's name for our own intents and purposes.

So if Harry Potter was careful about not saying the name of "the one who shall not be named," we don't need so concerned about God's name that we only refer to him as "you-know-who." That Other Christians might know who, we need all the reference names available to us if we are to tell the story of God and God's love.

Perhaps we can take on clue from Jesus. Remember how he referred to God ? Jesus called God "Father," but when he taught us to speak to God through the Lord's prayer, it was "**Abba, Father**" or "Daddy."

"Father" or "Daddy" are still not proper names, but as every father or mother knows, all it takes is a child saying "Daddy" or "Mommy" to get our attention. Therefore, it may well be, as Buechner observed, that when God shared his unpronounceable name with us, he hears us however we speak it... and "hasn't had a peaceful moment since."

Let us pray: *Abba, Father, God, Adonai, Elohim, YHWH, Jehovah, we thank you that you have revealed to us that we can call out to you and you will hear us. Thank you for knowing our names, who we are and what it is that we need from your divine presence each and every day. We lift up our prayers along with all humanity today, trusting and hoping that we can find our way with you during these often deeply difficult days. Bless you children, especially those who need you so very much today. We pray for healing, dear Abba. In Jesus name. Amen.*

P.S. I guess some Abba, Fathers songs might be good. And songs with some of those names for God, like El Shaddai.

Abba Father Michael Card (with lyrics)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTf5VvpBa18>

Abba Father A Capella Academy (lyrics in comments)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un2dZZC7VSc>

Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith singing El Shaddai and Thy Word

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoOc5QLVHk0>

And the Father will Dance by Mark Hayes Lake Avenue Church (very joyful)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIDOUO0OdNk>

and here's a lovely version of the 23rd Psalm in Hebrew by MIQEDEM (listen for "Adonai.")

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWM8gSSnz_8

St. Paul's In Your Home Daily for Sunday, May 17, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #57

The Whispering Holy Spirit.

¹⁶ *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.*

¹⁷ *This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. (Jn. 14:16-17 NRS)*

The above scripture is from this Sixth Sunday of Easter. In it, Jesus describes a role of the Holy Spirit to stand along side us. The word for this function of spirit is paraclete, and has been variously translated as Counselor, Comforter, Advocate, Helper, Friend, or Paraclete. This helper intercedes for us before God, not defending us, but asking for mercy.

This is a wonderful description and affirmation of one way the Holy Spirit functions.

Without paraclete, how the Holy Spirit works would be more elusive. Like the wind. The root word for "Spirit" is the same root word for "breath" or "wind." While you cannot see it, you can feel it.

In my internet meanderings, seeking music to link with these devotions, I discovered a wonderful story illustrating how the *Holy Spirit as Wind* and *Paraclete as Helper* might be observed together.

This is the story of Jimmy Reed (1925-1976), a famous American blues singer and songwriter who played guitar and harmonica. In his biography, "*Big Boss Man: The Life and Music of Jimmy Reed*," a mystery related to some of his recordings was revealed. Careful listeners to his music had noticed there was a hint of a woman's voice on some of them. But it was not a back up singer. Rather it was a voice whispering the lyrics into Jimmy's ear just before Jimmy belted them out.

The mystery was revealed as the author of the book interviewed studio engineers and musicians who worked with Reed. The voice belonged to Jimmy's wife, Mary Lee "Mama" Reed.

Mama Reed was standing alongside Jimmy, whispering the lyrics to his song, and helping him remember. By then, Jimmy had a lot of health problems that affected him from recalling the words to his own songs, some of whom had never been written down. His wife knew all the words and helped him.

I love how this sweet story so well also describes God the *Holy Spirit as Wind/Breath Helper/Whisperer*.

The Holy Spirit stands with us, whispering in our ears and whispering in our hearts the lyrics of the never-ending hymn of faithful trust in God's holy word.

The Holy Spirit reminds faithful of the truth, jogs our memories that we belong to God. Especially when we forget, the Spirit/Helper keeps us singing. Keeps us trusting. Keeps us sharing that good news with others.

Let us pray.

Whisper in our ears O God the wonderful lyrics of your love for us. We need your help to remember, especially when ill health, fear, and discouragement interfere. As Holy Spirit Helper, help us remember. As Holy Spirit Advocate, be merciful to us, As Holy Spirit Comforter, comfort us with your grace. As Holy Spirit Paraclete, stand with us, and all your children. As Holy Spirit Counselor, listen to our cries for help. We pray for all who need your ever-present love and support today. Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer. Amen.

P.S. I w

“Stand by Me” Tom Kendzia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6iJ7UJDSAg>

Christ the King Church *Stand By Me* with Tom Kendzia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9x1FnLfEp40>

Chris Brunelle *Stand by Me* (Guitar Solo)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MakhmTEXaQ>

You Do Not Walk Alone original music Irish Blessing by Elaine Hagenberg

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNCi2KW-JFk>

Stand By Me with Spirit Gospel Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFRTArA2_BU

“Still With Thee” by Elaine Hagenberg; words by Harriet Beecher Stowe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPJ7LXTd8II>

and... of course, I better link to a Jimmy Reed Song “Baby What You Want Me To.” Is that “Mama” in the background?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEkepygs_bM

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, May 18, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #58

"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." (Eccl. 1:2 NKJ)

The very first sermon I ever preached at St. Paul's was August 20, 1995. I had moved to Wilmington as a "trailing spouse," following my wife Carol who had just gotten a teaching job at UNCW, where she taught until her death in 2001.

I arrived "without call" back then, but available to preach, and I did many times until I was called by St. Paul's in June, 1997 to a one year half-time term call. On May 17, 1998 that term call became a regular call, and on January 1, 1999 I became full-time. I am forever grateful for how my life with the people of St. Paul's emerged from what was first "temporary" and "part-time."

If August 20, 1995 was the first time I preached at St. Paul's, then May 17, 2020 was the last. The first time I preached from Ecclesiastes 1. The last time from John 14. The first sermon survives in a file. The last sermon is on YouTube. The first sermon looks at vanity from it's Hebrew root, *hebel*, which also means *breath... or vapor*. The second looks at (Holy) Spirit from it's root, *pneuma*, which also means *breath... or wind*.

But *hebel* is not *pneuma* by a long shot. *Pneuma* is part of *agios pneuma*, or Holy Spirit that active presence and person of God who is actively felt and working among us even when not seen. *Hebel* describes the human condition, where all is *fleeting, futile, or vaporous*.

Various translations of vanity in Ecclesiastes 1:2 substitute "*pointless, meaningless, and futile*." Vapor may be the best way to think of it, and the one we might most relate to whenever we think life is "*pointless*." Why *pointless*? Because, like *vapor*, it quickly goes away. We didn't have vaping in 1995, but it would have been a strong image. There's that big puffy cloud. And now it's gone. Life can be seen like that.

Have you had the experience of reading of an aging celebrity's death, and realizing you haven't seen a recent photo of them in many years? The recent photos are shocking when we remember them at the height of the glamour. It's not surprising that holding on to good looks is sometimes called a *vanity project*.

The good thing about coming to grips with *vanity* as *vapor* is when it causes us to think on those things that are not fleeting or meaningless. Like our relationship with God, who loves us as precious children forever. God's solid relationship with us in Jesus Christ is not like vapor. It doesn't go away.

Christ makes life meaningful. When we are free from chasing after, or holding onto that which is fleeting, then we can devote ourselves toward building strong bonds and connections with God and each other. Bonds and connections that will last.

In a time when many are feeling Ecclesiastes' lament, breathing in all the hope that comes from the gospel is indeed a breath of fresh air.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, when we hear the lament of Ecclesiastes' Preacher, we can identify with that feeling of hopelessness that comes when we feel all is futile. Help us to see this more as vapor, something not lasting but rather reminder to seek our security in that which will last. Thank you for the gospel of Jesus Christ, and for the lasting love it reveals to us. Give us courage, in the face of uncertainty, to hold fast to all your promises, and not give in to feelings of futility. Help us live beyond ourselves for others and value the strength of that gift. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. Consider these accompanying songs:

Song of the Wanderer by Dan Forrest is a beautiful accompanying song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKYlxi5bN1w>

Your labor is not in vain by Porter's Gate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPj3Kf7Dorw>

and "Who I'm Meant to Be" Anthem Lights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVb8OJEQGIQ>

..... and, just in case you might be interesting in what Pastor Mark said the first time he stood before the congregation 25 years ago, (and if it holds up or should be vaporized 25 years later in this time of a global pandemic) I'll attach that August 20,1995 Sermon.

"Vapor of Vapors" Pentecost 11C (13) 1995

St. Paul's Lutheran --Wilmington, NC

August 20, 1995

Pastor Mark Opgrand, guest preacher

Eccl. 1:2; 2:18-26 -- Colossians 3:1-11 Luke 12:13-21

My dear friends in Christ. Grace be unto you and peace from our gracious and ever living Triune God- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What interesting and compelling texts we have today -- all three of them are rich in thought and certainly get our attention. Not only this wise warning in Luke's gospel to not make possessions your security, but also the encouragement in Colossians as God's resurrection people to set our minds on the things that are above.

Then added to these rich texts is this great text from Ecclesiastes which really “tells about life like it really is.” These are wonderful texts to think about this week, and there are many vivid examples from life that connect with them.

For example, we did not experience a hurricane striking us this week, but if we had, what better reminder of how it is possible to work a lifetime to build something up only to see it destroyed overnight by pounding wind, rain, and sea water. Hurricane Felix would have clearly reminded us that you cannot rely on everything lasting forever. There are many experiences and examples which support what these texts are getting at.

But let me begin here by getting right into the texts themselves. First, from Ecclesiastes we read: “Vanity of Vanities, says the Teacher (some translations say Preacher). All is vanity.”

I have to admit its kinda fun to say that. “VANITY OF VANITIES. ALL IS VANITY .” -- sounds almost like being a hell fire and damnation preacher, which of course is kind of unfamiliar to us “grace and hope” Lutheran preachers.

“Vanity of Vanities. All is vanity.” However, the English translation of the Hebrew word here -- which is “*Hebel*” doesn’t quite give us the most helpful image.

To be sure, vanity in our everyday usage does include a meaning like being stuck up or preoccupied with your looks, or brains, or athletic ability, or image (all of which don’t last forever).

However, a better translation would be “vapor” or “breath.” How about vapor? Let’s try that out: “Vapor of vapor, says the teacher. All is vapor.” A different word encourages a different feeling, doesn’t it? The image of vapor is an image of something you can’t hang on to. It goes away.

So the teacher here, in speaking the word “hebel” is calling attention to the absurdity of human life, or to the progress of life that is unsubstantial, or worthless, or fleeting. According to this teacher, life is just plain no more dependable or stable than a breath of wind.

We’ve heard this same thought reflected in Psalm 90 where the writer ponders the human condition. You may have heard this psalm at a funeral. Where the psalmist writes:

The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

The psalmist and the Teacher see life the same way here. In chapter two of Ecclesiastes, the teacher talks about life work. For him, labor and toil are also vapor because we can never know who will inherit and control our work after our death.

Here we might think of someone inheriting a family business or maybe a family farm. Who knows if it will be managed as well as by the one who previously put a lifetime into it? Specifically, when you die, who knows what will happen to your life’s work, or estate, or legacy, or valuables, or mementos, or anything you have that means something to you.

As the Teacher reflects, death will cancel out that into which we have put a whole lifetime of energy.

Now when we first hear this, even though may be true, it's not very comforting. It's kind of discouraging, or at least sobering, to think of life this way. I wonder if you noticed how clearly this Old Testament perspective connects with the gospel text we also read. Jesus tells a parable.

As a warning to people to be against all kinds of greed and the temptation to think of one's life consisting in the abundance of possessions, Jesus tells a parable -- this time about of a rich man who is blessed with abundant crops - So much so that he doesn't have places to store them all.

Now the problem was not that he chose to expand his storage facilities. That would be a very reasonable business practice. He could even give away what he didn't need.

The problem is that in all this he proceeds with the assumption that his abundant wealth is going to provide him for all his needs for years to come. How telling it is to hear the man say to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

Ah, but this is not possible ... Because at this moment God intervenes and addresses the rich man as "*Fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.*"

Now God could just as easily be saying (to paraphrase our first lesson), "*Vapor of Vapor, all is vapor*". Don't you understand, fool, that everything you have striven for is vapor. It doesn't last."

If this where your heart and treasure is, it's about to be gone, you poor sad fool. This very night your life is going to slip away from you with one final breath, and everything you think you have been trying so hard to hang onto is gone."

I'm paraphrasing of course, but this is the sense of this text, and there are a lot of sobering thoughts here.... for everyone.

Life is fragile. It will end. You can't take your things with you.

One of the things that is interesting about these texts is that even an unbeliever wouldn't argue with the reality of life being fragile and fleeting.

In many ways, life is like vapor. And that's why it is so important to be able to hear the gospel as we face these realities. The gospel is the only thing that can transform something that looks like a grim reality into hopeful living.

Life is not just some sad fleeting experience where we lose everything we work for and leave with nothing.

For the teacher in Ecclesiastes, hope comes even after he bemoans the human condition, where he says: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw is from the hand of God'; for apart from God who can hear or who can have enjoyment?"

The key here is to receive from God that which is essentially a gift. God wants us to enjoy life. This is so clearly revealed through all that God has given to us. Then, when we see everything as a gift from God, we can live our lives in thanks and praise and when it's time to join God in our new heavenly home, we can let go.

We can even earlier let go of some of the things we so try to hang onto. We can let go of the craziness of trying to accumulate possessions or other forms of security as if they're the only things that will make us happy or make life worth living.

We can also be free to give back to God a portion of what God gives to us. We can experience the joy of giving. I know many of you have come to understand that joy. This joy is the inheritance for the children of God.

But this gospel-oriented way of living and being is difficult for many, because the other message from so many areas of life is this: Get as much as you can, Hold on as long as long as you can. So people are driven to consume or embrace anything that can offer good feelings or supposedly offer happiness.

But when happiness rests in the things, it doesn't work. You just need more things, or more security. And then it's over, and what is left?

As I pondered these texts this week, especially the scripture from Ecclesiastes this week, I couldn't help but think about the life and death of baseball legend Mickey Mantle.

Mickey Mantle could very well have been the speaker of these words from Ecclesiastes. In his early life he accomplished in athletics what very few have ever been able to do. He was a true baseball hero, a name that I think every person in America knew.

A record holder, a star, one who had everything that many aspire toward. Millions of young men dreamed about being just like Mickey Mantle.

Well, as we know from reports of his later life, the things that came with fame and fortune took a terrible turn. In his retirement from baseball, Mickey Mantle also became a legendary alcoholic.

Not long ago, Mickey made the following comment on his life: He said prior to being released from Baylor Medical Center.

*"This is a role model -- don't be like me. God gave me a body, the ability to play baseball, God gave me everything, and I just ... pffft ... wasted it." That "pffft" is so close to the meaning of "hebel."
"God gave me everything, and I just.... vaporized it."*

Earlier he had admitted his regret that as a father (and a great baseball player) he never ... had time ... to play catch ... with his own kids.

All this is very sad.

Now I know Mickey leaves a Mickey Mantle Foundation which does good work, and there already will be more people signing up to be organ donors in the case of their untimely death. I also hope through his confession many will be more attentive to the problems of alcoholism.

I hope many others, though this example, will recognize a certain kind of futility in assuming fame and fortune will bring you happiness. I certainly pray that Mickey Mantle has found peace in God's loving arms.

But this kind of experience can be instructive for us. It can not only illustrate for us how fame and fortune are fleeting fantasies, or fleeting vanities, but it can encourage us to seek life with God where we find fulfillment no matter how life unfolds for us.

You don't have to be a baseball hero, or have every little thing, or every big thing. All you really need to be happy is what God freely gives all along -- and that is God's self -- the fullness of God's self through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is the great thing we all need to experience --- that through the gift of our baptism God gives us all the essentials of life - and that is the love of God. In the beginning, as in the end, we need nothing more.

There can be nothing more. Everything else is vapor. Power -- possessions -- prestige -- wealth -- influence -- financial security -- our health -- our youth and good looks.....

All that is vapor. It goes away.

What lasts is God's love. Love rooted in creation and redemption. Love rooted in God's extravagant grace. Love which enables us not only to be secure in God's embrace ... but also to embrace each other. As family. As friends in Christ.

This is the love which enables us to be confident in God's promises Love which enables us to be God's faithful people.

All Christians (including those longing for the good news and experience of God's love) need to know how important and how great this is and that's why occasionally we need these sobering texts to remind us of how temporary physical things are.... "the things of this earth," as Colossians says.

For when we hear these sobering reminders -- whether it be from scripture or when reflecting on the death of a sports hero or after being wiped out (or happily missed) by a destructive hurricane.... when we hear these sobering reminders, we will also encounter the strong proclamation and promise of God's love and faithfulness.

That is the treasure God would share with us today ... a treasure that does not need to be stored up, for it is already eternal and it is already ours forever. This is the treasure which is God's gracious and everlasting love. Amen.

**"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."
(Jn. 15:13 NKJ)**

As pressure mounts for America to reopen while the pandemic continues, I have seen increasing calls from those in leadership positions for our citizens to be ready to make the sacrifice in order for the re-opening to happen.

It has been observed that many have already sacrificed their livelihoods in order to flatten the curve. With this, has come increasing stress, depression, fear, and even a spike in suicides. The time has come, according to some of our leaders, to resume normal life in order to save the economy.

In advocating opening the economy, I have seen comparisons to what we expected among our men and women during World War II. One remark was this:

"We sent our young men during World War II over to Europe, out to the Pacific, knowing, knowing that many of them would not come home alive. And we decided to make that sacrifice because what we were standing up for was the American way of life. In the very same way now, we have to stand up for the American way of life."

That prompted one interviewer to ask: *"So I'm asking, since you're asking, who are you sacrificing? Who are you willing to give up in your family? Who are you willing to sacrifice to die? You're saying people should be willing to sacrifice family to die. Who are you willing to give up?"*

It becomes harder to answer a question like this... when it becomes personal. One thing I've noticed in the history of the world. It's a lot easier to talk about sacrifice, (either hypothetically, or when it doesn't affect you personally), when it's someone else's sacrifice. Have you noticed how many leaders who call for another's sacrifice are often immune from having to make a personal sacrifice themselves?

I would have better respected the one interviewed if he had replied, *"Well, I'm willing to take the risk personally. I'm willing to be exposed. I'm willing to risk sickness. I'm willing to say good-bye to my mother and father if they become infected by their grandchildren who catch the virus when they go back to school. For the sake of the economy, I am willing to make the sacrifice. It's that important."*

Okay. Then you can say *"we're all in this together."* But not now from your safe compound. Not from your access to sanitized groceries and rapid testing. Not unless what you expect from others is what you will also demand from yourself (See Golden Rule, here.)

What makes Jesus Christ so great, and what makes him truly worthy of being our Lord and Savior, is that Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself for us all. He would not be the general at the back of

the battlefield or politician back home saying, "You go." Jesus would not push someone into harm's way so Jesus would be spared. He risked everything... for us. And when he talked about "No greater love..." he would stand behind the truth of that statement with his own life. Which he gave. For us. And for all.

And that's why we can listen to Jesus, and trust him, and follow him. He has earned our confidence.

Let us pray:

We feel that shift of policies that affect our lives, O Lord. We hear that call to go beyond the sacrifice of our livelihoods to our lives. If we need to lay down our lives so that our economy can be saved, make it so that lives can be saved. Make our sacrifice really serve all, not just those who will profit most from places of safety. Help us find a pathway forward that works best for all. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. Thinking of Jesus' sacrifice, here are songs to meditate upon:

O The Deep Love of Jesus by Simon Korolskiy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLTu1xv2-Us>

Jesus Paid It All Celtic Worship with Steph Macleod

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfUNU-sPwbQ>

Jesus Paid It All Kim Walker-Smith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ymkl0t0FOcw>

Is He Worthy Shane and Shane

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pBeDoSIUnU>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, May 20, by Pastor Mark Opgrand #60

"We Are Marching in the Light of God" ("Siyahamba"). Where did that come from?

This song has long been one of our most popular recessionals at the 9:00 am worship service (remember when we had those?). Long before it became hymn 866 in our new hymnal, we belted it out with great enthusiasm.

But did you know Clarence Hales and I share a common 36-year-old memory about this song?

It was the summer of 1985. I had just finished my first year as Lutheran Campus Pastor at Purdue University, in West Lafayette, Indiana. Clarence was a sponsor for the St. Paul's Youth Group that had come to Purdue for the Lutheran Church in America's National Youth Gathering.

While Clarence and I would not meet each other for another ten years, what we had in common from the summer of '85 is that we had both learned and sang a brand new (to us) song. The song was "Siyahamba," a native Zulu song that was part of a collection of songs introduced by a Swedish singing group named Fjedur.

Fjedur were featured performers at that gathering. The director of Fjedur, Anders Nyberg, had discovered this native song, along with other songs of protest and praise, while travelling in South Africa. Nyberg is the one who introduced the popular "Siyahamba" to this country that very summer.

The name of the whole collection of songs was called "*Freedom is Coming*" which is also the title of the second most popular song after "*We Are Marching In The Light Of God.*" One thing that struck me about these songs was that they were shared when South Africa was still an apartheid state. Back then, Nelson Mandela was in prison with little hope he would ever be freed. Six years after Clarence and I first heard "We are Marching," Mandela was freed (1990). Then apartheid ended. And four years after that, Nelson Mandela became president (1994).

Following the youth gathering at Purdue, I heard Fjedur again at our Lutheran Student Movement (college) Gathering. One student in attendance was a native South African. He was studying at North Dakota State University. When Fjedur began singing "Siyahamba," tears ran down his cheeks and he joined them on stage. This was his song in his language. What a moving sight, seeing this South African belting out that song with seven blonde blue-eyed Swedes. Afterwards I asked if the song was as he learned it. "It was perfect," he said.

Origin stories of songs are not unimportant. They provide context and add meaning and depth to our experience. When we sing them, especially ones that lift up the light of God, we are united with all Christians everywhere.

This very much resonates with what is written in 1 John chapter 1:

⁵ *This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.* ⁶ *If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true;* ⁷ *but if we **walk in the light** as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.* (1 Jn. 1:4-7 NRS)

Let us keep marching in the light of God. And sing with all those who have looked for hope and healing.

Let us pray:

Thank you for songs of hope and affirmation, O God, songs that show us in our singing that we are joined in hope and praise with all those who march with you. Thank you for your light, a light that ended years of apartheid in South Africa with peace and reconciliation, and light that draws us now to you as we ask for health and healing. Bless all those who are working to make this world healthy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. There are many recordings of *Siyahamba We Are Marching In The Light Of God*. Here are a few from various places in the world, including the country of origin.

Angel City Chorale

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGOiANtGmhE>

Notre Dame Folk Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjwvA7ND-L0>

Chorale Sainte Famille (CONGO Brazzaville)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fi-zd2k8wgQ>

Credo Dortrecht

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udIZw2A4ygM>

Indonesian Choir touring in Africa

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDzJvUJ_Sd4

Gurt Cush Choir Bristol

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXtDnN2L9z4>

I'll also add *Freedom Is Coming*, since I spoke of it.

first an original recording by Fjedur:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6F1omXtDz0>

St. Francis de Sales Ontario

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBnv2RxxDiE&list=RDeBnv2RxxDiE&start_radio=1&t=9

Marymount Singers in honor of their headmistress who battled Covid-19 and won.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AuR8DVmQJQ>

and one more thing.... after writing this, I remembered a "Walking in the Light" sermon from 2009 where I shared some of this, after which Clarence told me he had also heard *Fjedur*. There were a lot of interesting and surprising parts to how that sermon came together... so I'll attach it just in case ...

Pentecost 02B (6) 2009 **Walking in the Light of God**

June 16, 2009

Ezekiel 17:22–24

2 Corinthians 5:6–10 14–17

Mark 4:26–34

When I first begin preparing a sermon I have little idea where the Holy Spirit is going to take me. Sometimes a question first prompts my thoughts, or an image, maybe a certain word or verse or theme...

... Then I work with it for a time... more often it works with me. This week has been very interesting that way...It was the second lesson that kept drawing me, and a central question that emerged was this: What does it mean to live by faith in a broken world which needs reconciliation?

That's the theme of this fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Two verses highlight this: Verse 7: *"We walk by faith, not by sight"*, and verse 17: *"if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"* These are beautiful words, but then we wonder...what does walking by faith and being new in Christ look like?

In 1985 when I had just finished my first year at Purdue as campus pastor, Purdue hosted the Lutheran Church in America's national youth gathering. Among the special guests were a Swedish singing group called Fjedur. They had recently been in South Africa learning the native African (mostly Zulu) Songs of Protest and Praise. Why protest and praise? Well, back in 1985 South Africa was still under the oppressive Apartheid system, where the minority whites had power, wealth and control in a highly segregated society...

Fjedur recorded these songs and published a song book, which I still have (hold up book). When they sang, it was the first in our country that anyone heard or sang a song we have now often sung during Wednesdays Together and on Sunday morning: "We are marching in the light of God." *Siyahamba ekukhanyen kwenkhos* What most people today don't realize is that this was a song of hope coming out of the apartheid era... just like another one they sang.... Siph'amandla

O God give us power
to rip down prisons
O God give us power
to lift the people
O God give us courage
to withstand hatred
O God give us courage
Not to be bitter.

So what does walking by faith and being new in Christ look like?

As Fjedur sang, I saw a black South African college student join these fair skinned Swedes onstage. With tears in his eyes... and hope... he sang with them...in his native tongue. "We are marching... Syahamba..."

Two other songs in this collection speak of releasing from prison one person in particular ... Nelson Mandela. Six years later our campus ministry was visited by the cousin of one of our students. She had been South Africa working in a ministry of reconciliation and though an unusual set of circumstances actually met Nelson Mandela on the day he was released from prison... after spending 27 years behind bars. Now that was a story. She was with other co-workers in a house where Mandela was resting after his first big speech; she served him a cup of tea.

She told us of Mandela's grace and dignity... his commitment to reconciliation. On the day Mandela was released, he ended his first public address with the same words he spoke at his trial 27 years earlier: *"I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."*

What does walking by faith and being new in Christ look like? Fast forward four years. Can you imagine the joy that black South Africans felt when Nelson Mandela was elected president in South Africa's first democratic election? Even so, it was a rough time... there was so much hurt and bitterness between the races.

Andrew Young tells the story of his visit to South Africa in 1995. Young had quite a life himself... as pastor, congressman, Atlanta mayor, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. He tells about being Mandela's guest when South Africa hosted the 1995 Rugby World Cup Tournament.

Now in that country, rugby was a white man's game, and the South African team was entirely white—a white team, representing a country... that was 80 percent black. It also had a team mascot—a leaping gazelle called a "springbok" that reminded most black South Africans of the country's racist history.

What did President Nelson Mandela do? He showed up at a press conference wearing a rugby jersey and cap with a springbok on it. Mandela told the press that until the elections, he and most other black people in South Africa had always supported whoever was playing against the Springboks. *"But regardless of the past," Mandela said, "these are our boys now. They may all be white, but they're our boys, and we must support them in this tournament."*

The next day, the Springboks' coach sent word for his players not to show up in their practice gear, but to wear shirts and ties instead. He took them out to Robben Island, to the prison where Nelson Mandela had spent nearly three decades of his life behind bars.

The coach and every player on the team walked into Mandela's cell. As they stood there, the coach said, "This is the cell where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. He was kept here for 27 years by the racist policies of our government. We Afrikaners tolerated his imprisonment for all those years, and yet he's publicly backed our team. We can't let him down."

Well, the tournament opened, and to everyone's surprise, the Springboks made it all the way into the championship game against the perennial rugby superpower, New Zealand. It was a huge mismatch, and yet, at the end of regulation time, the score was tied.

Andrew Young was in the stands with his host, President Mandela, who was wearing his Springbok jersey. During the timeout, Mandela brought a South African children's choir out of the stands. They sang an old, black, African miner's song, one similar in nature to what "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," meant to American slaves. Within minutes, 65,000 people in the stadium were standing and singing this black African miner's song.

Something happened. Something of a moment of glory happened at that place. Andrew Young wrote about it: "I don't know anything about rugby, and I don't understand the words of the song, but I was in tears."

When the Springboks came back on the field, they were unstoppable. They won the World Championship. It became an occasion of victory for all of South Africa, because for the next 24 hours, whites danced with blacks on the streets of Johannesburg.

At least for a time, they were one people celebrating together. At least for a day, perceptions were changed. All because Mandela, with dignity and grace, was able to bear his cross and model a letting go of bitterness so that people could see a new way to live, a way to live as fellow countrymen and women, brothers and sisters in Christ.

So what does walking by faith and being new in Christ look like? I know there are a many ways, and on another day we'll talk about some of those other ways. But today, we will sing a song of marching in the light of God and remember where it came from. We will remember what the light of God can do for those follow in his ways...

I know I should be saying Amen here ... but there's two more little pieces to this week I want to share with you. I also discovered this week that the story I just told is going to be released as a movie this fall with Morgan Freeman portraying Mandela and directed by Clint Eastwood. It's called The Human Factor.

It's being produced by Freeman's film company... I mention this not simply as movie promotion, but because of a connection we have to the company. Revelations is the film company that newly graduated UNCW film studies major and St. Paul's member Travis Palmer (who regularly sat right down there) is interning with this summer. I also learned this week that Allison Wooten, another faithful member of St. Paul's (who regularly sits right down there), just left for South Africa today.

It's so interesting and amazing how every once in awhile so many things come together and get us thinking about the wonderful ways that God works in this world. Now let me say it. Amen.

Postscript:

I am writing this after the delivery of this sermon. Two more pieces fell into place following the 11:00 am worship service. Clarence Hales, long time member of St. Paul's, told me that he was at Purdue as a sponsor for that youth gathering. He remembers Fjedur very well and has the recording they made of the songs. This was another neat connection.

Another connection was even more interesting. A first time visitor was looking at the stained glass window and waiting to speak to me. She was in Wilmington with her daughter because of the daughter's interest in and devotion to the locally filmed television shows "One Tree Hill" and "Dawson's Creek". She came to visit St. Paul's because her church in England was also called St. Paul's. She told me that they always sang "We are Marching" at their confirmations.... AND she was at that Rugby Championship game in South Africa in 1995!!

I was stunned. I cannot even begin to calculate the odds of this connection. I asked her if I had told the story accurately. She said, "*You were spot on.*" God must have had some fun guiding these connections this week.

Pastor Mark Opgrand

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church

12 N 6th St.

Wilmington, NC 28401

And one week later... Sunday morning, June 21. I looked at my email between services and had a note from the English woman, Sandra Elsom. She was back at her St. Paul's, and they sang... lo and behold... what else? "We Are Marching in the Light of God." The interesting connections continue.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, May 21 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #61

"Look what I can do!"

A person who has no sense enjoys doing foolish things. But a man who has understanding walks straight ahead. (Prov. 15:21 NIRV)

"Look what I can do!" Even though many years have passed, these words still haunt me.

They were the last words one of my nineteen-year-old campus ministry students in West Texas spoke as he played *"Russian Roulette."* And lost.

"Look what I can do!" It was at a party where there was a lot of drinking. There was also a revolver. He wasn't waving it around or anything. It was just on the table. It had been loaded earlier, but Gary unloaded the six bullets until many drinks later, when he took one bullet, and placed it in a chamber.

It was then he spun the cylinder and spoke his final words: *"Look what I can do!"* Putting the gun to his temple, he pulled the trigger, terminating his life.

As he was fooling around, nobody stopped him. They were laughing. Just having a good time. They thought it was funny. Being so drunk, no one imagined this would happen. At least that's what they told the detectives.

This was an action that some say harmed no one except this young man who tragically acted foolishly. I disagree, but at least he didn't point the gun at a friend's head and pull the trigger.

But *"Look at what I can do."* is not the same as *"Look at what I should do."* Gary *should* have left the handgun unloaded, or kept the safety on, or better yet, kept it locked away when hosting a party with a lot of people drinking and showing impaired judgement.

In this time of continuing coronavirus outbreak, I am noticing a lot of people are choosing to express their *"rights"* with a *"look what I can do"* attitude. But *"can do"* and *"should do"* can have far different outcomes.

People are free to ignore practices that could reduce the risk of either catching or transmitting the virus. They can omit wearing the mask. Or ignore physically distancing. Or not wash hands or disinfect surfaces. The problem with that attitude, however, is that you are not simply putting yourself at risk.

The governor has chosen not to resist those pastors who sued so they *"can do"* worship any way they wish. Anytime. *"Look at what we can do now"* comes a victory cry.

But here, too, *"can do"* is not the same as *"should do."* Without safety measures well in place, welcoming people back to worship without precautions is a bit of a *"loaded gun."* The virus continues to be highly contagious. Masks need to be worn. People need to stay apart. Surfaces

need to be clean. There needs to be good ventilation. Each implemented good measure takes another bullet out of the “loaded gun” chamber and makes us safer.

In our haste and deep desire to come back together, let us show good judgement and earnest care for the needs of others. For it is just as St. Paul writes:

¹³ Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love. (1 Cor. 16:13-14 NRS)

Let us pray:

We remember those day today those who have shown poor judgment at great cost. We also pray for each one making judgements each day. Help us make wise choices which contribute to the good of all your people. Bless those who suffer or are in harm’s way. Encourage all those who give so freely of themselves so that others may live. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

P.S. *The Servant Song* is a wonderful song expressing what it means to love each other. The two other songs express this as well. Enjoy.

The Servant Song from Bukas Palad in Philippines (recent)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ClbZWEzu6I>

The Servant Song Plymouth Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32jWTAIHxgE>

The Servant Song David Haas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryHm5ZLyFsc>

Love One Another, As I have Loved You by Chrissela is also touching.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRQ-dsvsmss>

as is.... Graham Kendrick singing *Love Each Other*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtkROEDMTbY>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, May 22, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #62

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Ps. 19:14 NRS)

50,000 words later...

When I wrote *St.*, the first word in *St. Paul's In Your Home Daily Devotional*, I never imagined that 50,000 words later, I'd somehow still have something to say.

Except that... as soon as I saw "50,000" at the bottom of my current working word document, my brain froze. What else is there to say? It was then I remembered something that my mother-in-law Dorris Thysell used to tell me. I even wrote it down once so I wouldn't forget. Here is the advice she gave me:

"Next time, in promulgating your esoteric cogitations, or articulating your superficial sentimentalities and amicable, philosophical or psychological observations, beware of platitudinous ponderosity. Let your conversational communications possess a clarified conciseness, a compacted comprehensibleness, coalescent consistency, and a concatenated cogency. Eschew all conglomerations of flatulent garrulity, jejune babblement, and asinine affectations.

Let your extemporaneous descantings and unpremeditated expatiations have intelligibility and veracious vivacity, without rodomontade or thrasonical bombast. Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity, pompous prolixity, psittaceous vacuity ventriloquial verbosity, and vaniloquent vapidness. Shun double-entendres, prurient jocosity, and pestiferous profanity, obscurant or apparent!!

In other words, talk plainly, briefly, naturally, sensibly, truthfully, purely. Keep from slang; don't put on airs; say what you mean; mean what you say. And, don't use big words!"

I was impressed. Even when later she told me she hadn't written it, this was no small feat of memorization. Apparently, this was popular verse to memorize among those in her generation (and the generation before hers).

Dorris didn't know where the words originated. I have since discovered that some attribute them to author Mark Twain. Others have said Hale Porter, but for a fact you can find them on scanned pages of the *Pennsylvania School Journal, Volume 23*, published in 1875 and *The Penn Germania: A Popular Journey of German History and Ideals in the United States*, Volumes 14-15, published January 1913.

In other words, these words have been around a long time. When you take time to look them up, they actually make a good point. They have been remembered because they are fun to read out loud (try it) and make a point. With great verve.

By contrast, looking at Holy Scripture, it is most helpful to us that all the writers (and God as ultimate writer) wanted to communicate in a way that was clear. Imagine if scripture was about promulgating esoteric cogitations rather than speaking seeking to express clear and wonderful love of God through Jesus Christ.

Maybe it's no accident that God's divine expression of self is called WORD, and that God's unique manifestation of self is Jesus, the WORD made flesh.

And perhaps we can take a cue from St. Paul himself on the urgency of clarity and simplicity in proclaiming the gospel:

*When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did **not** come **proclaiming the mystery** of God to you in **lofty words or wisdom**.² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.³ And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.⁴ My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a **demonstration of the Spirit and of power**,⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-5 NRS)*

Let us pray.

God, it's usually not a problem for us that our decantings and expatiations have veracious vivacity. More often we are at a loss for words when we try to communicate your gospel to others. Help us know so well the story of your love for us, through the scriptures, that we can effectively share it with others. Keep praying for us, Holy Spirit, translating our deepest thoughts to words for the sake of those who most need steadfast and clear words of peace and hope. We pray with all those looking heavenward today, waiting and watching with them for expressions of your healing love made known through Jesus our Lord. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you my God. Amen.

P.S. Perhaps "Word" themed songs fit today.

Let the Words of my mouth by Fernando Ortega

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpshVtU8_dA

May the Words of my mouth by Don Moen

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast In Your Word by Koine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tel3ayeBxX0>

Lord Keep Us Steadfast Lyle Lovett

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8ZsksiAcFw>

Thou Whose Almighty Word by Choir of Trinity College Cambridge Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPlw_Q7Eq1k

Thou Whose Almighty Word (not images relating to Trinity, with familiar image of Jesus, the original painting from which our "Light of the World" stained glass is based.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqP3IYR4YRg>

and, as a non-gospel bonus, but something to bring a smile here's "Word Crimes" by Weird Al Yankovich (You can't say these devotions are all cookie cutter).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Gv0H-vPoDc>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, May 23, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #63

The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them; ¹⁵ My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net; ¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. (Ps. 25:14-16 NRS)

Loneliness is a silent assassin.

That sentence seemed a bit intense, but it sure got my attention.

It was in the middle of a short article that Benj Pasek had written for Mashable about *"Loneliness and Connection."* In his comments, Pasek was writing about the new world of self-isolation and its effects, especially on those who were already suffering from being isolated and alone.

He was writing about already identified effects of isolation, such as depression and anxiety and *"all those things we hope will go away with enough distraction and avoidance"* which are much worse now because of COVID-19.

Even with things opening up for perhaps many, there is a significant population that will continue to be living in isolation. Pasek suspects many. That prompted him to offer this insightful comment about those feeling isolated:

Knowing that there are people in your life who will reach out to you (when prompted or unprompted), reminding you that whatever you are going through on any particular day isn't permanent — that helps. Knowing that despite peaks and valleys, there are those who love you unconditionally and those you love as well, eager to connect again on the other side of this, helps too.

But then comes that line: ***Loneliness is a silent assassin.***

And with that he suggests, "the more vocal we can be expressing not only our care for those we suspect are suffering but express our suffering to those who care for us — that's the only way I know how to fight back."

Pasek suggest remembering to email, text, call, or essentially offer any reminder of connection. He encourages those who are suffering to have the courage to reach out and ask for help. Even if it is we ourselves, he says.

Here at St. Paul's we have tried to be intentional about reaching out through our "shepherds," a group regularly telephoning everyone in the congregation. I am grateful for their commitment. They have expressed a lot of joy in making old and new connections.

As we "phase re-opening," we must continue to remember each other. Each of us. All of us.

This time in our lives is truly offering unique opportunities to empathize with each other more universally than ever before. One effect of this time of *“forced isolation and loneliness”* is that we can now empathize with what older people know so well, and often have lived with for a long time, that is, being trapped within four walls, experiencing the crushing weight of loneliness, and dealing with the loss of health, the loss of friends, the loss of connection to others.

I believe we are experiencing an emergence of Christ-like compassion like never before, especially among those whose hearts are ever growing closer to the Lord despite this intense time.

Let us pray:

Remember, we pray, all those who feel isolated and affected by loneliness today. And remind us, who may be able to reach out to someone with a gesture of connection or kindness, that reaching out in love is a wonderful gift. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. A couple of songs came to mind. Eleanor Rigby, by the Beatles (... *“all the lonely people... where do they all come from?”*) But there isn't any gospel in Rigby, only a vivid description of loneliness. Next I thought of America's classic *“Lonely People.”* *“This is for all the lonely people... thinking that life has passed them by.”* This is a little more hopeful than *Eleanor Rigby*.... *“don't give up until you... drink from the silver cup and ride the highway in the sky.”*

In my research I learned that lead singer Dan Peeks, after going solo, used to finish his concerts with this song, but as a committed Christian regularly added this postscript: *“Jesus is the answer to loneliness.”* That prompted a fan to suggest he rewrite the lyrics with this hopeful message. That he did, so there are now two versions of this song. I'll link to them both.

Lonely People (Secular classic)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Sn2tKDZB3I>

Lonely People (Christian version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RznnYX89oww>

and here's a beautiful song I had never heard by Sovereign Grace Music, *“Afflicted Saint, to Christ Draw Near.”* Very hopeful amid loneliness.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zGbdg1YCY>

Stumbling Heavenward.

One of our most beautiful stained-glass windows is based on this text:

⁶When [the apostles] had come together, they asked [Jesus], "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Some call this day "Pre-pentecost." or Ascension Sunday (the Sunday following Ascension Day (May 21 this year). Before Jesus would send his Holy Spirit to be the abiding presence of God, he would depart. The window depicts that.

Sometimes I ask our children how we know this is Jesus going up to heaven. They reply, "The angels," or "The clouds." It's pretty straightforward in both window and scripture. Jesus would leave to prepare us for a new way God would be manifested in our lives through the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Thinking about the ascension, I am imagining heaven today, not so much as detailed final destination, but as promised outcome to our wonderful life in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I'll leave pondering what it looks like for another day.

Today I am thinking more about what for me is the most beautiful *35 second song* ever recorded. I first heard it live at a Youth Gathering in San Antonio Texas in the early 1980's, sung by the duo "Salmon and Mulder," who recorded a couple of CD's but not among anyone's greatest hits.

This little piece is an exception! I thought I had lost it forever when my old cassette tape broke, but thanks to YouTube, it can again be shared. I wish some others would record it, because even while short, it's a beautiful expression of honest Christian faith. It declares both who we and whose we are, expressing much in few words and with lovely harmony.

Therefore, on this day of remembering Christ's ascension here is "*Stumbling Heavenward,*"

"And we're all stumbling heavenward
flying like a crippled bird
yet we know
as we go
there's a shining light

guiding as we seek our way back home.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PswYOIYOzu0>

Let us pray:

Thank you so much. O God. for loving us just as we are, however crippled we are by life's experiences. Our flight may not be pretty, but thanks to you we know where we are headed, and we know we can trust your guiding light as we seek our way back home to you. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. I would be enough simply to include only “*Stumbling Heavenward*,” Even so, I’ll add a couple versions of an old classic “*Sing to me of Heaven*.” In our Lutheran tradition, we don’t have many hymns like “Sing to me”, but part of the fun of these devotions is discovered such a wide range of wonderful expressions of faith through our music. Samonte records the classic sound of people singing in worship. Acapeldredge has exquisite harmony. I wish I could get him to do a version of “Stumbling Heavenword.” Blessings.

“*Sing to me of Heaven*” SE Samonte

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMu6vy8rODc&list=PLOUy3mhak75YghMgS9i_IRCvEXFaDM4ej

“*Sing to me of Heaven*” Acapeldrege

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMeC-hZnhuo>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, May 25, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #65

Memorial Day.

¹³ And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them." (Rev. 14:13 NRS)

⁷ Cast all your anxiety on [Jesus], because he cares for you. ⁸ Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you (1 Pet. 5:7-10 NRS)

A Memorial Day was first observed to honor the fallen dead shortly after the Civil War ended in 1866, with 1.5 million casualties. There was first an observance in Charleston, South Carolina later followed by one in Waterloo, New York. After World War I, the day commemorated all American military personnel who have fallen in all wars.

While you probably already knew that, I suspect many in our country do not. By moving this from a one-day observance, May 30, to three-day holiday weekend, it is easy for its intent to be buried amid family outings, travelling, or the many "Memorial Day Sales."

Fundamentally, we need to honor our blessed dead for their service to country and their heroic sacrifice.

This is no small thing, especially when, throughout our history, so much has been lost. Our dead need to be remembered, and honored, not only for their noble sacrifice but also for the tragic loss of life that comes whenever men and women are called to war by their country.

While Memorial Day is a national day of observance, Christian faith takes it a step further. That countries go to war is a sign of failure among human people to live in peace as God calls us. Our honesty about that and faith in the one who shows mercy and forgiveness directs us even more faithfully to pray for peace, to seek the avoidance of settling things this way, and work toward reconciliation when the fighting stops.

As Christians we will also remember all those throughout history on all sides who have given their lives, most of whom just wanted to live out their lives peacefully but nevertheless went when called. Furthermore, we look in hope to a gracious God, who in Christ Jesus, has died for the sins of all. It is he who reminds us that even when we fight and die, we all still belong to God.

Let us pray.

Eternal Father, strong to save: We remember all those who have given and lost their lives through service to their country. Bring peace to all those who mourn and hope for all to be reconciled through the gospel of Jesus. Help us all choose Christ-like pathways that build bridges between those in conflict with one another and help us experience the joy of peace and harmony, as you have called us. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. These moved me beyond words:

Eternal Father Strong To Save

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjcSpCSUjdk>

Mansions of the Lord West Point Band and Glee Club

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jccNoxn1HoU>

Hymn to the Fallen John Williams

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Omd9_FJnerY

Memorial Day Bagpipe Tribute (Amazing Grace)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2O0daPfqSV0>

Taps performed at Arlington National Cemetery

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bfe4TxvUOiw&t=91s>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday May 26, 2020 (not) by Pastor Mark Opgrand but by popular request, Pastor Michael Megahan.) #66

To the Ends of the Earth.

Acts 1:8 (NIV)

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Now many of you know, I am a *missionary*. Missionaries are, usually, people sent out to foreign lands to do, well, to do missions. Of course, the word “missions” is quite broad and conjures up many different ideas about what we do. But did you, know that the word “missionary” is not found in the Bible? It is an ecclesiastical word.

It is true that Jesus told his disciples that they were to go out into all of the world. But he did not say as “missionaries.” He used the word “witness.” So, what is a witness?

We know the basic idea of a witness from courtrooms. A witness is somebody who has seen or heard something that will help a jury decide if another person is guilty or innocent of a crime. They have to have had a personal experience of the situation or dialogue in question. It can't be hearsay, that is, a valid testimony cannot be based on what the witness heard from a third party. It has to be firsthand knowledge.

As Christ's witnesses, what does that mean? Who is on trial? How do we get the firsthand knowledge?

Christ is the one on trial. Yes, I said it: Christ is on trial. No, he did not commit a crime. He is being tried in the courtroom of this world by all humans to determine if he is the true Son of God, the Messiah sent to bring salvation and life to all people. It is our testimony that will or is supposed to convince those who have not yet decided.

But you ask, if a witness is one who has first-hand knowledge or experience of an event, how can I bear witness to Jesus who I have never seen? Well, there are actually several ways which confirm your role as a “first-hand” witness.

First, you have the Spirit of God in you. The Spirit informs you and guides you in knowing the truth (Jn 16:5-15). That is the promise Jesus gave and which was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost.

Second, a great source of eyewitness accounts is the Bible: For example, glance at some of the following: Jn 21:24; Luke 1:1-4; Gal 1:11-12; 1 John 1:1-4: The Bible is like court records. Every courtroom, every trial has a court-stenographer who records verbatim the words, actions and decisions of a trial. In a similar fashion, the Bible has provided us with over 3,000 years of

eyewitness first-hand, accounts of what God has done and who Jesus is as Son of God and Son of Man. Sharing Bible stories with family, friends, even strangers is a great way of bearing witness.

A third validation of your role as a witness is found in your own experiences of Christ. How have you experienced Christ through Bible reading, baptism, eucharist, personal forgiveness, healing, joy, etc.? Your experiences have qualified you to be a witness of God's grace in Jesus Christ. No, you don't have to go out to a street corner and ask people if they have been saved. Yes, you can, over a cup of coffee or during a conversation with someone, perhaps a friend or schoolmate, share with them the hope and joy you have in Christ. One word spoken at a chance moment can change lives. O, the stories I can tell about these "chance" moments, but that would take too much space in this short meditation.

Christ sends us into the whole world, beginning with Wilmington and on to countries we have never even heard about as witnesses to who he is, what he has accomplished for all humanity. That is what Pentecost is about. It is the birthday of the Church. It is the day the Church was given its purpose: to be witnesses to the whole world to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

Holy Father, you know each human who walks and who has walked upon the earth. We are all your children. In Christ's death you gave each one of us forgiveness. In his resurrection, you provided eternal life for each of us. At Pentecost, you sent the Holy Spirit to empower us to be witnesses to this Good News. Enable me, give me the courage, give me the wisdom to be a bearer of this Good News to others. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.

P.S. The titles of several hymns were selected by Pastor Megahan. Here's what I found:

O Zion Haste by Prince George Winyah Episcopal Church Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Otmdb-afNJM>

O Zion Haste by CCFI Choir from Taiwan

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLrb_QMvyDU

O God O Lord of Heaven and Earth Trinity Lutheran Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEkV1V9qgHc>

O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth (Paul Manz pipe organ version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLqJ3K9DN30>

God, Whose Almighty Word by Eamon Younis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNfR3r1WuEY>

St. Paul's In Your Home Daily Devotional for Wednesday, May 27, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #67

A hymn search that started with "O Zion Haste" and took me to "Kum Ba Yah" in Norwegian.

I was thankful for another wonderful meditation for Pastor Michael Megahan yesterday. I had also asked him about some hymn suggestions to which I might offer a link. One suggested hymn was "O Zion Haste."

One of the links I included was to a lovely choir singing it on a beach (or maybe virtual beach). It was nice, if not spectacular. I linked to a couple of others. I was surprised that it hadn't been recorded more often.

But as the old radio personality Paul Harvey built a whole career around sharing "the rest of the story," there is more to this story.

The YouTube channel that posted this version of "O Zion Haste" was "jamjar30002000." I wondered if it had some other hymns. When I clicked, I saw a preview image of a pastor in a church and the title said "Gudstjeneste Finnsnes 24 05 2020." That was this past Sunday. When I clicked on it, it was a worship service. A pianist, vocalist, and guitarist were playing the tune for "What a Friend We have in Jesus" but singing in an unknown (to me language). The words were printed. Sweet song. Then the preacher preached. After that the group sang what sounded like "Kum ba Yah." At the very end of the service (I scrolled) came the words: "Gave til Finnsnes Kirkeforening and vil du gi et bidas?"

Google translate came to my rescue. I tried "Norwegian to English" and it came out: "Give to the church's association. Will you give a gift?" (We all say that at the end of online worship, don't we? Well, not here in Norwegian, of course)

Upon further digging, I discovered this was a church in Finnsnes, Norway. Translating the second song's lyric "vaer meg naer" it came out "Be near me." No church in this country dares sing "Kum bah Yah" because politicians use the phrase to ridicule people trying to come together peacefully. Perhaps we should sing "Vaer meg naer" in Norwegian and reclaim that lovely melody.

I further discovered a beautiful song that their youth choir was performing called "Har du fyr." I supposed it was a religious song as it was being done in church, and upon further googling, I found lyrics in English. You can find the English lyrics in the linked piece performed by Hekla Stalstrenga, which is deeply moving. Both renditions are beautiful.

So how does all this fit into a devotional theme? First, I think of Pastor Michael and Lutheran Bible Translators bringing the beautiful message of the gospel into a scripture that can be read and understood by God's people in Africa and other places.

Second, I think of Pentecost. People heard the gospel in their own tongues. It moved them and changed their lives.

And third, I think about the people far from us last Sunday in Finnsnes, Norway, doing just about what we are doing, that is, a service that will be viewed by members not in personal attendance. (And oddly enough, by me half a world away just by clicking links). I heard “*What a Friend We Have In Jesus*” and “*As the Deer*.” Even though I didn’t know the language, I knew what they were singing. And Glory be to God I heard “*Kum Ba Yah*” uncorrupted by politicians so it could be reclaimed as the prayer it was when it was first sung... by the Gullah-Geechee people of West African origin.

And lastly, I discovered another beautiful song I had never heard before, “*Har du fyr*” with lyrics that resonate with that 35 second “*Stumbling Heavenward*” song I shared a few days ago.

And that’s the rest of the story. Enjoy.

Let us pray.

Thank you. O God, for music and languages and melodies that reveal the wonder of your love for all people. To see a streamed service that so resembles our service reminds us of how much we are indeed together during this pandemic. We pray for all people everywhere, and in all languages, we join all our brothers and sisters in prayer. Bring healing we pray to this troubled world and help us use this time of waiting as opportunity to draw closer to you. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

P.S. Here are the songs and the service. If you link to the service, you can enjoy the songs. If you speak Norwegian, you can enjoy the sermon.

Har du fyr by Finnsnes Church Youth Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mdBaEKB1Cw>

Hekla Stålstrenga - *Har du fyr* (you’ll be glad you listened to this beautiful version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rck1uCW50uA>

and... The Sunday, May 24, 2020 service from Finnsnes Church in Norway:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jngbq8TxmmM&t=1739s>

St. Paul's In Your Home Daily for Thursday, May 28 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #68

“Worship on demand” versus “Demanding ‘in-person’ worship.”

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. ² Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. (Ps. 100:1-2 NRS)

As this pandemic has advanced, so has the technology of worship. True, the technology was already here, but until the pandemic, most of us continued the “normal” practice of in-person worship. In our case every Sunday at 9:00 am and/or 11:00 am.

When “in-person” worship was no longer possible (at least for a while), things changed. Thousands of churches almost immediately shifted to some form of “live-streaming” or “pre-taped” video services. Even those who were “live-streaming” recorded the services so people could view them at another time.

Thus began “worship on demand.” Like “movies on demand” or “sports on demand”, or “online classes on demand,” people could now watch worship “on demand,” that is, whenever they wanted. We have hoped it’s more just *watch* but rather *participate* as if we were still in each other’s presence at 9 or 11 on Sunday mornings.

If the cameras were turned the other way, I wonder how many would be watching while eating breakfast or multitasking on their iPads. I wonder how many people were fast forwarding the parts of the service that didn’t interest them... or pause the service to get that second cup of coffee... or just walk out (who’s watching anyway?)

“Worship on demand” changes the worship experience. I wonder if we might get so used to it that it will be awkward to come back in-person. “Oops. Am I supposed to stand now? Say what along with everyone else? Oh dear, this service is longer than I remembered. I miss my bathroom just down the hall.”

Meanwhile.... there is a growing movement among many throughout all the states to demand “in-person” worship. As someone who has worshipped “in-person” here at St. Paul’s more than 1,200 times in 23 years, I truly understand just how much we all miss this time together. No matter how well we do “on demand” it will always pale in comparison to being in each other’s physical presence.

But making the decision of “when?” and “how?” to come back together “in-person” is no small thing. We continue to learn more and more about this challenging virus and its deadly effects. We listen the doctors and epidemiologists for their best wisdom and guidance. We try to lower risk as much as we can. If no one gets sick because of our good decisions I don’t believe we will ever wish we had been less careful.

Who knows what's ahead? We observe what is happening elsewhere. We make our plans carefully and prayerfully, so that when we are back in the sanctuary, it will be with a renewed sense of joy. That, we trust, is what God demands.

Let us pray:

Dear God. Please bless us during this time of separation in worship. We pray especially for those churches who have chosen now to open their doors. Protect them, especially so they will be safe and not live to regret their haste. And please spare from criticism those churches who, out of love and care for their members, are choosing the side of caution. Bless all the alternative forms of worship. And most of all, direct us during this time apart, to discover deep within ourselves a connection to you that will continue as we continue to connect and re-connect with each other. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. It seems to me that some big hymns of the church are the ones we need today.

O Worship The Lord Chester Cathedral

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBEmXFkwcOE>

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty General Conference Girl's Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-p5q9hjLWI>

The Church's One Foundation at Duke Chapel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ECY2IleRg8>

O God Beyond All Praising by Villanova Pastoral Musicians

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V-AQbKyg48>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, May 29, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #69

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet. 2:10 NIV)

avoiding the quadrillion probabilities of our non-existence

That is the title of a poem I found a long time ago in a paperback book that I would have long since discarded except for that one poem. I don't know much about poetry, so I don't even know if it is a good poem or not. I remember simply liking the way the words were put together.

While I have shared this poem with couples about to be married, I now see it broader in scope, that is, describing the positive life changing effect any one person can have on another. Here's the poem, written by Joe Plntauro, former Roman Catholic priest, in a collection called "*Kites at Empty Airports.*"

*i am not who I was
i am not going to be who I was going to be
you changed all that*

*you are not who you were
you are not going to be who you were going
to be*

i changed all that

*what is is, and cannot not be.
what was, was, and cannot not have been.
so you see
my love*

*we are us.
we are us now and we shall never
have been*

not us.

*who are we going to be?
we are going to be who we never would
have been*

without each other.

The poem could have been about a couple. But change “*love*” to “*friend*” and change “*without each other*” to “*without each other and Jesus*” and we have something descriptive of the very positive life changing effect we might have one each other, especially when Jesus is between and within us.

I really believe that’s what happens when we really meet each other in Jesus’ name.
Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, We are thankful for every encounter with another that has changed for the better who we are. Thank for that we are going to be who we never would have been without you.
Amen.

P.S. *The Summons* includes that a lyric that resonates with the poem.... “*and never be the same.*” This is how it is as we follow Jesus. The song “*We are called*” also picks up this theme. Enjoy.

Will You Come and Follow Me (The Summons) by Rethie van Niekerk
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o469PRLdbHU>

The Summons sung by Robert Kochis
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0aAkOe87mo>

We Are Called by David Haas sung by Notre Dame Folk Choir
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgomtlc1_yc

We Are Called by St. Paul Young Adult Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdj4N8FMYeY>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, May 30, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #70

O Day Full of Grace

The "*Lutheran Book of Worship*" (the old Green Hymnal) came out in 1978 as I was in my final year of seminary.

I have a sweet memory of reviewing the entire hymnal with a few friends and Ruth Havlik, a fine church organist we knew. In the course of five evenings, she played through every hymn (all 569); we tested the arrangements, evaluated strengths and weakness, and Ruth freely spoke her mind about the hymns.

I still have my hymnal where I made "Ruth notes" on each page.... notes like: "Okay, nice, not too hard #319"; "familiar but 'Johnny one note' #300"; "Nope #340"; "We know this one #364; "watch crazy rests #552; "very empty renaissance style #366; "I love it, play majestically #377"; "very singable #376."

Ruth's notes for #161 were "*One of my favorites, but the Germans don't seem to know it.*"

That was "*O Day Full of Grace.*" I believe she was right. When discussing hymns for my first Pentecost here, I suggested "*O Day Full of Grace.*" It had never been sung at St. Paul's. (Bill Remele can verify this; he didn't know it). My German background senior Pastor Misenheimer had never heard of it. It was not in the old red hymnal, nor in several other earlier St. Paul's hymnals. It is in a couple of the older Scandinavian background hymnals, which is how I (and others like Ruth Havlik) first learned it.

Bottom line (stanza?): It is a great hymn. This was the hymn I chose for my ordination. Since 1978, it has become a familiar Pentecost hymn, through the words first composed by Nicolai Gruntvig (1783-1872) were more Advent in nature. The present tune is "*Den Signe Dag*", was composed by Christoph Weyse in 1826.

It is not hard to find exceptionally wonderful recordings of this hymn, as arranged by F. Melius Christiansen. Every fine Lutheran college choir has done this song. It has also been a special virtual choir project by hundreds of Lutheran musicians for this Pentecost Sunday. I'll have links to that and other great recordings.

So what's so special about this hymn? As a medium level musician, it always seems to me to come down to good tune and great lyrics. There are many good tunes, but that is not enough if there aren't great lyrics to support it.

"*O Day Full of Grace*" has it all. It tells the story of God's wonderful grace from the birth of Jesus to that day when we, "*on our final journey go.*" There's a Pentecost verse. Let me now share the verses and invite you to meditate upon them before going to the links to either watch or sing along. Perhaps before singing it, you can read it aloud as a prayer. Let it move you powerfully through this great affirmation of God's grace in all our lives.

O Day Full of Grace

- 1 O day full of grace that now we see
appearing on earth's horizon,
bring light from our God that we may be
replete in his joy this season.
God, shine for us now in this dark place;
your name on our hearts emblazon.

- 2 O day full of grace, O blessed time,
our Lord on the earth arriving;
then came to the world that light sublime,
great joy for us all retrieving;
for Jesus all mortals did embrace,
all darkness and shame removing.

- 3 For Christ bore our sins, and not his own,
when he on the cross was hanging;
and then he arose and moved the stone,
that we, unto him belonging,
might join with angelic hosts to raise
our voices in endless singing.

- 4 God came to us then at Pentecost,
his Spirit new life revealing,
that we might no more from him be lost,
all darkness for us dispelling.
His flame will the mark of sin efface
and bring to us all his healing.

- 5 When we on that final journey go
that Christ is for us preparing,
we'll gather in song, our hearts aglow,
all joy of the heavens sharing,
and walk in the light of God's own place,
with angels his name adoring.

Text: Danish folk hymn, c. 1450; tr. Gerald Thorson, 1921-2001
© 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship, admin. Augsburg Fortress

“O Day Full of Grace” has it all, and I’m glad my colleagues here at St. Paul’s have not let a Pentecost go by without now singing it.

Let us pray.

O God, on this eve of another Pentecost Sunday, we thank you not only for your Holy Spirit, but also for the Spirit’s role in creating words and tunes that express the wonder and joy of God’s grace. Especially during this time of international stress and fear, may we be comforted by your grace and all the forms it takes. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. Here are some links to wonderful *“O Day Full of Grace.”*

O Day Full of Grace Virtual by Lutheran Musicians (no text – for watching)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldITpkTYM0U&feature=youtu.be>

O Day Full of Grace Virtual by Lutheran Musicians (with words)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJETTbnf6w&feature=youtu.be>

O Day Full of Grace Concordia (Morehead) Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdi7W6viRw0>

O Day Full of Grace Chant Clare (good audio)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8_CRu_LXEs&t=211s

O Day Full of Grace St. Olaf Centennial Choir (very large ensemble)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2JVwkDCIOo&t=169s>

and lastly... underscoring the great tune, here is the great Paul Manz’s version on organ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1HgBAEfpM8>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #71

The Spirit Calls ("It's for you").

I was reading about church trends that have been emerging, but now even more on account of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was predicted by church futurist Carey Neiuwhof that churches' "on-demand access will eclipse live events.

He described how in the 80's and 90's TV shifted from live-viewing (you had to watch your favorite show live or you missed it) to on-demand viewing, at first through VCRs, then TiVo and finally through streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Disney+.

While it's been this way for awhile, most churches don't behave that way. We push everything toward a live event, assuming that most people who access an experience will do so exactly when it happens.

That used to be called "coming to church." If you weren't there, you missed it. We all have missed "coming to church" this way for many weeks.

Our next best effort has been to create worship experiences that can be accessed online and "on-demand." Many people assume that the sooner we get back to "normal," (meaning live and in person worship), the better it will be.

Neiuwhof suggests our changing culture (in part due to the long term effects of a pandemic) is already changing how people will experience "church." Several "cutting edge" modern churches reach thousands of people online each month, and even before the virus, was a fraction of those who worshipped "live."

Neiuwhof recommends that churches prepare to use modern technology to make lots of content available for people to access anytime. He says even material not brand new will be brand new to someone who hasn't accessed it before. Even something you did before will have value to someone who hasn't seen or heard it before. People won't care if something is new as long as it is great, he says.

I'd want to be careful about "grading" my own past work, but in writing the brand new Pentecost Sermon for this Pentecost Sunday (available on YouTube [stpaullutheranwilmingtonnc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stpaullutheranwilmingtonnc)), I thought fondly about the one I shared three years ago. It was not a brand new idea, but one that I had honed over the four times I shared the essential concept over the past forty years (1979, 1984, 2004, and 2017).

In each of those Pentecost Sermons I was trying to imagine the surprise of encountering God in a new and unexpected way. It would start out with a history of Pentecost, maybe start to get a little "dry," and then be interrupted by a telephone call for God, who was seeing where it wasn't going, and then chose to intervene with a telephone call.

The first time I did this (1979) was long before cell phones. I had recording a ring, hid a phone in the pulpit, and when it started ringing, the ushers scrambled to try to get to the office right off the sanctuary to silence it. It's quite a crazy wonderful experience to recall that.

The twist years later in 2017 is that because people still sometimes forget to silence their cell phones, they imagined that's what was happening, not a phone call from God.

I believe we are moving toward a time (even after coming back to in person worship) when people will continue want to "tune into" a service on demand. That could happen after you heard "you missed a good sermon" last Sunday, or "You should have heard the choir. They were great!"

We don't know just what the future holds, God continues to shape us, and in every age, "the Spirit Calls, and it's for you."

Let us pray.

On this Day of Pentecost we thank you, O God, for the wonderful and surprising way you created your church for mission and ministry. Fill our hearts with your Holy Spirit today so that we may powerfully express your love and speak your word. In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

P.S. Hope you will participate in St. Paul's online service and sing along. Here are a few more Holy Spirit songs. I am also attaching for reading the sermon I referenced. It won't be like being there, or seeing it delivered, but hopefully your imagination can be active and you will smile thinking of God phoning it in.

Holy Spirit Come and Fill This Place by Lisa Deaton

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgU_32v0R_I

O Holy Spirit by Ruth Fazal (contemporary, simple, sweet)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fValJ8vHIE>

Spirit of the Living God acapella by Voices of Praise

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrwRS1h-rmY>

Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart by Exultate Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlrBp0yg8XI>

and thinking of calls... this Just a Little Talk With Jesus by Michael Lining (nice acapella)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9d_SgvLk2Y

The Spirit Calls (“It’s for you”).

Pentecost Sunday 2017

Dear friends in Christ. Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pentecost ... is from the Greek word Pentecostes... literally meaning ... fiftieth and first referring to the Jewish festival mentioned in Acts ... the one that took place on the fiftieth after Jesus’ last Passover.

Christians now celebrate this day fifty days after Easter. It is also marked as an anniversary of the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples in Jerusalem. And Pentecost marks the completion of Christ’s redemptive work on earth.

Christ has died for us.

Christ is risen for us.

Christ has ascended to be with the Father..

and Christ will come again for us.

Until then.. and ... from now on, the ongoing work of the church will be done through God’s Holy Spirit... who comes... on Pentecost.

We celebrate Pentecost... both as a festival and as a season. It becomes the second half of the church year... The first half observes the life of Christ and runs from Advent through Easter. The second half, Pentecost, explores life of the church ...through the work, gifts, and fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The color for Pentecost... is red ... the color of fire... reminding us that the Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire. The fire represents God, the “consuming fire.” The fire also represents warm hearts, fiery zeal, dedication, and devotion ... of Christ’s disciples.

Red further is the color of blood and reminds us of the blood of the martyrs who gave up their lives for the church. Red will soon be replaced by green... which is the symbol of growth. During Pentecost season Christians are urged to grow in the spirit.

So this... is a brief overview. Many of you may already know quite a bit of this. What you may not know, are some other interesting customs associated with Pentecost.

In my reading this week, for example, I discovered that in the Middle Ages it was the custom in some churches to let a disk with a dove painted on it fall from the ceiling upon the congregation below.

That symbolized the coming of the Spirit upon the people. (If we did this today, perhaps we might toss some flying Frisbees from the balcony)

In 13th Century France, white pigeons were released during church services. Personally I can't imagine trying this today. I, for one, would not want to be sitting beneath nervous birds, (if you know what I mean).

During this same time period some families suspended the figure of a dove over their dining tables during meals. Another custom which surprised me was that in England ... on the day after Pentecost, religious plays were produced and a product called *Whitsunale* was sold.

Churches and universities made and sold ale to raise funds for the poor or to repair buildings. I wonder if this this might have been the origin.... of the *church bake sale*...however... lost in translation... *the Church Makes Ale* ... becomes... *The Church Bake Sale*.

All kidding aside, on this Pentecost Sunday, we would all do well to remember that Pentecost is more than just an observance of a great event in the past... there are lots of things that Pentecost can remind us of.

Why just the other day, for example

(telephone can be heard ringing ... ring....

RRRRRIIINNNGGGG

(continues during ringing)....I thought of how Pentecost itself is a marvelous expression of unity which draws everyone into a close family ... supported by one another ... RRRRIIINNNGGGG and further draws upon the lifeblood of the spirit

RRRRRIIINNNGGGG who indeed comes into our lives with enthusiasm and vitality.

RRRRRIIINNNGGGG

Such is ... the gift nature of the gift itself, and we can be grateful that it was given to us at all...

RRRRRIIINNNGGGG

I'm sorry, but I just can't go on. Would you excuse me ... while I answer this?

(answering phone and holding it up to my ear)

"Hello. I don't know who this is, but I really can't talk right now. I'm right in the middle of the sermon. Can I call you back at a better time.?"

What do you mean, there is no better time?"

Who is this?"

Say again?"

Can you spell your name?"

Are you leaving out some vowels?

This is weird.

Who is this really?

Am I being pranked?

Okay, what's my mother's maiden name?

Grandmother's ...

....great grandmothers...

.. great great...

great great great..

Never mind. .. I believe YOU now.

I just didn't think YOU were supposed to call people on the telephone.

Ah, ah, no m'am-sir. I didn't mean it that way...

Yes ma'am-sir, I know YOU can call people any time and any way you want.

Yes, I did see the movie OH GOD, ... and Bruce Almighty...but those were years ago...

Yes, I thought they were pretty good ...

It's just that I'm so surprised to hear from YOU right here in church.

No, of course the church is a wonderful place to hear from YOU.

I just didn't expect it this way...

Yes, ma'am-sir.... I'm sure the disciples were surprised at Pentecost, too.

What's that...? You want to talk about the sermon?

I'm not sure I understand... but okay...

What do you mean ... I was starting to get boring?

*I know it was a little like a lecture ...
but I thought some history would be interesting.*

Yes, sir, m'am-sir.

*I realize it was getting a little dry ...
and people were starting to daydream...
.... but it was going to pick up...*

Oh, I see.

*You looked ahead and saw it wasn't ... picking up
... and that's why you called...*

Of course I'll take.. the help.

I'll take notes....

*And yes, I know the whole proclamation depends on YOU
.... just ..like.. at... Pentecost.*

and... yes. yes... YOU are the one who comes and calls...

and makes sure ...

...right... that all your people know

that you are with them always...

to the end of the age.. and yes..

even today

...especially the children...

so that.... (say again?).... so that all of us

(yes... all of us) will be secure in your promises...

and excited uh huh ...

...and enthusiastic... about the gospel...

...uh huh...and bold too

... and able to speak clearly...

... and communicate the good news...

Right... Yes sir/ma'am...

that is good news and I'll be happy to tell them...

and you give me your word....

that they will understand

.... just like at Pentecost...

Okay. Anything else?

(Sure, I'll say "HI" to PJ)

Well, then... Later....

Please... call again... any time.

(speaking directly to the congregation)

None of us may ever fully comprehend the excitement of that first day of Pentecost.

It was surprising ... and remarkable ... the Spirit of God coming upon the disciples with those tongues of fire ... the beginning of a dynamic growing relationship between God ... and God's church.

With God the Holy Spirit now working through us us... who have been called.

That was Pentecost, and the church began.

On that day, God spoke through the Holy Spirit
with tongues of fire and with words ...they all understood.

God still does that... through the Holy Spirit...

Perhaps not on the phone...

Perhaps not through the mighty wind...

Perhaps not with tongues of fire ...

but clearly.... in ways we will understand.

...through the proclamation of God's Word.

...through our baptism

...through the Lord's Supper...

Through all of this, God the Holy Spirit calls. And if we're not interested? Well, there's some good news here as well.

For even when ... we try to resist the Holy Spirit, God's Holy ..Spirit ..still.. the Spirit comes to us.

Even when we try to live without God, the Holy Spirit will keep after us.

Like a ringing telephone that will not quit God's Holy Spirit will nag us until we answer it...

We know ... what that's like.....

(RRRRRIIINNNGGGGGG! RRRRIIINNNGGGG

(picking up the phone)

Hello?

(holding the receiver out to the congregation)

It's for you. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, June 1, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #72

So admit to one another that you have sinned. Pray for one another so that you might be healed. The prayer of a godly person is powerful. It makes things happen. (Jas. 5:16 NIRV)

“One Glaring Omission!”

“What?” I said, speaking to one of our members after Easter Sunday worship quite a few years ago. *“What did I miss?”*

“You failed to pray for our troops,” she said with an intensity I have never forgotten. *“One glaring omission!”*

She was right. In the prayers of the church that Easter Sunday I had not prayed for them. It was an unintentional omission. By reviewing prayers from previous weeks, I verified that. In every previous prayer for as far back as I reviewed, I read something like: *“We pray for our men and women who are serving their country.”* Just not that morning. I forgot.

The woman who said this had been living out of state for a while, so she had missed other prayers with petitions for our troops. Even so, praying for troops was so close to her heart that she had no other words for me that morning but these: *“One glaring omission!”* No *“Happy Easter.”*

My omission likely ruined for her what otherwise might have been a meaningful service. Or maybe she thought it was a “nice service, except for...” These many years later, I remember nothing else about that service except her words.

I never heard those words from her again. I made sure of that. I always remembered to pray for our troops. Admittedly, there were times I wanted to say, *“Did you hear the prayers today? No glaring omission this time.”*

Despite that awkward encounter, this woman was lovely, and we actually had a good relationship. When she died some years later, it was truly an honor to preside at her graveside service. In planning the service, I recalled this story with her daughter, who said, “Yep. Sounds like Mom. She spoke her mind. My husband is a career Navy SEAL who has been in harm’s way a lot. It was always important for her to pray for him and all our men and women in the service.” When later in the funeral homily I shared the story and my positive learning from her observation, we all smiled.

Yesterday, while watching our Pentecost Sunday service online, I recalled *“One Glaring Omission.”*

This time, in my sermon, I failed to say anything about the tragic death of George Floyd and the subsequent unrest and violent rioting that is taking place all over the country.

Pentecost Sunday wasn’t the wrong time to speak to this. It was an omission simply because I wasn’t thinking about it when I wrote the sermon. So this time I’m the one saying *“One glaring omission!”*

I have no excuse. Even while protests (both peaceful and violent) had not yet been present in all fifty states, virtually everyone who looked at news (including me) saw George Floyd dying before our eyes following excessive restraint. We are all affected and deeply troubled by this.

As Christians, we must speak to this, but not simply in words or prayers that soon fade away. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is real, as we embrace it, then the love of Jesus must become the standard by which our lived-out faith is revealed and judged. God help us, everyone.

Obviously, because nothing human is ever uncomplicated, there must be plenty of room for failure here... and glaring omissions. We all have a terrible history with God's admonition to: "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8).

And here, I personally confess my own poor track record of speaking to the incredibly difficult issues George Floyd and other deaths reveal. Many times I offered up prayers but not backed them up with my own commitment to engage actively in working for positive growth in the whole area of justice, fairness, and love for all God's people.

I fear *many glaring omissions* in my own life, and to that I can only kneel before Christ my Lord (and others I have offended) and ask forgiveness. And from that, in hearing Christ's absolution, ask for further guidance and direction.

No songs today. Just moments of silence for prayer. God be with us all.

Let us pray.

O God, there was a time when we would never have seen video footage of someone brutally restrained unto death. Once again now we have, and once again the fear and rage underlying complex human relations in our time have boiled over into more violence and destruction of property. The flames of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost have been eclipsed by erupting burning anger. How can we live without your help, O God? Show us your ways and give us the wisdom and guidance to follow you, no matter how frightening or discouraging this seems today. Protect those who protest peacefully and protect our police officers and service members trying peacefully to restore order. Have mercy on us all, O God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:5 (NIV)

Our understanding of something is based primarily on our perspective of the event. Our point of view is the beginning of interpretation and understanding. Consider the following three examples of how a **change in perspective** might change the understanding of a biblical passage:

1. An 8th Century B.C. statute of a cherub (plural is cherubim) is a hideously shaped beast with four legs and a pair of wings. A 16th Century A.D. picture of a cherub done for one of the first printed Bibles shows a rosy cheeked infant playing among the artifacts built for the temple.

In Genesis 3:24, when God placed cherubim with flashing swords to guard the Tree of Life, were they rosy cheeked infants or ferocious looking, winged creatures?

2. A 18th Century A.D. picture in a children's Bible illustrates Noah's Ark as being tossed about on a stormy sea, the sea filled with floating carcasses of people and animals as well as other debris. A 21st Century A.D. children's Bible illustrates the same scene with a boat filled with animals sailing on a placid sea toward a rainbow. (Some add the Ark towing two skunks behind on a small raft.) The story of Noah is a story of judgment and destruction.

Which illustration gives the proper perspective? Does it change our understanding?

3. We all know Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper, with Jesus and the disciples sitting together before a feast spread out on a long table. Yet the original feast was probably eaten by Jesus and his disciples reclining on the floor (or low couches), on their left sides, in groups of four, eating out of common dishes.

A change in perspective makes it easier to understand how, in an earlier narrative, the woman came behind Jesus (who was reclining on the floor) and washed his feet, or how the disciples could see who was dipping bread in the same dish with Jesus.

When Paul writes in Philippians 2:5, he is encouraging us to take a different perspective on how we view each other as well as others in the world. We are to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus. He does not say "like," but "same as."

Martin Luther comments on Philippians 2:5 with the following: "I should become a Christ to my neighbor and be for him what Christ is for me." Again he wrote, in another commentary: "A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and his neighbor—in Christ by faith, and in his neighbor by love...we may be truly Christians...Let the virgin use her piety to serve the prostitute, the wise man to serve a fool, the pious man to serve a sinner, the righteous man to serve the erring."

The Spirit the Church received at Pentecost is the same one we received at our baptism. The Holy Spirit does not just encourage us or teach us but transforms and empowers us to become a Christ to others. We no longer live from the point of view of humans—of political, cultural, sociological, economical, racial or other perspectives. We now see the world from the perspective of Christ on the Cross. That is who we are as **Christians**. We see individuals as created in the image of God—no matter who they are, where they were born, gender, age, etc.

How I respect or disrespect the image reveals how I respect or disrespect the Creator in whose image the other person is made.

Our perspective often determines our understanding of a situation. We are called to have the same point of view of others as Christ on the Cross had for us. As Martin Luther wrote, that is what it means to be truly Christian.

Prayer: Holy Father, while we were still your enemies filled with sin, your Son died for us, reconciling us to you. Just as Christ humbled himself and became obedient even unto death, so let me share in the same humility and be a Christ to whomever I meet in life, even to those who are different, perhaps even considered my enemies. Join me with all others who have been baptized to become living stones of the true church, the body of Christ in the world to serve the world in love to your glory. In Christ Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.

P.S. Our first two hymns are in ELW hymnal: #713, and #512.

O God of Every Nation Plymouth Church Lincoln, Nebraska

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_A7pqFdY6I

Lord, Let My Heart be Good Soil (In Chinese and English) by Chiu Sin Fu Stephen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pLXg1Zodl8>

Lord, Let My Heart be Good Soil by St. Paul International Lutheran Church Toyko

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyYKNhrb1dE>

Lord, Let My Heart be Good Soil by Indonesia choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VuPiORRaM>

The last song is **new** to me, and **really good** in my (Pastor Mark) opinion. I'll add the lyrics.

We Labor Unto Glory... The Porter's Gate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRuPZCXShg4>

My God, my God, where e'er I go, glo-o-ory
Where I reap and where I sow, glo-o-ory
When my hands they grip the thorns glo-o-ory
In the still and in the storm, glo-o-ory, glo-o-ory

Refrain: Oh, we labor unto glory 'Til heaven and earth are one
Oh, we labor unto glory Until God's kingdom comes

The sun it shines and then goes down, glo-o-ory
Rain, it pours and beats the ground, glo-o-ory
Dust, it blows and ends my days, glo-o-ory
Hearts they burn beneath Your gaze, glo-o-ory, glo-o-ory (Refrain)

My heart, my hands, they're kingdom bound, glo-o-ory
Where thorns no longer curse the ground, glo-o-ory
Trim the wick and light the flame, glo-o-ory
Our work, it will not be in vain, glo-o-ory, glo-o-ory (Refrain)

St Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, June 3, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #74

“What then, shall we say to these things?”*

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?³ Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. (Hab. 1:1-3 NRS)

I watched and listened to an African-American Lutheran preacher's Pentecost Sunday sermon yesterday. While she referenced Pentecost, the events of this past week along with experiences of many years, drew her to the above scripture from Habakkuk. Given the massive expressions of anger, hurt, and frustration that have erupted in every community this past week, Habakkuk's lament speaks clearly to that.

I am discovering this week that it is much easier to write about a deadly Covid-19 pandemic than it is to write about the deadly effects of police brutality or systemic racism. We can all identify with the fears of being victims of a virus. We are not all in fear of being victims of police brutality or systemic racism.

I am trying to listen better these days, not just react with the same feelings I have always had, or with the same pronouncements/excuses I have always offered. I speak for no one but myself here, but I must admit my racial ignorance and insensitivity. Of course, I've always been careful not to sound too overtly racist, but I share in the same attitudes of many white people who don't understand we really have deep and serious racial divisions, and how that related to our own privileged positions and advantages.

I fear this will sound once again like empty white confessional rhetoric, but I truly want to live and love all people as Jesus has called us. Jesus' whole life and witness stood against the prevailing attitudes of his day that kept people apart. That kept people down. Or oppressed. Or in their places.

There are terrible things happening in our country and around the world right now. The coronavirus is new. That's why it's called "novel coronavirus." One deadly germ, unchecked, can destroy the whole human race. Racism is not "new," but can also destroy the whole human race, especially when violence erupts. In both cases, it takes a concentrated effort for things to get better. Thankfully, despite the fear and anger all around us, complete destruction is not inevitable.

People can change their interactions with each other to prevent or inhibit viral spread until a vaccine can be developed. People can also change the way they interact with each other socially, economically, racially, and spiritually. Of course, for those most protected, there may not be much

motivation to seek new understanding or new ways to live together (What's the problem?). For those least protected, things can easily fester to the breaking point (There's the problem!).

It's very difficult to write about this, especially when I want to be respectful for people coming at the difficult and painful issue from multiple perspectives and experiences. However, I believe we can all agree, based on evidence, that both a Covid-19 infection in your lungs and 8 minutes 46 seconds of knee bearing down on your neck can permanently take your breath away.

The hard issues of relationships between people will not go away easily or quickly. But amid all the terrible images of violence and destruction I have also seen many signs of hope. I have witnessed inspiring leadership, especially from the black community, who have every reason simply to give into the rage, but who do not. I see police officers who are called to protect and serve, reaching out to with love and respect to peaceful protesters despite being equally condemned for the sins of a brutal minority. I see Christian leaders from every background reminding us of what Jesus' life was all about.

What then shall we say to these things? I know this will sound naïve to those who don't believe or who cannot look to the one who is our source of light and life, but what we shall say to these things is this:

**If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.*

³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:31-39 NRS)

We hang on in hope to these powerful promises at the same time we lament our present human circumstances.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, we look to you today for hope, healing, and opportunities to grow closer during this time of racial distress amid pandemic fears. Help us turn a new corner in listening to each other,

and learning. Give us open minds and hearts that we may imitate the loving ways of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

P.S. Here are a couple of “hope”full songs for today.

If God is For Us (Who can be against?) by the St. Louis Jesuits

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdmgC7_SCgk

My Hope is Built On Nothing Less by Buller, Baller, and Aichele

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3n5w_2IXvuA

and lastly one that is new to me.... *Hope Changes Everything* by NewSong

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jQiuZdOvbM>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, June 4, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #75

More thoughts.

Amos 5:24 *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* (NRSV)

Amos 5:24 *I want you to treat others fairly. So let fair treatment roll on just as a river does! Always do what is right. Let right living flow along like a stream that never runs dry!* (NIRV)

I watched a YouTube sermon from a pastor from our tradition today who dismissed what's happening around us this week as "*drama.*"

Then he talked about what's more important, namely Jesus' mission and ministry. Hmm. Let me think about that.

The catalyst for the recent protests (*drama?*) throughout the United States and in some countries overseas is the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

While most stop short of saying he got what he deserved (meaning if he hadn't been causing a disturbance or trying to pass a counterfeit bill, he'd still be alive), many observe this is part of the terrible effects of institutional racism and police brutality that has been occurring for a long time.

Some say this tragedy could just as easily have happened if George Floyd were white.

But contrast this with Dylan Roof, a young white supremacist who walked into a peaceful Bible study at Emmanuel A.M.E Zion church in Charleston, SC five years ago on June 17, 2015. Roof shot and killed nine people in cold blood, and did not get a knee on his neck. Peacefully incarcerated, they brought him a cheeseburger (look it up). Just saying.

There are a couple of streams of reflection, here. One focuses on the death of George Floyd and the systemic racism that permitted certain police procedures to go to far. And again let me admit I am not speaking about this with authority. I can, however, repeat a comment from a chief of police who said that such a restraining technique under those circumstances should not be allowed.

I also heard other police chiefs interviewed who admit that while the vast majority of officers under their charge do their jobs with integrity, honesty, and fairness, there have always been a few that the system has permitted to exhibit harmful behavior that ultimately hurts everyone. I heard one chief talk about how regrettably the job to protect and serve can also institutionally protect bullies.

And now I hear myself saying, "But what about all those vicious criminals who will pull guns and murder law enforcement officers any chance they get?" That's an important question, but belongs

in a separate discussion. I recognize law enforcement is a hard, impossible, and often thankless job, especially when there is so much lawlessness. The job includes situations and risks that can easily escalate to where actions can get out of control. Regrettable choices can and do get made. I admire all who come into their jobs as police as a calling. We need to support them.

But if you come into the job as a bully, and enjoy your unchecked power to knock heads around and hurt people, or if you come into the job with deep seeded racial animosity or hatred, how that plays out is now much more likely to be exposed. I read an insightful quote by actor Will Smith. *"Racism is not getting worse. It's getting filmed."*

I am grateful for the strong leadership of mayors and police chiefs who both support law enforcement but who also recognize the importance of accountability. It's hard to turn a blind eye excessive force when it's right before you on film.

I am particularly grateful that in our own Wilmington community we are seeing our local police and sheriff departments being such positive role models for working with the community and peaceful protesters. God bless them all and keep them safe so we can all be safe.

The events of this past week are reminding me of opportunities for us Christians to get our hearts in good places for the sake one another and especially in listening carefully to those whom Jesus stands with as our brothers and sisters.

We people of faith simply must support the very kind of justice that is called forth throughout our sacred scriptures. Justice matters. Fairness matters. Reconciliation matters. Peace matters.

Real pain and suffering is not *drama* to be dismissed so we can get back to the comfort of our own blessed relationship with Jesus. Pain and suffering is what connects our shared humanity with Jesus our Lord.

Let us pray:

Bring not only peace to our land, O God, but opportunity for growth in demonstrating love for you and our neighbors. In this time of recognizing our vulnerability to a deadly virus, may we also recognize the damage that has been done by being caught up in sin... sin against you and sin against neighbor. Let us not fear facing these hard truths but be honest about ourselves so that we draw closer to the model you hold before us in Jesus Christ or Lord. We look to you for hope and healing for all illnesses. Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer, in Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. I thought of a couple of justice themed songs, but also want to share this wonderful and hopeful song by Craig Courtney

God Gives Us the Song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GWGC77IGs8>

Let Justice Roll Soteria Ministies, Australia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBhGbtXCBC8>

Let Justice Roll Down Chris Christensen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiZdcDHEd8E>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, June 5, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #76

The thing you can't do without.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.
(Rom. 12:12 ESV)

One of the small books I have returned to from time to time is *All Will Be Well: A Gathering of Healing Prayers*, edited by Lyn Klug. It is a compilation of many cries from the human heart: prayers of joy, woundedness, release, healing, perplexity, hope, fear, anger and love, all infused with a sense of God's unfailing presence.

In reflecting on protests and pandemic, this week, I was drawn to this, particularly one sentence.

*Today I read about a man who slashed his wrists because he lost his hat.
He was old, and of course, they say he was crazy.
I think not.
I think he'd just had all the losses he could take.
He said as much.
His last words were, "O God, now I've lost my hat, too."
I know how he felt.
Every time you turn around, time – with a little help from
your friends – grabs of something else. Something
precious. At least to you.
Hearing. Sight. beauty. Job. House. Even the corner grocery
turns into a parking lot and is lost.
Finally, you lose the thing you can't do without – hope
(that it can get better).
Dear God, when he gets to heaven, let that man find his hat on the gatepost.*
--Elise Maclay:

It's that line about hope that stuck me: *Finally, you lose the thing you can't do without – hope (that it can get better).*

As losses related to the pandemic continue to be felt, many are feeling the loss of hope. (Will this ever be over?) As racial unrest continues, there are few present indicators that things will get better. As divisions between people continue to grow deeper, hope wanes.

For the man in Elise Maclay's verses, losing his hat was "the last straw." He could not take one more loss, and he just gave up.

I wonder how many are on the verge of giving up? How many have lost hope that anything is going to get better. That the pandemic will end. That a vaccine will save us. That reconciliation between people will ever happen. That we will ever understand each other. That people can feel safe. That lawlessness will not overpower peace and security. That leaders can be trusted. That I and my family are going to be okay.

Hope really *is* the thing we cannot do without.

Proverbs says, "Without *vision*, the people perish," (proverbs 29:18) but *vision* and *hope* are not far from each other here. Without *hope*, despair sets in motion all manner of destructive behavior, either against self, or someone else. Or someone else's property. Without *vision*, we can't see what to do next.

What I'm looking for during these difficult days are signs of hope. I'm sure you are too. There is just so much to discourage us. So much rage. So much fear. But even as we begin to understand where this is coming from, (that is, understanding all the *emics ... pand-, syst-, end-*) moving to a better and healthier place where things will get better is no small feat.

(Note to self) This is where I'm supposed to call/invite/challenge everyone to remember the gospel. Remember this gospel of hope. Affirm the gospel of peace and reconciliation through this gospel. And encourage everyone to have hope.

But I keep thinking about the man losing his hat. And people losing their lives. And people losing hope and lashing out. And people giving up. And people of faith about to give up. Christian brothers and sisters picking one side that requires giving up on the other side.

We cannot lose hope. God help us.

Let us pray:

Lord, Jesus Christ, you are our only source of hope and healing. Everything else fails. So with humble and hurting hearts, we turn to you, and beg that we shall not lose hope. Heal us, we pray, and forgive us when we fail to model your generous and all inclusive love. Infuse us with the kind of confidence that generates hope for the future and encouragement in the present. Bless all who look to you for health and healing today. Protect all the peacemakers, and those who desire to make better what we are and who we are. In God's Holy Name we pray. Amen.

For prayer and meditation, here is a most beautiful version of *Miserere Mei, Deus* (Have mercy on me, God from Psalm 51) sung in Latin by Tenebrae Choir at St. Bartholomew the Great Church in London.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3v9unphf0>

I was very touched by this version of *Veni Creator Spiritus* (Come Creator Spirit) done in Gregorian Chant by family called Harpe Dei

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEKuxUOPzk8&feature=youtu.be>

Translation: Come, Holy Ghost, Creator, come from thy bright heav'nly throne; come, take possession of our souls, and make them all thine own. Thou who art called the Paraclete, best gift of God above, the living spring, the living fire, sweet unction and true love. (...) O guide our minds with thy blest light, with love our hearts inflame; and with thy strength, which ne'er decays, confirm our mortal frame. (...) Through thee may we the Father know, through thee th'eternal Son, and thee the Spirit of them both, thrice-blessed three in One.

And here are links to hymns we have sung that speak to us today:

Lord Of All Hopefulness posted by Peter Anderson of a choir in a beautiful church

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-D_aT8CXyc

Lord Of All Hopefulness by Steven Gwilt

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBwK159xwDE>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, June 6, 2020 not by Pastor Mark Opgrand, **but by Pastor Michael Megahan #77**

(Note from Pastor Mark: I happy to offer another Pastor Megahan devotion today. Since this is so closely related to Pentecost Sunday themes, I wanted to share it before we got too far into the Pentecost Season. It's great to have these.)

I heard you. And understood!

"Utterly amazed they asked: 'Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own language?we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongue.'" Acts 2:7-8, 11b (NIV)

(A side note: the Greek word (διάλεκτος) translated as "own language" and "own tongue" is the word from which the English word "dialect" is derived. It is different from the "unknown tongues" Paul speaks about later. At Pentecost, they were hearing, without interpreters, the Good News preached in their own dialects.)

As a missionary in Africa, one of my main responsibilities (and joys) in one area was establishing a house-to-house evangelism program in a new diocese. After visiting every village for over seven years, it came time for us to move to a new call. So, I returned to every village to say good-bye. At the end of one farewell service in a small village, a woman came up to me and said, "Do you remember me?" I had to confess that I did not, for I had visited so many people over such a long time, it was difficult to remember all of them.

She said: "About five years ago, you came to our home to talk to my father. He was a shaman (witchdoctor). You sat outside, in the shade and told him about Jesus. I was inside fixing tea, so you probably never really saw me. But I could hear every word you said, and you were speaking in our dialect.

"My father died. He never accepted Christ. But I listened carefully. You see, I was a prostitute, already had two children and was in danger of getting AIDS. But when I heard you telling my dad about Jesus, I was touched so much about how Jesus really loved me and died for me that I started hoping and praying that Jesus would come into my life. You see, it was the first time I had ever heard about God's love, and you were speaking in my language so I could really understand.

"A few days later, I went to church and talked to the Pastor. I repented, accepted Christ and was baptized. I stopped being a prostitute, started a small business from a loan from the congregation and now am rearing my children to know Christ. If you had not come and told me about God's love in my own language I would probably have died of AIDS and left my children orphans."

At Pentecost, the Church was born and given the Holy Spirit's gifts and power to proclaim the Good News *to every nation in every tongue*: "*...we hear them declaring the wonders of God in*

our own tongue” (Acts 21:1b). If we are silent, if we do not provide the witness in a way and language that people understand, evil will then prevail:

*“Lost in the night do the people yet languish
Longing for morning the darkness to vanquish,
Plaintively heaving a sigh full of anguish
Will not day come soon?
Will not day come soon” (LBW 394).*

Let us pray:

Holy Father, in the Name of Jesus, forgive the Church for being slow in telling the world about Christ. Forgive us for being silent about the Good News to those who are different from us, who have a different language. Through the Holy Spirit, enable me to participate in the great story telling about Jesus in every nation and language so that all people might have life and have it abundantly. Send me or help me to send others. Amen.

P.S. ... and for our hymn/songs today:

Another Great *O Day Full of Grace* by Luther College Nordic Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laMO1EfGpKs>

Lost in the Night performed by St. Olaf Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2_7XUdAabM

Spirit of the Living God Fall Afresh On Me by RVTA Kids

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccaFnRYLTok>

Spirit of the Living God Meredith Andrews

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPks3NQwH28>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Holy Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #78

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-20 NRS)

Holy Trinity Sunday (or should we call it "Holy Heresy" Sunday?)

I remember one hymn from my childhood more than any other. Not Joy to the World. Not Jesus Christ is Risen Today. Not even A Mighty Fortress.

It was "**Holy Holy Holy.**" It was sung at Zion Lutheran in Medford, Oregon far more than any other hymn. That could have been because it was our organist's favorite (I imagine so). It could have been because other favorites are more seasonal and wouldn't be sung throughout the long (what was then called) "Trinity Season".

We sang it a lot. Any part of why I remember that so vividly is that our organist played it slower and with less energy than any other organist I have ever known in my history of the church:

"HoooooIIIIIIlyyyyy, HoooooIIIIIIlyyyyy, HoooooIIIIIIlyyyyy,
Looooorrrrrddddd GaaaaawwwwwdddddalIIIImmmmmmiiiggghhhttyy,
Eaaarrrrryyyy iiiin ttthhheee moorrrrrnnnnniinnnnggg
oooouuuurrrrr soooooonnnnngggg sssshhhaallll rrrrrizzzze totheeeeeee"

You get the picture. The word "*dirge*" comes to mind. I cannot recall when I first heard it played with passion and enthusiasm, but when I did, it became for a favorite hymn like it is for many. I cannot imagine a Holy Trinity Sunday sermon without it, and I happy sing it any other time as well.

"God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity..."

Did you know that Holy Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday in the church year that commemorates a doctrine, that is the teaching of the church that God is a Triune God experienced as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Because it is a teaching, and because we say it is important to believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we also then try to explain what is essentially impossible to explain, or explain well. Then we easily fall into all those analogous pitfalls which have been named "heresy" (false teaching). Nowhere has this become more difficult than when trying to explain the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Some of you know that my late wife Carol Thysell (Ph.D. Chicago) was a religion professor at UNCW and had done much work in the whole area of the history of Christian thought. One of my most touching memories of being with her in final days at the Hospice Care Center nineteen years ago was when, after a long period of deep slumber, she opened her eyes, looked at me and said, *“Explain the Holy Trinity to me.”*

People who knew Carol would be quick to say, *“That sounds like her, always thinking about these deep things even at the end.”*

So what did I say in reply? *“Well, Sweetie, soon enough you’ll be able to explain it to me.”*

I love that sweet memory, because in the end that’s where we all will be. Standing before God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with mystery revealed. Or many not. Either way, it won’t matter. Being with God and reunited with loved ones will be all that matters. Of that, I am quite confident.

Until then, we can *try* to explain the Holy Trinity, but watch out for analogies that can’t go deep enough (like water, ice, vapor, or apple skin, pulp, seeds, or eggshell, white yolk). Don’t make this Holy Heresy Sunday. Instead let that divine mystery remind us all this most amazing relational God who is relational even within God’s own self.

On this Sunday and every Sunday, let us value and celebrate everything that has been revealed to us about this Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who, among many other things creates, redeems and makes us holy.

And let us sing all those good hymns and songs that point us to that mystery (but not in a “dirgey” way).

Let us pray.

Thank you, O God, for making possible knowing you well enough that we can trust you with our whole selves. Bless you for all the ways you have made yourself known to us as the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Help us become so secure in our relationship with you that we can be bold witnesses for faith in you especially during these deeply troubling times. With increased Covid-19 cases, help our health care workers be ready. With racial tensions erupting all over, and exposing so much pain, hurt, and anger, help us find safe ways to move toward health and healing. You know what each one needs this day, Grant us your peace, in Jesus’ Name we pray. Amen.

P.S. Naturally, I’m going to link you to several spirited versions of “Holy Holy Holy.” And I’m going to do something a little different for me. I am going to link you to a satirical conversation about

Holy Trinity heresies, and one that describes the challenges of trying to explain the Holy Trinity. Blessings.

Holy Holy Holy by Second Presbyterian, Memphis Church Choir and Orchestra

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2N40vhA4hh8>

Holy Holy Holy on the mighty Wurlitzer at Sanfillipo Chicago (oh boy hang on for this)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORUundI5UEQ>

Holy Holy Holy Christian choir with piano (nice key changes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCnRYj3IMIQ>

Holy Holy Holy by Anthem Lights. Okay, it's slow, but the harmony is exquisite. Not my old church.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZIKmNlqpVQ>

Holy Holy Holy by Audrey Assad (also slow, but I see now slow is good if sung well)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgHrNNM23p8>

Holy Holy Holy by Shane and Shane (very contemporary)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl6ZkTbUgW4>

and finally, something entirely different...

St. Patrick's Bad Analogies by Lutheran Satire (learn in a funny way about modalism, Arianism partialism)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQLfgaUoQCw>

and a little more ... *Three Minute Theology on the Trinity* (makes a good point)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ra0ASN0d7o>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, June 08, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #79

A Devotion Within a Devotion.

Following Hurricane Florence, Lutheran Disaster Response made available devotional booklets called *"New Every Day: Forty Devotions for Disaster Survivors."* Unlike the more general all purpose *"Christ In Our Home,"* devotionals, "New Every Day" specifically addressed living through a disaster. It was not specific to a hurricane, but any disaster that might affect several people at the same time.

"New Every Day" is well written and was well received. At the time we distributed them, I thought they had recently been written, but actually they were first published in 2005.

I was wrestling with writing my latest devotional this morning when I realized I could use some help. I had used up my Pastor Megahan "specials," and am also dealing a newly diagnosed case of shingles (one "lesser known" side effect is that it is harder to write daily devotionals when you have shingles) so I picked up "New Every Day," I opening randomly to this:

Change and Blessing

"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:29 NIV)

"A life-changing event means an end to former things as well as a new beginning. The story of Jacob in Genesis 32 describes his life-changing encounter with God. Camped one night by the Jabbok River, Jacob was anxious about the next day. He was on his way to meet his brother Esau, whom he had not been or spoken with for many years. During the night, a man came and wrestled with Jacob, leaving his hip out of joint. At the end of the struggle, Jacob realized he has been fighting with God and insisted on a blessing. Jacob was not the same afterwards. His body had been injured, and he adopted a new name, "Israel." His new life also included reconciling with his brother.

You also know struggle and loss. In your journey toward recovery and "a new normal," your wrestling can also lead to blessing. Certainly, things will not be the same again. Yet, just as new plants grow out of an old tree stump, new beginnings will unfold for you. God is at work, bringing you to blessing and new life."

I don't reckon the authors of this devotion were thinking of a global pandemic when they wrote this. Or a mass eruption of the effects of racial division and unrest for decades. Lutheran Disaster Response is most often seen responding to hurricanes, tornados, floods, and fires.

But that image of “wrestling” sure fits today, doesn’t? Wrestling with all the changes that are happening on account of the pandemic, (which shows no signs of letting up). And wrestling with a unprecedented response to racial injustice (which to many, feels “different” this time).

“Your wrestling can also lead to blessing.” I like that, and I am glad we have Jacob’s experience in the scriptures as our guide.

Do you remember one of the best parts of that story? It was when the two estranged brothers reconciled. Years earlier Jacob had betrayed and swindled his brother Esau. At their meeting years later, Jacob feared Esau would kill them all. But what we saw was the power of God at work in the lives of both brothers who were so different from each other (they even looked completely different (Genesis 27:11).

After Jacob wrestled with God, and when he met his brother, here’s what happened: ⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (Gen. 33:4 NRS)

Forgiveness. Healing. Reconciliation.

With the help of God (even wrestling with God), it can happen in our time as well.

Let us pray:

When Jacob wrestled with you, O God, he came out a different person. As we wrestle with so many hard things these days, we pray we will come out better persons, persons through whom reconciliation with our brothers and sisters can happen. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. I happened on this first piece by accident but was drawn to it as much as first by seeing choir and orchestra wearing masks. This was the first choir I had seen do this, maybe dispelling the notion that singing through a mask will sound muted. Be sure to click the closed captioning so you can see the translation from German to English. This is beautiful.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=44&v=BC-KF89S0No&feature=emb_logo

It Is Well With My Soul is one of those beautiful inspiring songs...written after a time of tragedy and wrestling with God. I can hear Jacob and Esau singing this:

It Is Well With My Soul by TenTwo Six Nashville Group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDIJz6zzHNU>

Is Is Well by Audrey Assad

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY5o9mP22V0>

St. Paul's In Your Home Devotional for Tuesday, June 9, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #80

"Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." (1 Sam. 7:12 NRS)

"Here I raise my Ebenezer..."

There is a famous hymn about this. Well, not entirely about that one lyric. It is that lyric, however, which is probably the most sung lyric in history where few people know its meaning or context.

"Here I raise my ... "Eb-en-ez-er, higher to Thy help I've come."

The hymn is *"Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing."* I cannot recall the number of times over the years, when for fun, I've asked those who have just sung the hymn: "Who can tell me 'What is an Ebenezer?'" Few hands go up, even among those who once heard what it meant. Ebenezer is not one of our everyday church words, and it comes right in the middle of such rich imagery, that it is not immediately grasped when we sing it. That may be why there have been some modifications. Consider the original lyrics with our hymnal version in bold italics.

Come, Thou fount of every blessing, ***(Come, thou Fount of ev'ry blessing,)***
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace, ***(Tune my heart to sing thy grace)***
Streams of mercy, never ceasing, ***(Streams of mercy, never ceasing,)***
Call for songs of loudest praise. ***(Call for songs of loudest praise.)***
Teach me some melodious sonnet ***(While the hope of endless glory)***
sung by flaming tongues above ***(Fills my heart with joy and love)***
raise the mount I'm fixed upon it, ***(Teach me ever to adore thee;)***
mount of Gods redeeming Love. ***(May I still thy goodness prove.)***

The lyrics are mostly the same, though the song is a bit more accessible without *the melodious sonnet, flaming tongues, and mounts.*

Verse two comes with fewer alterations.

Here I raise my Ebenezer, ***(Here I raise my Ebenezer):***
Hither by Thy help I've come, ***("Hither by thy help I've come";)***
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, ***(And I hope, by thy good pleasure,)***
Safely to arrive at home. ***(Safely to arrive at home.)***
Jesus sought me when a stranger, ***(Jesus sought me when a stranger,)***
Wandering from the throne of God, ***(Wand'ring from the fold of God)***
He, to rescue me from danger, ***(He, to rescue me from danger,)***
bought me with His precious blood. ***(Interposed his precious blood.)***

Except for *"interposed"* instead of *"bought me"* these versions are identical. I wonder if anyone had thought of a substitute for *"Eb-en-e-zer."* Rhymes with....?

Continuing....

Oh, to grace how great a debtor **(Oh, to grace how great a debtor)**
Daily I'm constrained to be, **(Daily I'm constrained to be)**
Let thy goodness like a fetter **(Let that grace now like a fetter)**
Bind my wandering heart to Thee: **(Bind my wand'ring heart to thee.)**
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, **(Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it)**
Prone to leave the God I love. **(Prone to leave the God I love.)**
Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it, **(Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it;)**
Seal it for Thy courts above. **(Seal it for thy courts above.)**
Text: Robert Robinson, 1735-1790, alt.

The third verse also has little variation. We have “*grace like a fetter*” instead of “*goodness like a fetter*.” If something binds us to God, *grace* may be a stronger word than *goodness*. Mostly the entire hymn is a beautiful prayer to God, thanking God for rescuing us through Jesus Christ. It is a prayer for God to hold us close.

Within this context, raising the Ebenezer makes sense, harkening back to that time in Israel’s history when a great victory was won, and that place of victory was marked with a special stone. *Eben* and *Ezer* combines two Hebrew words for “help” and “stone.” “Ebenezer.” Therefore, whenever God’s grace in our lives happens in a clear and identifiable way, that is essentially a milestone we can raise and celebrate.

So why all this talk about an old hymn and an *Ebenezer* when we still have a big pandemic and all this terrible racial unrest all around us?

First, music is something that can unite us, especially when music or hymns is in the form of a prayer we can all pray together.

Second, when there is a breakthrough with Covid-19, I am sure we will be raising our Ebenezers, celebrating that milestone.

And third, there is a wonderful honesty in this song that can when earnestly and confessionally sung, can be a breakthrough as people in conflict with each other can find peace in God and with each other.

Let us pray:

O God, we long to raise our Ebenezers as we look for breakthroughs in both virus research and in restoring human relationships. Bind our wayward and wandering hearts to you so we can have the courage to stand with and for each other, whether it be by practicing safe health practices, or by distancing ourselves from those practices that have kept us apart. Bless all the healers, and all who protect and serve. Take our hearts, Lord. In Jesus Name.

P.S. You know what song is coming. What struck me in my search is how this song is as beautiful when sung by a big choir or with solo or few voices. I enjoyed them all. Hope you will too. Please sing and pray along with them.

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LWyBcCH7Wg>

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing by Allred

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqznmLswaTQ>

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing by Fiddlesticks (a capella)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qx61UO8F5Kc>

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing Legato Vocal Ensemble by Antonia Wilson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZ1Gkl5ET5w>

Metropolitan Baptist Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApJbSqver0o>

Oakwood Aeolian Alumni Choir performed at wedding

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_Hxc2j775c

Morgan State University Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vt_PHXu1dY0

California Baptist University Choir and Orchestra (with *Holy Holy Holy* at end)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrF0UzdyPOM>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, June 10, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #81

In Praise of Pets. Part One... Dogs.

A month ago, I had a working title for an unwritten devotion called *"The Dogs Just Don't Get It. It's a Pandemic."* This was from observing that our two just didn't seem to notice anything was different during those ever-changing days. Their routines were largely interrupted. As time has gone on, I have appreciated how they have carried on like nothing is the matter. No matter what else is troubling the world, I always come home to a warm welcome (and a "where's dinner?").

I was late into having pets. It was not until *"Possum,"* our perfect little now 14-year-old terrier mix "rescue" came into our lives, that I learned just how much of a *"dog person"* I am. Seven years ago and since then, that self-understanding has become regularly challenged by *"Chessie,"* an *"all the way"* headstrong Yorkie.

In all the best ways, the gift of these two has really been life changing, and I more deeply understand the impact our pets have on our lives, and how, when they pass on, it is a terrible loss for all who have been blessed by them. We love our dogs.

In time of pandemic and social and political unrest and division, I have thought about how people are also divided in respect to dogs and cats. There are *"dog people,"* and there are *"cat people,"* (and yeah, I know, sometimes both *"dog and cat people"*...). But generally, people favor one animal over the other. Dog people are attracted to dogs. Cat people to cats. Dog people love being around dogs (including other people's dogs, who are eager for their interest). Cat people love being around cats (including other people's... wait how would you know? Cats don't usually socialize that way).

Mostly, we *dog* or **cat people** don't quite "get" the other.

Years ago at Holden Village I met a very creative writer named Herb Brokering. He wrote lots of books, including a couple of really cute devotionals called *Dog Psalms: Prayers My Dogs Have Taught Me*, and *Cat Psalms: Prayers My Cats Have Taught Me*. I confess I didn't purchase the *"cat one"* for a long time (why would I?) until pastorally I realized I need to understand *"cat people"* better. Brokering is obviously both *"Dog Person"* and *"Cat Person."*

So let me share a *"Dog Psalm"* and Herb Brokering prayer today, and tomorrow (so I won't hear cries of "What about the cats?") I'll share a *"Cat Psalm"*. Here's a *"Dog Psalm and Prayer"* from Herb Brokering. It sure describes our dogs.

I am dog.

I believe in unconditional love.

I do not settle for infatuation or puppy love.
I believe in true love to the end.
I am a life-long lover who will lie at your feet,
on the bed,
by your chair,
at your side.
I am dog.

I insist on your love.
I will stay at the grave of a lover until my end.
I believe in commitment.
When we have chosen each other,
I will be there for you, with plenty.
Out of my heart flows life and love.

You fill my life with abundance
and I am grateful.
Unconditional love is the highest gift.
I am committed to love.

God,

You gave me your love before I met you. You do not hold back or tease me with what you give. I am learning the strength of your unconditional love. You have shown me your commitment throughout my life; you have committed to me beyond this life. You have promised me love I cannot comprehend. You have made me a committed believer in commitment. Amen.

P.S. For songs today I admit considering “*How Much Is That Doggie in the Window*,” but settled for John Rutter’s great “*All Things Bright and Beautiful*” and the popular oldie “*Bless the Beasts and the Children*.” And lastly, a hymn from the “*Commitment*” section of our Hymnal, “*God is Here*.” (God spelled backwards... is... I know you know that one).

All Things Bright and Beautiful, John Rutter Directing
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjbktnTuV30>

All Things Bright and Beautiful by National Taiwanese University Chorus
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVSf5QISmA8>

All Things Bright and Beautiful by International Mezzo Soprano Katherine Jenkins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2ECKqYLSBs>

All Things Bright and Beautiful by Michael Lining Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txmpkFSoWuo>

Bless the Beasts and the Children... Karen Carpenter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhR36gV6vW4>

God is Here First Plymouth Lincoln Nebraska

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FreZ4LmhWk>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, June 11, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #82

In Praise of Pets. Part Two... Cats.

What I did not say yesterday "In Praise of Dogs" is that I once lived in a house with fifteen cats. I had two roommates and they had taken in a few strays. Two of the strays had litters of six kittens at the same time, so do the math. That experience did not convert me into a cat person.

Eventually they all found good homes, but what I can't forget during that time was cats everywhere. Everywhere. Maybe if it had been only one...

Herb Brokering's "*Cat Psalms: Prayers My Cats Have Taught Me*" helped me understand *Cats* and *Cat People* a little more. But so did the musical *Cats*, especially the great version I once saw from the fifth row when it played in Chicago. Not enough to convert, but enough to appreciate.

Perhaps this is something we can apply to the many differences between people and various perspectives these days. You may be a *Cat Person* and I may be a *Dog Person*, but we can both appreciate how we are all gifts from God and wonderfully made.

I am happy now to share a *Cat Psalm* and its Herb Brokering prayer, chosen in part because it reminds me of a cat story Pastor Jonathan once told us, and partly because of how it contrasts with yesterday's *Dog Psalm*.

I lie in their way.

They walk around me. I sleep, and they carefully step over my body.

They do not harm me when I am most vulnerable.

I lie in the open,

where they come and go.

I am a member of the family.

I let them know when I am there.

I put myself in their way;

I sleep where they walk,

lie where they would sit.

I put myself under their feet;

and they keep me from harming me.

I lie in their way so they will know I am here,

so they will be careful of me.

They know I trust them;

they step over me.

Let us pray:

O God, my soul lies down in the way of those whom I trust. They know I am here; they step over me, around me—not on me. My soul is at peace in heavy traffic of friends. I will not lie in the way of those who would do me harm. I find places where my soul can rest and not be harmed. My friends know I am here. They know my need for rest; they know I need to be among them but at peace. They protect me. My soul finds rest in the open, in the presence of those who love me. I close my eyes where I will not be harmed. Dear God, notice me; I lie down in your presence, in your way. Dear God, I am here. Amen.

P.S. For music, I admit wondering about including “*Old Deuteronomy*” from “*Cats*,” but the song isn’t about the Bible so... the next best thing may be “*His Eye Is On the Sparrow*.” Granted, the song is not about a cat per se, or sung from a cat’s perspective, but it does affirm God looking out for all God’s creatures. The last song I just found and was new to me but quite nice, “*God’s Way is the Best Way*”.

“His Eye is On the Sparrow” Fountainview Academy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBosJyhPcvA>

“His Eye is On the Sparrow” SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CS5vKFSPtM>

“His Eye is On the Sparrow” Mississippi Children’s Chorus

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_8pUqXADTE

“His Eye is On the Sparrow” Sounds Like Rain

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPI7WbPyoM8>

“*God’s way is the Best Way*” by Into the Light

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jA3AjkW5OXM>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, June 12, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #84

A Letter to the Editor.

¹³ *I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink;* (3 Jn. 1:13 NRS)

Dear *St. Paul's In Your Home* Editor,

I am writing to you about the last two devotionals you published, "*In Praise of Pets: Part: One. Dogs*" and "*In Praise of Pets: Part Two. Cats.*" It is with great dismay that I recognize the bias of your writer, Pastor Mark Opgrand. Clearly, he is a dog person. The "*Dog Psalm*" completely praised dogs, while the cat psalm, while accurate, understated the gift of God's wonderful cats. But that's not the worst part.

Pastor Mark, as I hear he likes to be called, spoke of "*Dog Persons*" and "*Cat Persons*," but WHAT ABOUT all the *other pets*? What about pet fish, birds, gerbils, hamsters, ferrets, turtles, and snakes? What about those unable to have warm- OR cold-blooded pets because of allergies, but love their hypoallergenic stuffed animals just as much? What about the "*Iguana Persons*?" NOT ONE WORD about them!

I believe your writer's myopic dog love has warped his ability to see things from other pet lovers' perspectives. And while I am grateful for his congregation adding some balance to pastoral ministry by calling a bonified "cat person," as senior pastor, if Pastor Mark wants to minister to the rest of us, he must clearly listen to all our WHAT ABOUTS. And learn.

I, for one, have had it. Please cancel my free prescription,

Signed,

Concerned Pet Person.

A response from the writer, Pastor Mark Opgrand

Dear Concerned Pet Person,

Thank you for honestly sharing your feelings. I actually do worry about the "*What Abouts?*" a lot.

If it would help, I would tell you about the only "pets" my mother would let me have as a child. They were turtles I named "*Pete*" and "*Repeat*." Everything "*Pete*" did, "*Repeat*" would repeat. Except "*Repeat*" died first, then "*Pete*" repeated. But honestly, we just weren't that close, so I admit I am not a "*Turtle Person*" either, except when the baby turtles hatch at the beach. Awww...

And here I go again, trying to interject humor which deflects us away from the heartfelt issues you raised, beginning with WHAT ABOUT...? Sorry. I really wasn't trying to leave anybody out. I know

people come from a wide variety of life experiences and dispositions that contribute to us being one way or another.... and every way in between. There are many varieties of persons, just as there are many varieties of pets.

Your reaction underscores that people have deep feelings about their pets (and probably lots of other issues as well). Even though we are not all in the same place, we need to listen and learn from each other. It's always easier to relate to someone with whom we share common interests, background, convictions, faith, and devotion to our beloved pets (whatever those pets may be.)

That said, one of the blessings that comes from belonging to God is that what we have in common is far more important than whatever separates us. We have a wonderful God who made us all. I hope we can rejoice over that. Since you signed your letter anonymously as "*Concerned Pet Person*," we won't know who you are to take you off the free daily devotional list. If they don't *delight*, just *delete*. Blessings.

Let us pray: *We thank you O God for all the creatures that you have made, and especially those you have given to us to care for and love. We pray that the persons we are -- will not limit us from getting to know and even befriending others "not like" us. Shape us with an identity that goes being a "Dog Person," "Cat Person," or "Iguana Person" to seeing ourselves most of all as **God's Persons**, beloved by God and given to each other to know and love. In Jesus Name. Amen.*

P.S The following songs seem about right, even though "*Meet in the Middle*" leans toward the secular side. Home Free is one of the great acapella vocal bands, so perhaps, even if secular, their wonderful harmony can remind us of the harmony God seeks in our lives together. Enjoy.

Everything is Beautiful by Ray Stevens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQVRJlyGDN8>

Blessed Be The Tie That Binds by Fountainview Academy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3I4cO9CCSM>

Blessed Be The Tie That Binds by unknown

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6IzTJfWdmk>

Meet In the Middle by Home Free

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vb6m40X12Vk>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, June 13, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #84

Another Insightful Buechner Thought. This time on "Peace."

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (Rom. 5:1 NRS)

The above verse is one of our anchor verses on faith and will be read tomorrow during our worship service as part of our second lesson. Because of all the turmoil and conflict around us these days, I have been thinking most about that part of the verse that says *we have peace with God*.

It would be important to note that *peace* here, is said to be *with God*, which might be different than how we otherwise think of peace between peoples. It's worth pondering, especially since we are so regularly praying for peace during these troubled times.

Frederick Buechner, in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, has a very compelling insight on peace when he writes:

*"Peace has come to mean the time when there aren't any wars or even when there aren't any major war. Beggars can't be choosers; we'd most of us settle for that. But in Hebrew **peace, shalom**, means fullness, means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself.*

One of the titles by which Jesus is known is Prince of Peace, and he used the word himself in what seem at first glance to be two radically contradictory utterances. On one occasion he said to the disciples, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matthew 19:34) and later on, the last time they ate together, he said to them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." (John 14:27)

*The contradiction is resolved when you realize that **for Jesus peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the presence of love.**"*

"For Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love."

Wow. Reading this was a real "aha" moment for me. So often *peace* in practical terms is just the absence of *war*... or the absence of *conflict*... or the absence of *enmity*. Or simply "cease fire." *Peace* as *Shalom* takes this to a whole different level, and *peace* as the *presence of love*, even more so.

When having peace is measured by the absence of struggle, *peacekeepers* are about keeping people under control. When peace is about the presence of love, people are freed for the fullness of *shalom*. In Jesus' name, we are freed to become *peace-makers*.

Peace with God, then, as Paul describes in Romans, affirms the *presence of love* in our relationship with God. God has chosen through Jesus Christ, not to bring the absence of war by any means necessary, but to bring the *presence of love*, though the cross of Christ!

Let us pray:

O God, so often when we pray for peace we think of peace as absence of conflict. Help us to see your peace as the presence of love. We still pray for the absence of conflict, but with space which gives us all opportunity to practice the life transforming love of Christ. Bless our world, our nation, and all your beloved children. Give your peace especially for those who are working so hard to make us well. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. Peace songs come to mind. Here are a few. And one at the end which is "something else!!"

Peace in Christ by Journey Day

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaKkItHsDBc>

Peace in Christ by Lucca

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-ns4IQMqtE>

Peace in Christ by 5 year old Claire Crosby and her Dad (stunning!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Waitmz6C100>

May the Peace of Christ Go With You by Kevin Boese

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JoOtrz4nRU>

I've Got Peace Like A River by St. John's Children's Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yfl38ZJAQw>

I've Got Peace Like A River by Little Sunshine Kids

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AG_zUHVXwFI

I've Got Peace Like A River by Loveland High School Chorus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9mJHhlap-Q>

Peace is Flowing Like A River by Carey Landrey

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOG4KpRcK0Y>

and.... it doesn't have *peace* or *love* in the title, but it reflects the outcome of having this kind of peace, the great ***Exultate Jubilate*** (Shout for Joy) by **Mozart** sung by the incredible **Regula Muelemann** (classical lovers rejoice!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_fa-Ls4RXk&list=RDo_fa-Ls4RXk&start_radio=1

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, June 14, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #85

1 Corinthians 12:4-6 ⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

Music is the language of the soul.

The first thing you see when you go through the doors of Phoenix, Arizona's *Musical Instrument Museum* are these words. *Music is the language of the soul.* If you didn't understand what that meant upon arrival you will hours later when you depart.

The *MIM* is a unique museum that displays over 15,000 instruments from every corner of the world organized according to country of origin. Each of the hundreds of display areas has continuously playing videos of the instruments being played. The headset you are wearing connects to each presentation as you draw close.

The first time I visited, I expected to be impressed. What I did not expect was to be so deeply moved, often to tears, as I discovered how this was such a deeply spiritual experience.

My first visit was long before a global pandemic, and before the level of racial oriented eruptions we are seeing today. Even so, images regularly surrounded us of a world that at war, filled with strife, and one with much sickness and poverty, and where so many people have so little.

Regardless of place or circumstance, however, in every culture makes music. Every culture has created varieties of instruments that make rhythm, create sounds with strings or reeds, or by means where buzzed vibrations pass through tubes.

In our lifetimes, we have likely seen many instruments, but nowhere as many as are on display as at the *MIM*. Before the *MIM*, I had no idea there exist so many instruments and sounds and melodies.

Sampling the sounds of these 15,000 instruments before my eyes and ears, my own little musical world really opened up, not only in respect to sheer numbers of instruments but also to what music means to the world ... and spiritually speaking, how it points to a wonderful God who put into the hearts of people the means to create music and experience this kind of joy.

That's the word. ***Joy.***

There is so much joy as people create things that make rhythm and sounds. It may not start out that way as a child or student learns to play something or first struggles to hit the right notes or make a nice sound...but as people work at this... as people make melody and play together... and sing together... and dance together...this truly becomes a joyful part of life.

Maybe, just maybe...this is also part of how God is working in the world to bring people together. With all their gifts.

I think of Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians...

1 Corinthians 12:4-6 ⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. (and may I add, there are varieties of instruments... and there are varieties among those who play these instruments ... but the same God who puts into the heart of people to make music...and be in harmony with each other).

Not all would see it this way. Those who embrace disharmony... or dissonance... might rather make instruments of destruction: "That flute would make an even better stake or arrow. Why waste brass on a trumpet when it can become a perfectly good bullet..."

But when we make music and make music together...we are not thinking about killing each other... we want to be in harmony...we want to keep the beat together...singing together is not shouting at each other. We can't be at war when we're just in the band. Swords into saxophones? That's the idea.

As we listen to and learn each other's music, we also grow a deeper appreciation of our diverse cultures and the amazing creativity within these cultures. This is a great gift of God to be celebrated and enjoyed. Let's make some music together and see if that helps with the deeper conversations.

Let us pray:

Thank you, God, for the wonderful gift of music and all its varieties. Thank you for how it powerfully and wonderfully connects us with each other. Help us appreciate the great variety of sounds and rhythms, melodies, harmonies, and arrangements. Help us through music learn to appreciate our differences and bring a deeper harmony to this world. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. I'm doing to take the P.S. a little different direction today. Since I've written of the MIM, the first link is a short introduction to the museum. The second link is the great hymn: *When In Our Music God is Glorified*. *The Trumpet Sounds the Angels Sing* also highlights instrumental music and praise. The next links are simply to a variety of pieces from different cultures and with different instruments. A couple may surprise you. **EnJOY!!**

MIM overview

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkeZiVT4IKo>

When In Our Music God is Glorified by Highlands UMC

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43f135yo11c>

The Trumpet Sounds the Angels Sing

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NKgLQY7kH0&list=RD5NKgLQY7kH0&start_radio=1

Sona Jobarteh Jarabi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oToZfPGMMBY>

Psalm 104 in Ancient Hebrew

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UABwgW9Sg>

Anoushka Shankar plays 'Pancham Se Gara'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CnhcGpmH9Y>

Scottish tribal pipes & drums band Clanadonia playing "Ya Bassa" during St Andrew's Day event 2019

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwWmcMz0ZVk>

PODEROSA AAINJALA - 150 TAMBORES I. noted 78,473,115 views here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Pq8vOVbvzs>

Immanuel Séjourné: Attraction (short version) performed by Christoph Sietzen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ix-QW-BShPY>

Sugar Plum Fairy by Tchaikovsky - GlassDuo LIVE (glass harp)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdoTdG_VNV4

Wintergatan - Marble Machine (music instrument using 2000 marbles)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvUU8joBb1Q>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, June 15, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #86

How Great Thou Art.

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;

² I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.

³ On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.

⁴ All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth.

*⁵ They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for **great is the glory of the LORD.***

(Ps. 138:1-5 NRS)

How Great Thou Art. I didn't grow up singing this hymn. If it wasn't in the old red hymnal in church (which it wasn't), we didn't sing it. Additionally, I didn't grow up listening to music on the radio (imagine that). And I didn't live in the south (except southern Oregon).

So it wasn't until I interned in campus ministry at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas (in the 1970's) that I experienced this song as such a powerful witness to the greatness of God. Where that happened was not at church, but at a "Kicker Dancing" venue. I didn't know "Kicker Dancing" either. It's basically a kind of country western dancing at a club with a Texas swing band.

Why I remember "*How Great Thou Art*" so well is because of Jess DeMaine and his band. Jess had recently returned to performing after a near fatal car accident a year earlier, and he had been in rehab for many months before he could return to the stage. He had a bad limp, but boy could he sing, and his witness to the awesome power and wonder of God was always expressed through his final song of the evening, "*How Great Thou Art.*" He always ended with this song. Not just a song. But praise to the one who had delivered him and restored his life. It was heartfelt and deeply moving.

I was reminded of Jess DeMaine recently as I viewed a service from another old Texas pastor friend. They sang "*How Great Thou Art.*" I hadn't thought of Jess DeMaine for over forty years. I remembered him singing the song, and I also recalled that he had been Lutheran.

I googled Jess DeMaine. What I learned is that he is still living (probably 80 years old now); his real name is Fred Frieling, Jr.; he's in the Texas Swing Hall of Fame; he has several recordings as singer and songwriter; and he's been active in his local Lutheran church for many years, leading the H.I.S. Band (Hearts in Spirit). Clearly, he's touched a lot of hearts through his music and witness to the gospel.

God continues to work through all sorts of people touching many lives in often unexpected ways. *How Great Thou Art* is a wonderful expression of this.

Let us pray.

Thank you, God for all the ways you show your greatness as you work through your people. Thanks again for music, and for ways music helps us witness and share your gospel. Bless those who look to you today for hope and healing. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. Well, you know I'm going to share some "How Great Thou Art" videos. I have a few stunners. I wish I had a link to Jess DeMaine singing it, but I do have one I found that he composed that is also a great witness for faith. The rest, arranged differently, showcase the powerful melody and lyrics. There are so many great versions, I couldn't help but include many. If How Great Thou Art is a hymn you love, you will be glad you spent some time linking to these versions. I'd love to know if you have a favorite among these.

Jess DeMaine original song "Just Be Still." Part of Reformation Celebration

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAG3mdXLYSk>

How Great Thou Art by Home Free

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXQpDDcrN-w>

How Great Thou Art by Elenyi Music (English and Russian)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ9lYwA9zVk>

How Great Thou Art Eclipse 6

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6kKW2M4TfE>

How Great Thou Art by Anthem Lights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48i4l1715uc>

How Great Thou Art by Elvis Presley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlfcvUtUoOM>

How Great Thou Art Martin McBride

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W16Aad19z4>

How Great Thou Art Carrie Underwood and Vince Gill

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyLWjawgzlw>

How Great Thou Art by Lauren Daigle (acoustic)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BL06fxHPVo>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, June 16,2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #87

You can't make an old friend.

Someone recently shared with me a wonderful surprise that happened to her. The doorbell rang, and on the other side of the screen was a dear old friend she had lost touch with and hadn't seen in over fifteen years. The old friend, who was moving to the area, took a chance and went to her friend's last known address.

It was a great reunion, affirming the joy of friendship, and that indeed, you can't make an old friend. That prompted me to remember a great quote from the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg:

It is great to have friends when we were young, but indeed it is still more so when we are getting old. When we are young, friends, are, like everything else, a matter of course. In the old days, we know what it means to have them. Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), Composer

This resonates with a favorite thought about friendship from C.S. Lewis, referring to Jesus describing friendship in John's gospel.

In friendship... we think we have chosen our peers. In reality a few years difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another... the accident of a topic being raised at a first meeting – any of these chances might have kept us apart.

But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christian friends, "You have not chosen on another, but I have chosen you for one another.

The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others. C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), Author

In these past months, I've also been happy to hear from some old friends. What's great about an old friend is that you have many shared memories you don't have with newer friends. Sharing these old stories might bore a newer friend to distraction, but an old friend loves remembering them with you.

Whether it's new or old, friendship is a wonderful gift. To be valued and cared about by another person is something quite wonderful. Whether it's a simple nice acquaintance or a deep soul sister or brother, friendship is something that really makes life worth living.

As we get older, the experience of losing old friends to death also increases. I remember funerals where it was said about low attendance: "She outlived all her friends."

Losing people, however, isn't always related to old age. I remember going to a 20th high school reunion and being shocked at how many classmates had already died. I would not have been so shocked at a 50th high school reunion.

These uncertain days present reminders to let people know how much you are thinking about them. It is good to be in touch with an old friend and share some memories with them.

It is also good to remember to thank God for all the dear newer people God has put into our lives, and without whom, our lives would be much poorer. Blessings.

Let us pray:

We thank you, O God, for the gift of friendship, for all those special people in our lives who are precious to us. For the old friends, with whom we share many memories. For newer friends, and friends not yet made, we ask your blessing, that your work is reflected among us. We pray that barriers between your peoples will come down so that we can experience the kind of friendship described and lived by Jesus our Lord. Bless those who care for all your children. In Jesus Name. Amen.

What a Friend We Have In Jesus Chris Rice

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csoLvZB_MdA

What A Friend Alan Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCV5t8wRBI8>

What A Friend Bird Youmans

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPNmtqD7fMs>

You've Got a Friend Randy Newman Chris Thile

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRBIMTK73wY>

You've Got a Friend In Me by Claire Ryan and Dad

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukD8zj6ngVY>

You've Got a Friend by Casey Abrams and Scott Bradlee

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzmliku-gZk>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, June 17, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #88

All Viruses Matter.

² When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. ³ The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean. ⁴ But if the spot is white in the skin of his body, and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall confine the diseased person for seven days. ⁵ The priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if he sees that the disease is checked and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall confine him seven days more. ⁶ The priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the disease has abated and the disease has not spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption; and he shall wash his clothes and be clean. (Lev. 13:2-6 NRS)

The above passage is the first location in scripture where *disease* is discussed. It's further mentioned in 112 verses. The Israelites approach sounds quite familiar in its approach. Examination. Observation. Evaluation. Diagnosis. Quarantine. Clean Bill of Health. The priests were the medical community back then, charged with maintaining the health of the entire community. Their laws (understood as gifts from God) were a lot like today's guidelines for public health safety.

Details regarding the origins of disease, however, were unknown. There are no words for "*germs*" or "*viruses*" or "*bacteria*" in the Bible. I could not find "*cough*," though I did find "*sneeze*" twice. The prophet Elisha healed a child who "*sneezed*" seven times. (2 Kings 4:35).

In so many ways this ancient world seems older than ancient. It was another world, with an entirely different normal than ours. What is the same is then, as now, is that people became sick. Some got well. Others didn't.

Throughout the millennia, our understanding of disease has evolved beyond adequate description. Compared to Old Testament times, we are light years ahead. Even so, as we are observing now with the deadly coronavirus, there is much modern science and medicine still does not know. What we know for sure is that even now many are getting or will get sick. Some will get well. Other's won't.

Because of all the attention on Covid 19, I am reading that we are seeing a spiking of other deadly diseases, like measles, especially where vaccinations are not happening. This comes as a serious warning. Covid-19 matters, but it is also true that "all viruses matter."

All viruses matter being true, this is not to suggest that all medical work now be equally distributed between all diseases.

That's because Covid-19 is presently our greatest disease threat, and not taken seriously or left untreated, will impact and severely transform life on this planet. The sheer number of infections and deaths will affect everyone, and everyone's economy. So, while all viruses matter, there is an urgency about Covid-19 that makes it a priority that must be addressed.

The Bible can offer inspiration and encouragement here. From earliest times, the health of the whole community was vastly important to God and his chosen people. God's guidelines (laws) were given for their protection. Modern medicine affirms this when looking at all the dietary laws. For example, it has been recognized that "unclean" animals were those which posed greater health risks than other foods. The guidelines protected them.

In Jesus, we also see in the ministry of a God who is personally invested in the health of his children. Jesus showed compassion on those who suffered, and he regularly healed the sick. He also enabled the disciples to do that work as well.

In today's world, I have observed how many Christian health care workers recognize their work not only as a job, but as a calling from God. What a blessing this is for all of us to be served by them. This very much relates to God's desire for us to be a healthy community. Good health matters to God. Good health in every way matters to God.

Let us pray.

O God. So many things matter in today's fragile world. Remind us each day to pray for good and restored health. For healing between peoples. For paying attention to what is most important right now in order for healing to happen. Bless all those who work for the health of the whole world, and all who look to you for hope and every kind of healing. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. Healing emphasis songs today:

Healer of our Every Ill by Marty Haugen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwBewCxunL0>

CHORUS: Healer of our every ill, Light of each tomorrow, give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.

You who know our fears and sadness, grace us with your peace and gladness. Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. CHORUS.

In the pain and joy beholding, how your grace is still unfolding, give us all your vision, God of love. CHORUS.

Your Labor Is Not In Vain... Porter's Gate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPj3Kf7Dorw>

Healing Prayers by Marty Haugen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRtuWPYTU2o>

God So Loved The World by We the Kingdom

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jasoo3UDSwY>

Healer of our Every Ill St. Brendan Church

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_CHcM2EmLs

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, June 18, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #89

Sixteen Friends walk into a bar....

This sounds like the beginning of a sick joke. Sick is right, but it's no joke.

Sixteen friends went to a crowded bar recently where no one wore masks to celebrate a birthday. All sixteen got sick, as well as many others at the same bar that night. When asked why they went, they said things like this:

"Out of sight, out of mind. We didn't know anybody who had gotten sick personally. The governor, the mayor, everybody says it's fine. We go out. It's a friend's birthday. It was a mistake. Now I feel foolish. It's too soon. We got super sick almost immediately... within days. We feel foolish, pushing it..."

Their interviewer, who also had recovered from Covid-19 said, "Now you know why converts make the best preachers."

We've heard many similar testimonials from people who ignored warnings or had not taken precautions to prevent or reduce exposure to infection. Now converted, they all urge precaution and taking as much care as possible.

This kind of wisdom is expressed by Jesus talking about being prepared for the coming kingdom of God.

³⁹ *"But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."* (Lk. 12:39-40 NRS)

I know this is not about being warned about the coronavirus, but it does illustrate how, if we had known certain things ahead of time, we might have altered our behavior.

With the virus, we know enough to adopt safer practices that make a difference in the health of the community. Wearing masks makes a difference, and doing this, we show everyone how much we care about them. It's for their protection even more than ours.

Perhaps it will still take more "converts" sharing their "if we had only known" or "if we had only believed" stories to make an impact on people's choices about where they go or what they do. And while this sounds like we have to shut ourselves off from everything or everyone or deny ourselves from those things we enjoy, that's not the case.

Adopting safer health practices is not an all or nothing proposition. It's not "stay at home" versus "sneeze freely." It's caring enough in the name of Jesus to think about others and do whatever you can to protect them.

Sixteen friends attending a birthday party at a bar and getting sick evidently now completely agree with that, even though I'm sure someone else will cite some statistics to refute these "converts" and try to persuade others simply not to worry and do whatever you want.

We'll see. That's guaranteed.

Let us pray.

We thank you, O God for so sharing the love of Jesus with us so that we can see beyond ourselves and care for the lives of others. We confess we are tired of the way things are now, and we so wish things could just be the way they were, where we could go out and have fun and not worry about getting sick or getting everyone sick all around us. We are bold, therefore, to pray for healing, for a cure from Covid-19 and effective research to prevent the next outbreak or whatever interferes with our lives. Remind us always that we don't live just for ourselves, but the result of being loved by you is so that we will be converted to show love for others. Bless those who are sick and recovering. Protect those who are at risk for infection. Be in our hearts as we face everything that is challenging us and our living together as your faithful people. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. Warning songs today? "If I'd only known" songs? How about just good songs that I would not have waited 90 devotions to share "if I had only known?"

Here I Am, Scottish Boy's Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhTpjdrLf0s>

Aksel Rykkvin's last performance as a soprano – «Ombra mai fu – from Xerxes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BybU77FPHGo>

This is the Day John Rutter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UGxzEyop14>

VOCES8: Lully, Lulla, Lullay - Philip Stopford

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7qYeZcOiol>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, June 19, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #90

¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a **message** may be given to me to **make known** with boldness the mystery of the **gospel**, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. ²¹ So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, (Eph. 6:19-21 NRS)

The Holy Gospel, According to the Netflix.

I remember the first time I realized that screenwriters sometimes include little messages that give people who know them clues to their identity. That happened years ago when watching an episode of the television show *"Northern Exposure."* In one episode, pilot Maggie announced that she was dropping off supplies to two towns named *"Snook"* and *"Dime Box."*

That might have easily slipped by most viewers, except people from Alaska, where the show was set, who know there is no *"Snook"* or *"Dime Box"*, Alaska. I, however, had lived in Caldwell, Texas, which happened to be just down the road from *"Snook"* and *"Dime Box."* The screenwriter was revealing his connection to *"Snook"* and *"Dime Box"*, Texas.

The second time I learned more about what producers and screenwriters can do was at a wedding I performed in Virginia, where I met writer/creator/producer Vince Gilligan, best known for *"The X-Files"*, *"Breaking Bad"*, and *"Better Call Saul"*. It was then I learned that Vince regularly names fictional characters after family members and gives nods to places they live. I learned he had created *"Wilmington"* brand cigarettes for one of the characters to smoke. One of his main characters was named after his new brother-in-law, the groom.

The third time was just recently. I had seen ads on Netflix for a new show called *"Sweet Magnolias,"* but not until reading an article in *"The Living Lutheran"* about the show's producer Sheryl Anderson, that I learned how she called attention to something that meant a lot to her. It was her church, an ELCA church, where she is an active member. Because Anderson is the series creator, she had the means to change the original book's Baptist church into a Lutheran church. Furthermore, she was able to have *Sweet Magnolia's* church, *Prince of Peace Lutheran*, call a black woman pastor. Deeper than that, every scene and dialog between this wonderful pastor and the three main characters is rich in Lutheran style grace, affirmation, mutual understanding, and love.

Anderson could have just named a character or street after a friend or created a product with a subtle wink, but rather she saw an opportunity within the framework of a secular series, to make a positive witness for faith!!

Set in South Carolina but filmed in Georgia on streets well known to my wife Rebecca ("there's the Covington courthouse!"), it's a good series, easy to watch and with good performances.

Another thing quite wonderful about the show, especially during these times of such racial division and pain, is the diversity of the cast. Strong friendships between black and white people are depicted, and do not seem forced, or even unnatural.

With such positive relationships, then, some might suggest *Sweet Magnolias* belongs more to the *fantasy genre* than *family drama*, but I think it quite wonderfully depicts what life can be like when the heart of our life together is Jesus Christ.

And yes, I love that the main characters all go to (pre-pandemic) church together! Thanks, Sheryl, for giving us the gospel through Netflix.

Let us pray.

We give thanks for all those who, when producing television and film, see opportunities to offer hope through the gospel. We are even more thankful when it is through a medium widely seen by many people, including people yet to be persons of faith. We pray that seeing stories of people of all colors being friends will encourage us to celebrate our diversity and experience the grace that comes whenever the gospel unites us. Especially on this Juneteenth observance, help us seek out every opportunity to heal our divisions and find positive ways forward. Bless those who are sick and their caregivers. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. For more information, connect with the *Living Lutheran* Online, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/>. Go to current issue and look for article called: A Faithful Witness (pg. 36)

I was looking at hymns reflecting *witness* and *evangelism* and happened on *Os Justi*.

The Lord Now Sends Us Forth Evangelical Lutheran Worship 538 by Good Shepherd Lancaster
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dzce0mveOVQ>

The Church of Christ In Every Age
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBUAQKGyc5A>

We all are one in Mission Hope Riverside
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkJkBkdXtVA>

Lord, You Give the Great Commission Georgetown Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buSgfHFsxGM>

and for two great recordings ...

Os justi Villanova Pastoral Musicians at Assisi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLiu2WTOLGw>

Os Justi Singapore Ladies Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiIYoDNnoJE>

Os justi meditabitur sapientiam: et lingua ejus loquetur judicium. Lex Dei ejus in corde ipsius: et non supplantabuntur gressus ejus. Alleluia.

When google translated this says:

The mouth speaks wisdom; and a tongue speaks justice. The law of God is in his heart; did not falter. Hallelujah.)

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, June 20, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #91

A reading from Exodus: *The Lord said, I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.*" Exodus 23:20

Zooming Godspeed and Farewell

It was a first. Pastor Jonathan and I zoomed "*Godspeed and Farewell*" I for St. Paul's members Fran and Susan Bolger, who have shared with us they are soon moving to Charlotte.

Over the years, "*Godspeed and Farewell*" has been a wonderful moment to celebrate someone's time with our congregation as we send them on their way. They walk to the front of the church, we do the little liturgy, we say a few things about them, and with hugs, we say goodbye, with the hopes our paths will cross again.

This time, while zooming, I keenly felt the loss of not being able to do this in front of the whole congregation. Not only that, but because of our physical absence from each other in worship these past few months, it occurred to me that someone could move away, and we might not even have noticed they were gone until some uncertain time in the future.

Oh, these times we are in.

It gets to me, too. Functionally, for myself I have tried to think of this time like a sabbatical leave. Sometimes during sabbaticals, people write. I've been writing. This is #92. That's about three months' worth, the same length of time for most minister's sabbaticals. Time to go back. But there is no back. Not yet.

The pain of loss of life together is great, even when I am pretending sabbatical. The zoom farewell underscored that, not only because I know how much I will miss the Bolgers, but because of how much I also miss everyone else.

Maybe we should have done a "*Godspeed and Farewell (Until We Meet Again)*" I for everyone at the end of the last Sunday we met together in person. With the hopes that our paths would cross again someday. We just had no idea what this was going to be like.

Many of you know I have snapped thousands of photos over the years here. The other night I thought I might "*cull*" a few duplicates. It was the first time I reviewed our pre-coronavirus life together at St. Paul's. I saw photos off all those new members. All those people I had updated for the online directory. All those wonderful activities where we worshipped, ate, and played together. I couldn't get far with the culling. I just felt sad. I miss our old life.

I know when people move away and leave the church home they have loved, part of leaving includes grief. We anticipate that when we say Godspeed and Farewell. But we also hope and pray there will be a congregation where they are going that will provide a new spiritual home. How do you look for a new church home nowadays? If you like staying at home and doing online worship, it'll be easy to "shop around".

It's not my wish to make this a "let's get sad" devotion, because one effect of remembering "how things were" is being ever thankful that actually have something to be sad about we can during this time of not being together. If we never had a church home to begin with, we wouldn't miss a thing. If we never had a church friend who was always a joy to be with, we wouldn't know what we're missing.

Three years ago on this Sunday, I shared a sermon that was my mother's favorite sermon. Because of the catchy little hook and accompanying story, people who were here remember it. If there was a refrain, it is "You gotta go through it," taken from the classic children's book, "We're going on a Bear Hunt."

I'm remembering that sermon and story again today because I know with so many things these days, "You gotta go through it." "You can't go over it. You can't go under it. You can't go around it. You gotta go through it!" The good news is that Jesus is always with us all the way. Through the joys. Through the sorrows. Through the pain. Through the healing. In the memories. And in every new experience. Always.

I'll attach that sermon... As always, absent or present, we thank God for each other. Blessings.

Let us pray.

We thank you for our life together in the gospel, O God, and for all, who, along the way with whom we share this life. Thank you for friendships discovered as we have worshipped together, and served together and been blessed together. We pray for an end of this global pandemic and for the very real hope of being able to be together again. In the meantime, give us opportunity to grow closer to you, and broaden our understanding that whether together or apart, we all belong to you. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. I had earlier posted a couple of versions of a song called "The Blessing." It's becoming quite a phenomenon as it is being recorded all over the world in many languages and by many different ethnic groups. It is essentially the Aaronic Benediction. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face toward you, and give you peace... Amen..."

There are many here, so even if you don't play all of them all the way through, I encourage you to do at least a minute or so of each. These are all recorded by people in isolation from each other,

and yet express a powerful witness and prayer for a great God who unites us all and “*goes through it*” with us. Their many tongues will remind us of the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The Blessing Australia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOt7baaVSbE>

The Blessing Celtic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3-tRu8MIk>

The Blessing Nigeria

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lewZ8ZhZB3Q>

The Blessing Arab World Blessing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qy0v69p5Jik>

The Blessing in Hebrew

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzqrWae5IK4>

The Blessing France

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1eCnolXi8s>

The Blessing Singapore

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wg1jqYmyWdU>

The Blessing Spain

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXGzL3br3oA>

The Blessing Qatar (with added Rap)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zwzgrx21rw>

The Blessing Zimbabwe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OA1tVs7VNcY>

The Blessing Sweden

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z21Jyg7RPXo&t=187s>

The Blessing in Hindi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqNSHePFnns>

The Blessing in Tamil

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDLuMAeCWO4>

The Blessing South Africa

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EPcd0B5SNs&t=99s>

The Blessing Ghana

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m84CNTY6DfE&t=384s>

The Blessing Hawaii

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxQ0RnKjrzY&t=323s>

The Blessing Lebanon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQ818qHiHL0>

The Blessing UK in Sign Language

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnEhlz2eHow>

The Blessing Kids around the world

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2ryaERFu4Q>

Pentecost 03A (proper 7) 2017

“You Gotta Go Through It: The Bear Hunt Story”

Pastor Mark Opgrand

June 25, 2017

St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Wilmington, NC

THE FIRST LESSON Jeremiah 20:7-8; 11-13

7O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. 8 For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. 11But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. 12O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. 13Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.

THE SECOND LESSON Romans 6:1b-5

1bShould we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? 2By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? 3Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

THE GOSPEL: Matthew 10:24-31

Jesus said to the twelve: 24“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; 25it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! 26“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 28Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Dear Friends in Christ. Grace be unto you and peace

from God our Father and the Lord Jesus. I’m going to share a story this morning I have shared before... but only once before in a sermon, so it’s not one of those “Oh, no... not that story again” situations here...)

It's because of my mother. I was visiting my mother last week in Arizona ...She's 94, wheelchair bound, tethered to oxygen, and struggling with memory issues.

I was telling her about my recent Pentecost sermon ... and the phone call... and ... *"it's for you."* And she interrupted... *"Well you know the one I liked? The one about the bear hunt!"*

You see, during a visit several years ago, I read that one to her...and she asked for a copy... and she made copies for her friends...and some of them even asked for more copies ...to give to their friends. So my thought was this: if it was that engaging ... it's probably worth sharing again... Here's how it goes...

Reflecting on these scriptures today, If there is one theme that permeates these lessons, it is... that in life ...and even while trusting Jesus... there are many obstacles, (fear ... and lack of trust being two among many)...and as much as we would like to find a way around this... with God's help... You gotta go through it. I was reminded of this ... as I recalled something that happened to me before I began serving here as Associate Pastor.

It was in 1995 ... when I left my dream job of eleven years as Lutheran Campus Pastor at Purdue University to accompany my wife Carol (who has since died... God rest her soul)... to Wilmington so she could begin her dream job teaching in the Philosophy and Religion department at UNCW.

This was the first time since seminary ... that I was without call and unemployed. And while I was very grateful for Carol's opportunity, after several months, I was really struggling with the loss of call, loss of community, loss of purpose, and loss of identity. What I needed was someone like one of our Stephen Ministers, that is, someone who could listen and offer support and care in the name of Christ.

I would meet people and they would ask, *"So what do you do?"* and I would reply... *"Well, I used to be a pastor..."* During those months, I visited many churches, wishing and hoping that God might still have something for me. Like all of us in this circumstance... I prayed about this... a lot.

One place I remember praying was on a Sunday morning before worshipat historic St. Matthew's Lutheran ... in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. Carol and I were visiting there that weekend.

If you've never been to that beautiful church, it's a bit like St. Paul's, but older, bigger, with a taller steeple and very ornate white altar and chancel; It has pews with little gates on each end and a high pulpit requiring the preacher to climb about dozen steps before reaching the top. There is also a balcony that goes all around the interior of the church.

I very clearly remember this was one of those “sad Sundays” for me. Many months had gone by without a sense of my future. “What am I doing?” I kept asking. “Where am I going? What am I supposed to do?”

So it was... before worship began, with eyes closed....I began praying about this, even being so bold as to ask God for.. a sign... something... an indicator... some kind of plan... or even a simple word of encouragement... something.

And then... out of nowhere... WHACK!!! I was smacked right in the head! Literally smacked in the head. I thought ... someone had hit me over the head with the green hymnal. But it was not that... instead, flying down from somewhere up in the balcony now sitting next to me... was another book... a children’s book... and the title was... “We’re Going on a Bear Hunt.” (Anyone remember that book?)

I opened it to read... “We’re going on Bear Hunt. We’re going to catch a big one. It’s a beautiful day. We’re not scared...” but then along the way... there are all these obstacles. and at each obstacle is the refrain: “We can’t go over it. We can’t go around it. We can’t go under it. Oh, no. We’ve got to go through it.” (add sound effects)

Well.... I never imagined an answer to prayer quite this way before...but I had been praying... and I got whacked.. .. and the answer seemed to be... “You can’t go over it. You can’t go around it. You can’t go under it...You’ve got to go through it. It’s a beautiful day... don’t be scared.”

And that’s really what these lessons are telling us... this morning. In Jesus’ own way... and in Jeremiah’s own way...and in St. Paul’s own way...we’re all being wacked ... with a good book this time the Bible...the good book.

Yes, the language is quite severe, especially as Jesus prepares his disciples for difficult and demanding ministry...But even when Jesus describes hardships and obstacles Jesus also says ... “Don’t be afraid” ...

Furthermore.... if you want to be my disciples and you face any obstacle... well... (do you want to say it with me?) “You can’t go over it. You can’t go around it. You can’t go under it. You’ve got to go through it.”

Jeremiah knew about that too. Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet during a time when the rule of one empire over Israel was giving way to another. Jeremiah was whacked with a similar word from God.

It happened for him about midpoint in his ministry when the Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar began expanding in the Middle east and Israel was about to be torn apart.

God called Jeremiah to warn people about this threat, even though he would be met with resistance ... and outright condemnation. But he had to go through it...which he did, faithfully trusting in God.

This is not unlike what Jesus himself was warning his disciples about ...as they were called to extend love and care ...to the world in Jesus' name. They also had big obstacles, much bigger than ours (actually), but the encouragement was the same... which is... whatever is getting in the way of you going where God wants you to go...or being who God wants you to be...or doing what God wants you to do... *"You... can't go over it.... you can't go around it... you can't go under it..... you gotta go through it."*

But God promises... that you CAN do that... and you WILL do that... Even if you are scared...because (remembering your roots ...who you are... and whose you are)... what holds you ...and all the faithful together is our ... BAPTISM!... (How timely that St. Paul talks about this in our second lesson...)

Being baptized... into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord...and remembering that... and holding on to that...what we always find ... just as in the bear hunt story... *"It's a beautiful day. And we're not scared."*

We're not scared.... because... as Jesus says ... we ..are.. worth ..everything ..to God. And God is with us. God is with us... in our joys... and in our sorrows...in our life passages...and in our transitions...in grief and in loss.....in sickness and wellness...when all seems hopeless... when things all come together.....and as we wait for what next ... God has in store for us.

Granted..... sometimes we forget to trust God in all this...and when that happens... a gentle nudge by God... may be necessary...Sometimes ... a whack on the head... is necessary. And admittedly, today's scriptures are more whack than nudge...but within them there is revealed an active loving caring God...who knows what this world needs... knows what needs to be done ... and knows how we can join in.

And that's our prayer... to be ready and open to God who continually calls and equips us for love and service in this world. And who knows?....

About a year had passed when I returned to St. Matthew's in Charleston, this time invited ... to be their guest preacher. That was just a couple of months before I was about to begin my call ... as one of your pastors ... here at St. Paul's.

So from that towering pulpit I enjoyed telling them the story of what happened what happened.... while praying in their pew a year earlier ...and getting *whacked* with what ended up... being an *encouraging message* from God.

At the end of the service, I was greeting people when a little fellow (about four or five) squared up ...right in front of me. With a fierce look in his eyes and hands on his hips, he cocked his head at me... and said,

“Where’s my book?” ...revealing.. that he was the little Jeremiah who launched that little answer to my prayer. “I don’t know,” I relied. “I just left it on the pew for someone else to find.”

I imagine now... years later... that little guy might be out of college, maybe getting married... maybe looking for a job...perhaps himself... wondering what next God has in store for him.

I hope ... he will remember his baptism. And that no matter what stands in his way, ... he can’t go over it ...he can’t go around it ... he can’t go under it... He’s gotta go through it!

I hope ... he will remember his baptism... because in baptism... we’re not scared.... because ... in Christ Jesus... God is with us... and it always... ends... up... being.... a beautiful... day. Thanks be to God. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home Devotion for Sunday, June 21, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #92

Easier when you have the ring.

And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

--Philippians 4:19

June is a month of many wedding anniversaries. I am personally reminded of this because the pop up on my electronic calendar every year. I enjoy remembering those wonderful days. I also remember the mishaps. The biggest mishap I remember was this:

Twenty minutes before the wedding, the best man lost the groom's ring. Worse than that, the ring had belonged to the groom's grandfather, so it was irreplaceable. I will always remember everyone but the bridal party madly searching the lawn and gardens next the church, hoping to find the ring. It looked like an Easter Egg hunt for well-dressed adults.

Because I had never experienced this level of panic before a wedding before, I soon realized that I would need to modify my sermon, addressing the issue of the lost ring. That was the only thing I could do, because no matter what other wonderful words I said to the bride and groom, everyone would be thinking about the ring and identifying with the shame of the one who had lost it.

I quickly added marginal notes, assuring them that the wedding is not about the ring. It's about the joy they are discovering together, the love these two people have for each other and the love of God who surrounds them.

Happily, five minutes before the wedding, the ring was found! Immediately the enormous burden was lifted and once again joy filled the air. The ring had rolled out of the best man's pocket in his car and was hidden in the seat.

It turned out that in the sermon I did talk about the ring. I first shared with them how I was preparing to tell them how it's not about the ring. It's about the love of God that encircles them and so on.

But all that came together with a now classic "punch line:": *"But I can tell you this. It's a lot **easier** to say it's **not** about the ring ... when you **have** the ring!"*

I have thought about this experience often in the church as we have made claims that God provides. God provides. We say this a lot, often during stewardship drives, but whenever we develop spending plans or embark on new or expanded ministries. We are doing that even now during this time of doing ministry while separated from one another. We claim God provides.

At the same time, our absence from each other and in-person ministry easily feels as if we have lost the ring ... that which binds us together and unites us church.

And here, I can tell you this: *"It's a lot easier to talk about God providing for all our needs when we still have everything we need."*

Now we don't. Or do we?

Years ago, when a wedding ring was lost, I discovered that when God's love is at the center of a couple's life together, a wedding can go on with or without the ring. I wonder how this might this apply to our life together while apart.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, like a bridegroom to a bride, you have promised faithful love to us your church. You promise to provide and have always provided. During this time of uncertainty and loss, help us remember your promises. Help us trust that even while things are not as they once were, you are with us still, making us ready for whatever is ahead. We pray for all who feel lost and alone, especially those who are sick. Encourage those trying to be safe and well. Teach us what you would have us know about your world and all your beloved children. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. Something solid today. How about:

The Church's One Foundation by Jubilate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rIS166ppoE>

Trumpet Voluntary by Clarke played by Stacey Bish and Stacy Blair

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHy3tJJdy24>

The Church of Christ in Every Age by Paul Coleman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgSFTvVn20E>

The Church of Christ in Every Age by Metro DC ELCA Synod virtual

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHRI-wez1DY>

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7goM02Em_Q&t=44s

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, June 22, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #93

When everything you've ever heard is a lie. Including this.

For you are the children of your father the devil, and you love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies. (Jn. 8:44 NLT)

In the 1967 movie *Bedazzled*, fry cook Stanley Moon, played by Dudley Moore, is persuaded by the devil to trade his soul for seven wishes. His heart's desire is that co-worker Margaret will love him. The devil, named George, is more conniving and con man than downright scary, and always finds a way for Stanley's wish to go awry. Stanley can cancel the wish by blowing his "raspberry."

After one failed wish, the true character of the devil is revealed through this dialogue between Stanley and George:

George (the devil): *"I forgot to tell you something about Margaret Spencer."*

Stanley: *"Oh, what's that?"*

George (the devil): *"She's dead."*

Stanley: *"Oh, no, she's not!?"*

George (the devil): *"No, she's not."*

Stanley: *"She's not?"*

George (the devil): *"No. She's alive."*

Stanley: *"Then why did you say that?"*

George (the devil): *"Malice. I'm a liar. I do it the whole time. I can't help it." (chuckle)*

Stanley: *"Are you telling me that everything you've ever said is a lie?"*

George (the devil): *"Yes, everything I've ever told you has been a lie. Including that."*

Stanley: *"Including what?"*

George (the devil): *"That everything I've ever told you has been a lie. That's not true".*

Stanley: *"I don't know what to believe."*

George (the devil): *"Not me, Stanley, believe me."*

One thing I have always enjoyed about this movie, and this scene, is how it exposes the devil as the father of lies. We have seen this before in the Bible when Jesus meets the devil in the wilderness after fasting for forty days.

It is in the wilderness, that the devil first tempts Jesus to conjure himself to eat. The devil follows this with an invitation to let the angels to catch Jesus mid-air after leaping off a tall building. It is then that the devil says, showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor,

"All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." (Matt. 4:8-9 NRS).

As far as lies go, here are a couple of whoppers. The first is that the devil has this to give, and second, that the devil would actually give the kingdoms to Jesus in exchange for Jesus worshipping him.

As we see both in scripture and in *Bedazzled*, it's the devil's nature to lie and try to persuade us to give our allegiance to him rather than God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Regrettably, devil's pretty good at this.

We live in a time when it is exceedingly difficult to know what or who to believe regarding many things. There are so many voices around us, and so many conflicting voices. There are so many people on different sides of issues who all make claims to speak the truth. Consequently, It's regularly very hard to separate fact from fiction.

I don't have an easy recommendation on sorting all this out.

I do know that we Christians must do the very hard work of continuing to examine the life and ministry of Jesus as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. That is very hard work, and we must be prepared to see things in Jesus that we either may not want to believe, or at least not follow.

Look at how Jesus relates to all people. Look at how he not only says "love your enemies," but actually loved those who opposed him. Look at how Jesus himself was about a ministry of reconciliation.

Doing this hard work together is revealing something not to be taken for granted. And that is the blessing of being authentic with each other. Aren't you glad when you have found a friend or co-worker whose word can be trusted? Aren't you deeply thankful when you children don't spin all

sorts of tales trying to cover their misbehavior? Aren't you grateful when being honest with each other builds strong bonds between each other?

This is not to say we will be free from passing along misleading information or spin certain things to our own advantage. We all fall short as sinful persons. But that's why we must continue to find our spiritual center in Jesus Christ our Lord and in God the Father of Truth. Furthermore, we trust in God the Holy Spirit to guide our hearts in the right direction where honesty, openness, and mutual forgiveness continues to give us hope.

¹³ In [Christ] you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:13-14 NRS)

Whenever you don't know what to believe, believe in Jesus. He's the way, the truth, and the life.

Let us pray.

We thank you Lord Jesus that in the midst of so many competing voices claiming to speak or know the truth about many things, that we can turn to you and put our trust in you as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. From this truth, help us discern fact from fiction in this fractious and confusing world. Thank you for trustworthiness and for honest means to strengthen our relationships with you and each other. We are so torn apart by anger, mistrust, and dishonest behavior. Heal our world, showing us your righteous path, and by helping us follow it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. Maybe something about truth and trust today...

I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life by Bob Hurd

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Fvwd9Y6xlg>

If You But Trust In God To Guide You National Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m-L5QcWePA>

My God, In Him I Will I Trust Psalm 91 Esther Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67wC6-kWWS0>

Psalm 91 Sons of Korah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A7aP9Tbtvg>

If You Trust in the Lord Mississippi Mass Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nJQD4L3aLA>

.... and as a special bonus, here's a link to that movie scene I transcribed:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7afoE1A4RIM>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, June 23, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #94

We are the Lord's. (Check punctuation.)

*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, **we are the Lord's.** ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. (Rom. 14:7-9 NRS)*

When this verse imprinted on me was quite unforgettable. I was working one summer as a camp cook at a Lutheran camp called Amnicon, located on the shore of Lake Superior in northern Wisconsin. My co-cook Paul and I were recalling how the director of Holden Village (where we had also worked) often spoke of this scripture but never spoke of it without reminding us to observe the punctuation.

There is a great difference between "We are the **Lord's**" and "We are the **Lords!**" Of course, there should be no mistaking this, but we often act as if we are the ones in charge, don't we?

Underscoring the remembrance of this verse was Paul's great musical skill in belting out hymns from the kitchen. During the day, campers passing by heard many hymns sung by the cooks.

A new hymn for me was "*We are the Lord's, his all sufficient merit,*" based on these verses. The hymn finished each verse with a strong, "*Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's!*" Paul would add, "*Remember the apostrophe!*"

I remembered the hymn and the apostrophe in a very dramatic way on July 6. That was the day I made a fateful trip riding my 350CC 1972 Honda Street Scrambler. I was flying through the countryside on County Road U when I leaned too far into a turn and hit some broken pavement and literally went flying one way while my motorcycle took a dive down a steep embankment.

I don't know how long I was unconscious. What I do remember was the first thing that came into my head. It was the refrain of the hymn Paul had been singing earlier. "*Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.*"

When you are in an accident, you really don't know right away just how hurt you may be. Even though I wore a helmet, I hit the pavement headfirst, and was out for a time. Most important, though, was when "*coming to*", I experienced a great peace, knowing that either way, I was going to be okay. I belonged to God.

Since becoming a pastor, I have turned to this verse many times, often sharing it with someone gravely ill or when facing a risky surgery. But it is also true, as I can testify, that anything can

happen at any time, so knowing and trusting and singing that “*whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s*” is a great comfort.

Let us pray.

In our baptism, O God, you have named us and claimed us and made us your own. We belong to you. We are the Lord’s. Help us always to remember that all important apostrophe that keeps us from imagining we are the Lords. Help us live each day with the courage that comes from knowing that we belong to you, and that nothing can separate us from your love. Bless those whose lives are at risk today, and all who are involved in their care. Bring us all close to you, we pray. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. I so hoped to find a recording that old hymn to share, but the only one I found was with a different tune... so... I opted to look for other songs based on the same scripture or theme: Here is what I found:

We are the Lord’s His All Sufficient Merit (not my tune)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGjyEORuXuQ&t=46s>

We Belong To God Hope Publishing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWyJtBOwwyc>

Oscar and Nancy and Friends Spanish Version

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYEy2oGyRac>

God Will Take of You Fountainview

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4Ez8m2ozf4>

God Will Take Care of You SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijytLs96yig>

God Will Take Care of You Diana McMahan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=137k9Kchril>

God Will Take Care of You Heritage Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpUslbCal34>

and as a **bonus**... *Nunc Dimittis* by Holst... “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjRpOGDXco0>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, June 24 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #95

In Praise of Pets. Part Four. Cats. (Again?)

⁷ Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre.

⁸ He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills.

⁹ He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry.

¹⁰ His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;

¹¹ but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love. (Ps. 147:7-11 NRS)

I am continuing to recognize my prejudices are being exposed.

I had earlier described how I not only discovered my rootedness and comfort in being a “dog person,” but also my difficulty understanding why anyone would ever want a cat. Simply put, I don’t understand “cat people.” However, as I am taking time to listen, I may be learning,

When I wrote a recent devotion sharing one of Herb Brokering’s “*Dog Psalms*”, I totally connected with it. I followed it with a devotion which included a Brokering “*Cat Psalm*” (not because I identified with it, but because I feared I might get a “*What about the cats?*” from the cat people. A third devotion was a humorous attempt to try to include all the rest. (“*What about the Iguana People?*”)

A few days passed when Pastor Bob Weeks sent me a piece he had written from the point of view of his cat, “*Sir Thomas*.” Bob claimed it had no spiritual value but thought I might enjoy it anyway. “*Au contraire*,” as they say in French; it did have spiritual value, because within those words is a wonderful description Sir Thomas’s relationship with Bob and Sylvia which indeed mirrors our relationship with God. With Bob’s permission (I’ll leave it with him to clear it with Sir Thomas), I am going to attach this piece for your enjoyment. Even if you are a dog person, I believe you’ll recognize and identify with the love between critter and human.

It also drew me to another Herb Brokering “*Cat Psalm*” under “*Family*.”

I am cat. I am a member of your family.

Once upon a time I came to live here.

Was it by birth? was I homeless?

Did I appear at your door?

Did you buy me? It does not matter;

I am a member of the family.

You call me by your family name.

I eat and play and sleep here.

I have my own bowl of food and my clean water dish.
Sometimes I eat right beside you; you know how to t set the rules.
I am cat and we are family.
You know where I nap and play and eat and cuddle and sleep.
I know all your rooms for I have visited them when you are not home.
You have told me which places are my own.
They are enough.
When company comes you introduce me. They answer and notice me for I am your cat.
We are a gracious family.

Herb follows it with this prayer:

***God**, you fill me with family grace. I am family with homeless, with stranger, neighbors and with immigrants. I a at home with warring nations and political foes. Grace is my journey. I leave and I stray. Grace is how I find my way home. I know the power and joy of belonging. I know the helplessness and pain of being cut off from others.*

See me share my table, divide by abundance, give my time and extend my sense of household. Life is your gift to all. All share your one life and breath and spirit. You call us your children and so we are. As I have a safe place in your earth so may we all be family. God at each dawn and dusk I find this place and all the earth a home of grace. Amen.

P.S. I realized after pondering the rest of God's creatures, that I missed a couple of obvious hymns and songs. Here they are:

All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTKJUxl8TL4>

All Creatures of Our God and King Southern Seminary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6WwR2xBRMc>

All Creatures of our God and King Horizon and Heritage concert

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0_8JnaOjSo

SIR THOMAS

INTRODUCTION

You might gather from the title of this edition that my name is Sir Thomas. My parents adopted me in August of 2005. (We really do not know how old I am. It is now 2020, and the first Vet that looked at me suggested I was about 1 and one half at the time. Mom thinks I am only 15, but Dad figures I am about 17 – oh well, I am not going to tell them how old I am.). When they got me they were not given my original name, so they had to choose one. Since the cat before me was Miss Cali, my new owners thought I should have a title, so they named me Sir Thomas. My coat is red and white, and I have a “halo” (mark on my fur at the top of my head). My human Mommy thinks the mark is appropriate because I am such a good boy. If I do say so, “I am a very handsome boy!”

HOME COMING -

A RIDE IN “RB”-

Dad had admired me greatly, but Mom was taking time to look at all the cats. Dad could not wait to take me home. Finally, the papers were signed and I could go with Dad and Mom. It was late one day when all the papers were signed, and Dad had to come back the next day to get me. He was there as soon as the Shelter was open. He was driving this 1975 VW Convertible. He put me in a cage, and took me out to the car, and put me in the front seat and turned the key to start the motor. WOW! What a noise, “Wheer, Budden - and off we went!” I could not see out, but I could see Dad shifting gears. We got to my new home and Dad mashed a button and the garage door opened automatically.

PROBLEMS WITH THE ANIMAL SHELTER FOOD AND EMBARRASEMENT IN THE NEW HOME-

Dad took me inside my new home and let me out of the cage. I had to go potty right away – the trip was too much. Low and behold, I let a fart that smelled terrible. I kept doing these for a few days until the food I had eaten at the shelter was out of my system. Mom and Dad were glad when my system cleared up. They had better food!

FIRST OPERATIONS –

THE CLAW REMOVAL and SEX FIX-

Mom and Dad had a very nice home with very nice furniture, so they had my claws removed on my front paws. In addition, they did not need any more cats, so they had me “fixed.” I was at the vets hospital for a day before Dad came to get me in that 1975 VW. It was a shaky trip home, but Mom had prepared a special bed for me to use until my paws were well. They took good care of me and I was soon able to pounce about. It was a little hard to use the litter box for awhile!

ACTIONS:

THE BACK PORCH AT PINEHURST PLACE –

A SPECIAL PLACE TO WATCH SQUIRRELS AND BIRDS GALORE. The back porch at my new home was great. I could watch squirrels and birds all day, that is if I was let stay out on the porch. Sometimes the squirrels would come right up to the screen and fuss at me. Once in a while I would have a visit from other cats. Then there were plenty of lizards to chase all around the porch. Mom would not let me eat them but every once in a while I took one in the kitchen for her to see. EEEEEH she would go!

THE WINDOW IN THE CAROLINA ROOM-

A GOOD PLACE TO WATCH SQUIRRELS, BIRDS AND GOLF PLAYERS. I had another good place to watch the outside critters. There was a room that my parents called the “Carolina Room.” I could sit on an old trunk and watch the birds, cats, squirrels, and people playing golf. I had a great chair to sleep in but Mr. Fred Swartout liked the chair, too. When he would visit, I had to beat him to the chair or he would sit in my chair.

ESCAPE TO THE YARD AT PINEHURST-

WHEN “DAD” LET ME OUT FOR GRASS -- Grass is a big need for me. I really liked being able to get out in the yard at Pinehurst Place to look for fresh grass to eat. Mom or Dad had to watch me because I liked to visit the neighbors. I especially liked Mrs. Benson’s yard. She had all kinds of grass and flowers to smell. Now days, in the apartment Mom plants grass for me and I sit and beg for it.

BONUS ROOM ACTION-

A NICE PLACE TO NAP- At Pinehurst Place we had a great Bonus Room upstairs. There was a bed up there just for me. I liked to take naps on that bed. I had to watch out when Dad was working on clocks up in the Bonus Room. One day he was taking a clock spring out of what is called a

barrel, and it got away from him. I was on the bed and all of a sudden the spring hit the ceiling and the barrel came my way. I did not bother to use the stairs, I just jumped over the banister. WOW! In our apartment, I still leave the clock shop area when Dad is working on a spring.

CLIMBING THE ARMOIRE AT THE NEW HOME –

I like to climb. We have a big *armoire* in the bedroom. When it was located at Pinehurst Place, I could jump from a chair to the top and enjoy the view. One day, I jumped down and hurt my paw. Mom and dad think I broke it. It has not been the same since.

KRISTI VISITS WITH CAROLINE –

I have a “Big Sister” named Kristi. She likes cats, too. I was getting along with her very well and One day she brought a baby kitten to Pinehurst Place. I guess I got real jealous. I spit and growled and Dad had to put me out on the porch to settle down. I was afraid that kitten was going to replace me. I have never forgotten that event. When Kristi comes to see us, I hide and sometimes spit at her. Maybe one of these days, I will get over the event!

TRIPS:

TO SEE KRISTI AND HAPPY –

STAYING IN EMILY’S Room – On one occasion, Mom and Dad went to see Kristi and “Happy” (“Happy” is Kristi’s husband) . They took me with them and had me stay with Kristi and “Happy” in their home. I was put in Emily’s room (Emily was Happy and Kristi’s daughter). I spent most of the time under the bed. Everything was so strange. There were two other cats and a dog who lived in the house, also. The dog’s name was Auggie. He was real friendly and liked cats, but the cat named Caroline was the one I had a bad experience with in New Bern. Little Emily had died several years before. I really liked her room, and I know she would have loved to have played with me.

TO RALIEGH DURING A HURRICANE -

We live in Hurricane Alley. Two years ago, we had to evacuate Brightmore due to a hurricane. We really had no where to go, but “Happy’s” cousin and his wife (Gregg and Janet) invited us to come to Raleigh and stay with them in their beautiful home. Dad and Mom put me in a cage and then in their new 2017 Cadillac and took off to Raleigh. It took us quite a time to get to “Happy’s” cousin’s home in Raleigh, but I made it. Then I was put in a nice room all to myself. They had a dog named Giles who wanted to play with me, but I did not like the idea. He was too noisy and scared me. I fussed up and spit. He was afraid of me, thank goodness!

MOVE TO BRIGHTMORE AND EVENTS:

Mom and Dad sold my beautiful home in New Bern. I had the best back porch. That porch was the best place in the world to watch squirrels, birds, and rabbits. I spent a very lonely last night in New Bern. They left me in an empty bedroom with my litter box and some water. I wondered all

night if anyone was coming back. Thank goodness, the next morning Dad came to get me and then, the ride to Wilmington began. I rode with Dad in the 2001 Cadillac. It took two hours to get to my new home Called Brightmore. Here at Brightmore I can only look out of windows; however, I do have a chair at two windows to use when I want to look out of the windows.

BOXES AND A NEW APARTMENT

After arriving at Brightmore, Dad carried me up to the apartment and let me out. You have never seen so many boxes! Right away, I did a lot of smelling to see if any of the boxes belonged to me. Thank goodness, some of them did! I was shown my bathroom, which was located in front of the washing machine just outside Mom and Dad's bathroom. I was glad to see that they brought my bathroom! Next, I was shown my water and eating bowls. Thank goodness , because the trip was long and I Was hungry!

GETTING USED TO NO PORCH IN A CHAIR

Mom and Dad placed my favorite chair near a window in the living room so I could look out of the window. To my surprise there were very few birds to watch out of the window. I think someone scared them all away. That was a let down for me, but I used the chair to look out at night, too. There are all kinds of creatures to watch at night. I have not told Mom because she might get scared. I use my chair to get sun during the day. It is located just right for sunbathing.

DR. WILLIAMS BECOMES MY NEW VET

She is such a nice lady, but I do not like for her to pick me up. Her office smells like medicine and a place where you get shots. She is good at taking my temperature. I have never understood why I have to have that done every time I go to see her. She only treats cats and is an expert with cat medicine. It was not long before I found this fact out. I had an abscessed tooth – WOW! She looked in my mouth and said, "That tooth has to come out." Well, I had to stay at her clinic for two days. Boy, her helpers are rough. One of them is big and picked me up by the neck when I spit at her. I felt a lot better when the tooth was extracted. Mom and Dad came to get me and pampered me well.

Dr. Williams likes to examine me every six months. On one examination, she discovered that I had thyroid problems. She recommended several remedies, but Mom and Dad chose their most expensive one (\$1,058). I had to have my thyroid destroyed by radiation. Would you believe that even my "poop" was radio active? We had to be careful where we disposed of my "poop." Anyway, Dr. Williams administered what I needed. I had to stay at her clinic for several days. Boy, was I glad to get out of the clinic and back home.

Unfortunately, I did get sick before the next six month exam. Dad always puts me in my cage, which I do not like! Then he rolls me down the hallway to the elevator. How humiliating! I Scream all the way. Next, he puts me in the car and I know I am headed for Dr. Williams. During this examination, she discovered I have what is called Renal Failure. I was so used to being

healthy that it really took me back to learn I had a problem. Dr. Williams said I was in stage three of the problem and gave my parents medicine to give me. Would you believe – three times a day! I get a pill in the morning about breakfast time. Next, I get a pill about 1 p.m. One day it is Prednisone and then every other day it is a capsule for my joints. Then, at night, comes the most terrible tasting stuff you have ever tasted – Mom and Dad call them “Drops.” The only good thing about taking this medicine is that after each Medicine I get treats. Mom has a box filled with my special treats. I get about six each time. This helps to take my mind off how terrible it is to have to take medicine. Oh! Yes! Dad holds me in his arms like a baby, and I like that, too.

My medical problems just kept happening at Brightmore. Mom had to go to the hospital one time and some nice ladies gave her a balloon which she brought home and placed on our dining room table. Well, at night I roam around. I like to chew on ribbons. Guess what? Yes, the balloon had a nice ribbon tied to one end. During the night, I was able to chew the ribbon in half and eat about four inches. The next morning Dad found out what I had done and really got worried. My parents waited a few days to see if the ribbon would pass in my “poop”, but it did not. So, back to see Dr. Williams I went. When she took an x-ray, she said, “We have to operate to get the ribbon out.” They cut me open and removed the ribbon. Man, was I sore for several weeks; however, after a few days, everything (primarily my bowels) started working again. I have been a good boy since that excursion.

BOXES “A” AND “B”

Since I have been a good boy, I have been given two boxes to sleep in. I like boxes. When my Parents get a box in the mail, I examine it and sometimes climb in for a sleeping place. As a matter of fact, I now have two boxes to sleep in. The box in the dining room is labeled “B”, and the box in the bedroom is labeled “A.” They are my favorite napping places, except the bed and on Dad’s coat. Mom has problems making up the bed sometimes because I like to sleep there. Dad’s coat is always left on the day bed in the study. I find that it smells like him and is soooo soft!

BREAKFAST IN BED

Speaking of beds, Mom spoils me. I guess that is what happens when you become a senior cat citizen like me. She often brings food to me while I am still in bed. Boy! Do I have it made!

MY NEW NEIGHBOR HAS AN INTERESTING APARTMENT

I am not allowed to run through the halls at Brightmore, but once in a while I am allowed to go right outside our apartment and investigate. Sometimes, Dad even takes me down the hallway and I run back to the apartment. This is called “exercise.” One day I got out without my parents knowing it. The door to our apartment was shut before I knew it. Boy! Was I scared! Soon one of my parents discovered I was missing and opened the door. I shot in the apartment, and my tail was all fuzzed up.

We have a new neighbor by the name of Dr. Tom. He is a retired dentist and a very nice man. He likes to leave his apartment door open sometimes. Guess what? I would love to go in his

apartment and look around. I almost got inside one time and my parents apologized, but Dr. Tom said, "Let him come on in." Maybe one of these days I will get into his apartment after all.

MY STROLLER

My Dad got the idea that I would like to be strolled on the Brightmore Campus, so he purchased a small pet stroller for me. He thinks I like the stroller, but I HATE THAT THING! That thing has four front wheels for easy control; brakes on the back wheels; a sun top; and no SHOCK ABSORBERS. It takes Mom's help to put me in the stroller, which has a zipper compartment that keeps me from jumping out while Dad strolls.

MY BATHROOM

My bathroom is called a litter box and is in the hallway to Mom and Dad's bathroom. They keep it full of litter so I have 24 hour access. Next to the plastic litter box is a useful thing called a Litter Locker. The Litter Locker makes things very handy for Mom and Dad. They just put my waste in the container and turn the locking device. I did have a problem with my bathroom on one occasion. At one time, it did not have a cover and I aimed too high. Dad had to clean the carpet with carpet cleaner. Then, he put the cover on my litter box. I just wish he had installed a light in that thing.

A POPULAR 'PUSS'

If I do say so myself, "I am a very popular 'Puss' at Brightmore. " Hardly a week goes by without one of the residents coming to my door to greet or pet me. Since the virus, Mom and Dad have had to remain in the apartment during mealtime: however, their food is delivered. I watch for delivery for them because they might sometimes be watching TV. I am afraid they might not hear the door bell. Anyway, when the Dining Wait Staff arrives, I get a big greeting. Then, there is a very sweet lady who works in the Morrison Dining. She left a bag full of toys for me (a toy rat, a ball with a bell inside, and a bird with a fuzzy tail).

Almost every day one of the residents will ask, "How is Sir Thomas?" Mrs. Zumwalt is a favorite. When she comes by, Dad holds me and lets her feel/pet me. I even have a "backup" person to feed me when Mom and Dad go away. Her name is Mrs. Bonnie Ryan. She has a cat named Ruby, but Ruby is female, and I have not visited her.

NEW DOG IN THE FAMILY

My Big Sister, Kristi, and her husband "Happy" have just adopted a new dog. His name is Asher, They call him "Ashe" for short. I have not seen him yet, but I have told my sister that I do not do dogs. I am told he is black all over and can already sit when commanded to do so. Mom and Dad think he is soooo cute! They call him "The VIP Dog." I am sure he is not as pretty as me. He has two cats at his home, and I am told he is being very nice to them. This is hard to believe.

BY MY DAD – ROBERT WEEKS 6/20

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, June 25, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #96

¹⁵ *You shall not steal.* (Exod. 20:15 NRS)

About the time I got picked up for armed robbery. In a roadblock. (True story).

First, let me say that recalling this story is intended to share something from my own past that illustrates how personal experiences can shape the development of empathy. ***Empathy.***

Second, I truly believe police have a hard and nearly impossible job. It cannot imagine how extremely difficult it is possibly to be in harm's way every single day when on the job. I respect law enforcement, even when, from personal experience, I know mistakes can be made.

Here's the story: It was two days before Thanksgiving in 1969 when three carloads of John Darling's friends from Pacific Lutheran University caravanned to his "hasty" wedding at a small Lutheran church in Bremerton, Washington.

Most weddings don't happen on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. The bride was pregnant; John was dropping out of school; and he wanted his dorm friends from school to celebrate with him. The wedding was nice, the reception simple. We attended. We went home.

There were three of us in our car: Al Knorr and driver Phil Lavik were up front; I was in the rear. Phil was proud of his recently purchased 1964 baby blue Buick Skylark. He was not proud that he had just gotten his first speeding ticket a few days earlier. We all nicknamed Phil "The All American Kid" on account of "getting saved" at a Billy Graham Crusade and from that, playing the following summer on a Christian Missionary baseball team. Seriously, Phil was one of the nicest guys you've ever met.

Coming back from the wedding that night, we were not happy that Phil was determined to stay well below the speed limit. "Come on, Phil, you can at least *go* the speed limit." Nope. We poked along until we came to the Tacoma Narrows Bridge. The Narrows is like a smaller version of the Golden Gate. Traffic started slowing. I saw flashing red lights. At first, I thought it was an accident. But as we drew closer, we realized it was a roadblock. "Oh boy, a roadblock! I wonder what that's about?"

We stopped. There was quick motion around us. I saw police. "Look, they're coming our way. Whoa! What's going on?" I looked behind me. Nothing to see. Then I looked forward. I realized it was our car that was now being completely surrounded. Weapons were drawn and pointed at us!! I heard the bullhorn. "Freeze. Put your hands where we can see them."

The two front doors were opened. "Slowly, get out of the car." I saw handguns and rifles and shotguns. There were so many of them. (our friends behind us counted 35 officers, sheriff deputies and highway patrol).

After Phil and Al were pulled out, I came face to face with a sawed-off shotgun. It was foot in front of my eyes. I will never forget those next words as long as I live. "If you make a move, I'll blow your head off." I did not make a move except ever so slowly as directed.

Immediately I was handcuffed, and with officers holding each arm and shotgun still pointed at my head, I was marched backwards to a patrol car. I passed by Phil, who panicked a little and had his head slammed into the roof of the car.

There we sat.

I learned later from some who learned more details, that there was some dispute about where next to take us. It seemed like we sat there for a long time. Three sets of officers asked questions before I finally asked politely, "Can I ask what happened? Why are we here?"

The officer explained that a half hour earlier three young men committed an armed robbery at a restaurant in Port Orchard, Washington. The make of their car was a 1964 Buick Skylark. Like ours, it was blue, and the first three letters of the license plate matched ours.

In other words, this was as positive an ID scenario as you could invent. We were going the right (wrong) direction and the right (wrong) time, and when spotted, law enforcement had probably cause and enough time to set up the perfect roadblock right on the bridge. Dead to rights. Except... we were three Lutheran college boys dressed in suits and ties who had just come from a wedding. We had no guns and no stolen money.

Dead to rights, except with enough reasonable doubt that suggested it best to sit there until the owners of the restaurant could be brought to positively ID us. Eventually, traffic opened up and I can remember looking out the window at our other friends slowly driving by. I was in the first car so imagine their surprise: "HEY, THAT'S OPGRAND!!"

Our friends pulled over to try to ask what was going on. The answer: "Get back in your car. You can read all about it in the paper tomorrow." Dead to rights. Except...

The restaurant owners arrived in a patrol car. From there, it was over quite quickly. "Nope. That's not them." We were uncuffed and returned to our car. The car had been completely torn apart, looking for the money.

On our way back to our car, one last Highway Patrol officer stopped us, saying, “Boys, I was the trooper who first spotted you. I know you’ve been through a lot tonight, so I’m not going to write you up, but I had you clocked going fifteen miles over the speed limit! Consider this a warning!”

Any other time, we would have probably believed that, but remember how we had been begging Phil to go at least the speed limit? We said nothing and went on our way, returning to dorm floor full of guys waiting and wanting to know every detail.

So where am I going with this here?

Personal life experiences can shape how we develop empathy for others. Compared to what so many other people have experienced, especially persons of color, my getting “pulled over” was nothing. We were not thrown on the ground. The shotgun in my face seemed excessive, but no one fired their weapons or hurt us, except for Phil getting a bump on his head. We were pulled over because our car nearly matched a car driven by someone who committed a crime. We were not pulled over for “driving while white.”

Fifty years later I can still remember every detail of that encounter. I remember being scared. And yet, compared to the trauma that countless persons of color have experienced over many generations, this was nothing. Even so, this experience changed how I listen to other people’s stories. And that’s a good thing. Not because I will ever claim to “understand,” what someone else has experienced, but because I can now listen and feel a little empathy, (at least), for others in their pain.

Empathy is a quality of Christian caregiving. Empathy can help bring healing in this time where we regularly we hear voices persuading us to “de-humanize” each other. Trauma damages our physical, mental, and spiritual health. Healing is at the heart of God’s good news through Jesus Christ. I pray this will happen for us all.

I wonder what you’ve experienced that has helped you feel empathy for others?

Let us pray:

Help us listen to the experiences of others, O lord, and help our listening develop empathy within us so that compassionately we can build bridges between each other. We pray especially for all those in law enforcement who daily put themselves in harms way. Protect them so they can well serve and protect the public. Guide their actions so that harm will not come from mistaken identities or from hurtful interactions with people either being at the wrong place at the wrong time, or being under suspicion simply because of the color of their skin. May the development of empathy and compassion happen with all of us as we listen and learn from each other. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

P.S. It may be a challenge to find the right song. Bobby Fuller's "I fought the law, and the law won" fits thematically, but where's the gospel? Same with "I Shall Be Released" by Bob Dylan or "Jailhouse Rock" by Elvis. I found *Psalm 91* to be powerful as well as the old hymn *God Will Take Care of You*.

Psalm 91 by Esther Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67wC6-kWWS0>

Psalm 91 Bible In Song

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_N-kv7KGM0

Psalm 91 Renew Collective

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HLIF2Dq570>

God Will Take Care of You Fountainview

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4Ez8m2ozf4>

God Will Take Care of You SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijytLs96yig>

Let Justice Roll by Soteria Music Ministries Australia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBhGbtXCBC8&t=122s>

God of Justice (We must Go) Tim Hughes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3NeIRb1LY4>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, June 26, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #97

In Praise of Closed Captioning.

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright.

² *Praise the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.*

³ *Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. (Ps. 33:1-3 NRS)*

What started out as an annoying remote-control malfunction ended up becoming a wonderful family sing-along.

I hadn't seen my cousins for a long time and not their children since they were small. But we all ended up at my uncle's place in Oriental, NC for a Thanksgiving get together. As typical of reunions, after dining and walking and football, it's time to pick out a DVD movie to watch.

"*Oh Brother, Where Art Thou*" was the choice that evening. My uncle had a brand-new big screen TV set. It worked fine, except for one thing: once the DVD was inserted, "*closed captioning*" was stuck in the "on" position, and no one could figure out how to turn it off.

"*Oh Brother*" is not a musical, but there is a lot of music in it, and one piece in particular was the Alison Kraus classic, "*Down in the River to Pray*." Because the captions were displayed, one of my cousins started singing along with it. Then another. And another. Then harmony. Then louder. I had no idea they (we) were also such good singers. For the rest of the movie, we sang along with every song.

So what was at first an annoyance turned out to be quite a blessing, revealing some family talents we might not have experienced that night. Imagine if we had "*The Sound of Music*." We'd all be in tears at "*Edelweiss*."

I wonder how many times something annoying turns out to be a blessing. Like getting lost and discovering a cool new place you've never been before? Or being out of a food ingredient and discovering something substituted actually made it better? Or having your electricity go out and rediscovering the joy of playing an old board game?

Let us pray.

We thank you, O God, for the small but wonderful surprises that enliven our days. We are grateful for all those wonderful little things, that often come when we least expect it, or even when annoyed or inconvenienced. For all these little gifts, we sing your praises. Continue to bless those who are dealing with illness, uncertainty, and distress. For healing and hope we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. Perhaps you would like to sing along to “*Down in the River to Pray*” today. Here you can.

Down in the River to Pray Allison Kraus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCnmYSIzZBc>

Down in the River to Pray Shenandoah Christian Music Camp (note the Mennonite and Brethren attire)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzejzO8ag2k>

Down in the River to Pray by The King’s Singers (notes included for a great for sing along)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5nQW1dXn2E>

Down in the River to Pray by the Schola Diffusa Virtual Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmBHBUFU3ZA>

....and since I mentioned it.. how about *Edelweiss*?

Edelweiss by Vienna Boys Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0JcOrQKNU0>

Edelweiss by Coro Mozart

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAS6ngN2ICI>

and of course *Edelweiss* by Julie Andrews (with lyrics... so sing along)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUBKrxvQYhA>

and finally Andre Rieu on violin with some cows standing by (hadn’t seen that before)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yj5lqDx4Z9U>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, June 27 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #98

Let's talk about smoking.

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. (Gal. 5:13-15 NRS)

Before I begin, let me admit something I thought about while awakening recently to a new devotional idea. Sometimes it might be that these devotionals veer more toward "Op-Eds" (Opinion Editorials) than traditional "Christ in our Home" daily devotionals. When I miss the mark here, please believe it comes from good intentions to try to express how Christian faith is not just a theoretical spiritual exercise, but rather something with real world implications. This devotion is rooted in the Galatian passage above.

But first ... Let's talk about smoking.

I am old enough to remember when smoking rights/privileges were pretty much equivalent to First Amendment rights about free speech. People smoked everywhere (just about). In every public space, (even indoors) people freely smoked. They smoked in restaurants, movie theaters, hospital rooms, doctor's offices, church fellowship halls, planes, trains, even seminary classrooms. People smoked not only in their own homes, but also in the homes of people who didn't smoke. It was considered a breach of hospitality not to offer someone an ashtray if they desired to smoke.

I'm not making this up. In the 40's and 50's, smoking was considered a healthful, relaxing habit. It was not until 1964 that the U.S. Surgeon General first made public the health risks of smoking. In the 1970's some restrictions began to emerge, but not until the 1990's did reports of the adverse effects of secondhand smoke begin to accelerate restrictions, like creating smoking and non-smoking sections of restaurants and other public places. It wasn't until 2009 that complete smoke free environments began to be widely enforced.

I remember the resistance to smoking bans and even shifts in hospitality toward smokers visiting in someone's home. I smoked back then; I remember my own resistance. For non-smokers, it was hard to ask smokers to smoke outside, but it happened, and in time smokers realized it was going to be this way forevermore. Smokers were free in their own home to smoke whenever they wanted, but it was no longer their "right" to light up in public places whenever they wished.

I am wondering if it might be helpful to remember how smoking behaviors changed over time as we ask/require people to wear masks during a deadly pandemic? We know both smoking and

Covid-19 kills. We have already learned with smoking that it's one thing if someone wants to risk their own health for themselves, but quite another for someone to put another at risk through secondhand smoke.

Breathing coronavirus is like breathing secondhand smoke. Except it is more deadly. Someone may be years from death by breathing secondhand smoke, but another just a weeks away from death if they are unable to produce antibodies from being infected by coronavirus aerosol.

Wearing masks should not be a free speech issue, just as the right to smoke was never a free speech issue. Paul's letter to the Galatians gives guidance here. Here it is again.

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. (Gal. 5:13-15 NRS)

Paul talks about freedom here too, but freedom to love for the health and well-being of all. Sometimes in quoting this passage, we omit the 15th verse which demonstrates the risk of self-indulgence and self-serving. Today, perhaps it may serve as a prophetic warning. We all lose by not caring for one other.

This virus can consume us all. Failing to make change our behaviors, as advised by health experts, will cause much suffering, regrettably multiplied by those who prize their personal freedom and rights over the health and wellbeing of those around them.

Let us pray.

We pray for a world continuing to suffer on account of the deadly pandemic. Bring guidance and wisdom to those who can make a difference as they demonstrate their concern for others. Change the hearts, we pray, of those who are stubbornly defying those practices that can make this world safer. We pray for our health care workers and all those involved in research and treatment. Draw close to us all, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. I hope you find a song/hymn you like today.

The Greatest Commandment Porter's Gate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEIUWTNsYXU>

Love One Another by Bob Dufford, S.J.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j00nL_6oAPQ

When Pain of the World Surrounds Us by Good Shepherd Lancaster (singing and lyrics after organ intro.. (this hymn was new to me even though it is ELW 704

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9GbRepA7D4>

Recommended in ELW under healing is this one:

In the Singing In the Silence ELW 466 by Martin Luther Lutheran Youngstown OH

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJ6nv5E5Z5I>

Blessed Are the Merciful Porter's Gate Project

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eI5Yweg00M>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday June 28, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #99

Old Hundreth.

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

² *Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing.*

³ *Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

⁴ *Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.*

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵ *For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*

(Ps. 100:1-5 NRS)

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him all creatures here below;

Praise Him above ye heavenly host,

Praise Father Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

In coming to this 100th devotion, there seemed no better scripture or hymn than "Psalm 100" and "Old Hundreth", also known as the "Doxology," literally "Glory Saying" from the Greek, but also well known as "All People That On Earth Do Dwell." Many other hymn texts also fit this tune.

What I did not know until further investigating was that old "Old Hundreth" is actually hundreds of years old, (469 this year) Going back to Reformation times, it was written in 1551 by French composer Louis Bourgeois and related to John Calvin's efforts to encourage the Psalms to be sung in worship the local language (in this case French).

The original French version was based on "Psalm 134", but became associated later with "Psalm 100" when Scottish Bible translator and hymnwriter William Keith penned "All People That On Earth Do Dwell."

The version most often sung to this tune is the "Doxology," written in 1674 by English Bishop Thomas Ken. This is the version I remember singing most in my church, especially when it was time to start the potluck suppers and no one wanted to "say grace." I can still hear "I guess we can always sing the Doxology." I also remember feeble attempts at harmonizing this lovely melody.

"Old Hundreth" might have been one of the original "praise songs." It was certainly a contemporary song in its day. It has certainly stood the test of time not only for its timeless lyrics, but also for its timeless melody that will always be beautiful.

So, on this **100th** “*St. Paul’s In Your Home Daily Devotional*,” I am thankful to join the host of God’s children over many centuries in praising God for a wonderful life, and especially for the wonder of being able to experience the joy of Christian community.

Let us pray.

We praise you O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the gift of life, the wonder of creation, and all the wonderful creatures you have made. We pray for all your people, our brothers and sisters whom you have made, and for all who look to you today, whether in thanksgiving or with a deep and desperate need. Bless us, we pray with hope for the future so that we can continue to sing your praises. Amen.

P.S. It’s going to all “*Old Hundreth*” today, done by quite a variety of performers, but all very engaging. Most will be the “*Doxology*,” but several will be “*All People That On Earth Do Dwell*.” I believe you’ll enjoy sampling these.

Voluntary on *Old Hundreth* for Brass and Organ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Tw9LdpkZvU>

Old Hundreth at West Point Chapel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRM6fx4NnFM>

Doxology by Virtual Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEMUgYqf5hl>

Doxology by Maverick City Music featuring Alton Eugene

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLamGZjeISU>

Doxology by Anthem Lights and Selah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQUTvMtUhw4>

Doxology by Covenant Christian High School Choirs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I90OUW856x4>

Doxology by Stars Go Dim

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RR4bBnmFGHA>

Doxology by Antioch AME Zion

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEA0F7c1sGQ>

Doxology/ Halleluia by Tasha Combs Leonard, David and Nicole Binion

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEA0F7c1sGQ>

Voluntary on Old Hundreth by Windcorp Brass Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JusRL9OTtpg>

Old Hundreth adapted as a funeral *Song of Farewell*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4RJJfyDhhE>

All People that on Earth Do Dwell by Keith Getty

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6ldQNsFUEw>

All People That On Earth Do Dwell.. the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Celebration

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=us2O62TTqYA>

and finally a nice Pipe Organ version...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnaH4FRvfWA>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, June 29, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #100

An historic constitutional change welcoming women into full ministry.

²⁷ *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

²⁸ *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* (Gal. 3:27-28 NRS)

Today marks the 50th Anniversary since the Lutheran Church in America voted to change its constitution bylaws about ordination from “man” to “person.”

This wasn't part of political correctness against the notion that “man” already meant “men and women.” No. In the history of the Lutheran Church in America and all its predecessor church bodies (and the American Lutheran Church), “man” literally meant “male.”

Therefore, it took a constitutional bylaw change for the church to open the door for women to serve in the church as ordained Lutheran pastors.

After so many years where only men were pastors, it was an often-difficult transition for congregations to consider a woman pastor. In some cases, it still is.

How did things change? The first thing I observed when people heard great preaching from a woman is that a good sermon is a good sermon. Even people uncomfortable with women in the pulpit were soon to acknowledge when the gospel was well proclaimed. Some of that may have been due to how women in seminary often worked a lot harder than their male counterparts. In my seminary classes, our women students regularly excelled. While a good student is a good student, I believe many women felt they had to prove themselves.

It has been quite wonderful for me to experience this positive change for the church. For most, men in women in ministry has become an equal partnership, and that has been a blessing for the whole church. So happy anniversary to that door opening!

I remember one story that showed how times have changed. It was shared by one of our women pastors after she left her parish to come to another church. She had served in her parish long enough for her to baptize a little guy and see him grow into an outspoken four-year-old. She was the only pastor he had known. At synod assembly, her successor told her about the first time he met the little guy.

As the boy was introduced to the new pastor, he looked at him, and after a moment of thought blurted out, “You can't be a pastor!” “Why not?” the new pastor replied. “Because you're a man!”

Cute story. Times change. And this has been a good change. Happily, most in the church don't give a lot of thought any more about pastors being men or women. They just want good pastors! Good preachers, effective teachers, compassionate caregivers, devoted in prayer, and skilled at congregational leadership.

Let us pray.

On this fiftieth anniversary of opening the door to women called into pastoral leadership, we give thanks for all those gifted and called to serve ... Bless our pastors as well as all who serve your church in many ways. Raise up for your church gifted servants of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world. Thank you for opening our hearts to the scriptures so that we can identify many gifts for ministry. Bless all who are called to share your gospel today. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. Some hymns and songs about calling seem right today:

I have called you by Name Nordic Choir Luther College

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqJDtH0IDPc>

I have called you by name by Hatfield Church South Africa

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqJDtH0IDPc>

We Are Called St Paul Choir (with music for sing-a-long)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsQ_kANdM6U

Jesus Calls Us Hymn Channel BBC

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhQ8TfjB1M>

Jesus Calls Us Sisters of OLOGC

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-fq9vIJLLM>

Jesus Calls Us O'er The Tumult Zion Baptist the Bahamas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-8NBROOxQ>

We Are Called

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZtPYS76ZMA>

We are Called, We Are Chosen, We Are Christ For One Another Tom Conry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HP2gwC5TGFs>

We Are Called St. Paul the Apostle NYC

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdj4N8FMYeY>

Jesus Calls Us O'er The Tumult by Prince George Winah Episcopal Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYIQw8w2TEw>

When There Is Nothing I Can Do to Fix Things

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

The above title and verse was written by my cousin Heidi Kvinge, who composed it for her church's Lenten devotion ten years ago.

That was shortly before she died at age 55 after being diagnosed four months earlier with inoperable pancreatic cancer.

When Heidi learned she had a very aggressive form of pancreatic cancer, she had the option to try to extend her life with an equally aggressive regimen of chemotherapy. She did one treatment, but it made her so sick that she opted for plan B. She and her husband and two kids quickly planned and travelled to Norway for a family vacation. It was a dream trip they always wanted to do.

Within days of choosing plan B, they put the whole trip together, took the kids out of school, and went. Even though it was winter, and Heidi was sick, she was well enough for them to create a beautiful family memory together. She wrote the following devotional after returning.

With so many persons facing uncertain health outcomes due to the pandemic, it is worth looking at how one person (who knew she was dying) pondered her own end.

When There Is Nothing I Can Do to Fix Things

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Since I was recently diagnosed with a serious illness, one I may not survive, I have had many people tell me that they were praying for me. Some have also added me to prayer lists around the country. I have always wondered about the purpose of intercessory prayer, especially when I know that many prayers for miraculous healings go unfulfilled. I've also wondered about the value of praying for strangers with no personal connection.

Being the recipient of this outpouring of prayer has given me a new perspective. While as a Christian, I do not fear death, even if it seems earlier than I or my family would have wished, the passage through illness is still daunting. I have found that there are many days where I do not have the strength to pray for myself and need to lean on the prayers of others. When people tell me directly that they are praying for me, with that extra concern that comes from knowing and caring about a friend or relation, it is a special blessing. These prayers bring strength and hope to myself, my husband, and my children as we pass through these difficult times.

Both my husband and I are in engineering fields. We are used to diagnosing problems, designing solutions and fixing things. We can't "fix" this illness but have to rely on God and the skills he has given to medical professionals to see us through to whatever outcome is ahead of us. We are completely dependent on the grace of God, poured out on us through the prayers of fellow Christians. It is an amazing and humbling experience.

Dear Lord,

Thank you for promising that your grace is sufficient for us, no matter what our circumstances. Let our weakness provide the opportunity for your power to shine forth.

Amen

Heidi Kvinge

A final thought from Pastor Mark: Heidi was on our prayer list too, just as have been many over the years. I am proud that when I say our church is praying for someone this not just an expression, but it is real people gathering regularly (and even now by Zoom) to lift up those who have asked for intercession.

Here are some prayer themed songs:

Sweet Hour of Prayer by Radiance Acapella from Zimbabwe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ph43J3pnBDo>

Sweet Hour of Prayer by Alan Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krDrQD2kzOM>

O Lord Hear My Prayer (Taize)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nCy2j07ECM>

I Need Thee Every Hour Anthem Lights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTdyD4Q3uHc>

Standing in the Need of Prayer by Jesus Own Kids

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMxfCvEct_s

Take Oh Take Me As I Am by John Bell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0GBZCvHPxY>

Take Oh Take Me As I Am by Stifttsgarten Ratvik

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gndLKNFPfWU>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, July 1, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #102

22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

(Rom. 7:22-25 NRS)

Time to topple Martin Luther statues? Or not?

We don't have many. I know there's one at Lenoir-Rhyne College, Luther College, and Wartburg Seminary. Since Luther wasn't a Civil War General, nobody is currently storming those few places that display statues of Martin Luther. Nevertheless, the controversy over other statues is causing me to ponder Martin Luther's legacy and the effect of honoring him with a statue.

But "What's that?" you say. What on earth are you talking about? *Our* Martin Luther? The founder of our church? The one who got everyone to pay attention to being "justified by faith." The one who wrote some of the greatest hymns in the history of the church? The one who stood for Jesus and against the church? The creator of the Christmas tree tradition? The great teacher, reformer, Bible scholar and translator?

Not our Martin Luther?

We don't usually talk about Luther's dark side, except to say he wasn't perfect, or to remind everyone that he spoke of being saint and sinner at the same time. And because there are more than 55 volumes of such gracious, thoughtful, scholarly, deep, insightful work, full of proclamation of the gospel, emphasizing God's word alone, we have always hoped this is enough to overlook his harsh rhetoric, and especially that terrible piece he wrote against the Jews, ("The Jews and Their Lies") something that was used by Adolph Hitler in defense of Hitler's "Final Solution."

But since we're talking about other statues, let's talk about Luther statues too.

I recently pulled off my shelf about this called "*Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics 1531-46*" by Mark U. Edwards. I first met Mark Edwards when he was a history professor at Purdue before moving to Harvard Divinity School and later becoming President of St. Olaf College before returning to Harvard as a Dean. At Purdue we were often mistaken for each other (the beard, hair, and glasses).

In his book, Edwards introduces us to this darker side of Luther, describing how, by Luther's own admission, Luther was an angry man. Anger was Luther's special sin. But when directed against the enemies of God, anger helped him, he said, to write well, to pray, and to preach: "Anger refreshes all my blood, sharpens my mind, and drives away temptations."

Luther knew some were offended by his harshness and anger, but he explained, "I was born to war with fanatics and devils. Thus my books are very stormy and bellicose. I must root out the stumps and trunks,

hew away the thorns and briar, fill in the puddles. I am the rough woodsman, who must pioneer and hew a path."

During the Peasants War of 1525, for example, he was invited to be a mediator, and tried to offer a peaceful treatise. When that failed, he wrote *Against the Robbing and Murdering Horde of Peasants*, in which he urged the princes to "*smite, strangle, and stab [the peasants], secretly or openly, for nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you and a whole land with you.*"

The peasants ended up brutally suppressed, and Luther's advocacy of their violent repression has remained controversial to this day.

In 1543, Luther published "[On the Jews and Their Lies](#)," in which he called them "*base and whoring people full of the devil's feces . . . they wallow in like swine.*" Luther had all sorts of ideas for what to do with the Jews, including the wholesale liquidation of their synagogues, even homes, and a ban on the teaching of their rabbis "on pain of loss of life and limb."

According to Edwards, these extreme views came from Luther's reading of the Bible. He was convinced that practically from the beginning of the world, there had been a perpetual struggle between the true and false church. What happened to the prophets and apostles could and would happen to the church of his day.

Therefore, Luther concluded the papacy was the Antichrist. Protestant opponents were "false brethren," like those who had plagued the true prophets and apostles. The Turks, who threatened Europe from the east, were a clear sign of the end times: they were Gog and the little horn in the Book of Daniel. Jews were a rejected people suffering God's wrath for rejecting the true Messiah.

Behind all these members of the false church loomed the Devil, the father of lies. Often Luther directed his attacks not at his human opponents but at the Devil, whom he saw as their master. Of course, no language was too harsh when attacking the Devil.

All this got worse as Luther's health declined, but with grit and determination he was active in writing until the very end. Luther was afflicted with heart, kidney, and bowel problems, along with severe bouts of depression.

We know from our own experiences that when we are not well, we are not our best selves. For Luther, his worst self in his later years was multiplied, and his harsh words often did harm, even though behind his words were good intentions of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ for all the world to believe.

In pondering this dark side of Luther, I am reminded of a quote by Roman Catholic Sister Helen Prejean. She was known for ministering to a convicted murderer on death row. I'm sure she said this many times, but she also said it to me when I met her once at UNCW: "People are more than the worst things they have ever done." What an insightful assertion.

Luther did many great things for the world and for the church. This is not to excuse his worst things, but to put them in a larger context. Just as St. Paul was brutally honest about himself when he talked about his

own contradictions (“Wretched man that I am...”), likewise when Luther spoke of himself as “*simul justus et peccator*” (“*at the same time saint and sinner*”), he was honest.

This self-understanding is reflected as Luther described why he did not want to be honored by the church taking his name:

"The first thing I ask is that people should not make use of my name, and should not call themselves Lutherans, but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone. St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3, would not tolerate Christians calling themselves Pauls or Peters, but only Christians. How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?"

Reading this, I don't believe Luther would be too keen on Luther statues, especially if it brought on unwanted attention toward him, and especially on those things that would turn people away from Jesus Christ his Lord. But looking at the whole of Luther, he was certainly far more than the worst things he wrote. In every statue in this country, he is holding the Bible, reminding us first and foremost to keep steadfast in God's Word.

Let us pray:

We thank you for all who, by their work, have strengthened the ministry of Jesus. We thank you for all the good Martin Luther did to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Thank you, that despite Luther's many serious failings, we can look to him like we look at ourselves, as forgiven sinners. Forgive us all, O God, and bless us now with strength and courage to minister to each other, centered in the love of Christ for all people. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

P.S. Even the Roman Catholics have “*A Mighty Fortress*” in their hymnals today. A good hymn is a good hymn even when written by someone with anger issues. Let's take another listen, and finish with “*Lord, Keep Us Stead Fast In Your Word.*”

A Mighty Fortress Organ Solo by John Cavicchio

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVN0ClcqRYs>

A Mighty Fortress played on Organ at historic castle church, Wittenberg, Germany

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tMcfvirv9s>

A Mighty Fortress virtual choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4EoLm3_luM&t=149s

A Mighty Fortress Heartsong at Cedarville University

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT6HQ1QaU4>

A Mighty Fortress by Chris Rice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UI9g5NQk6AI>

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast In Your Word by Koine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teI3ayeBxX0>

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast Choral Arrangement with notes by Concordia Publishing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDsgtjBGMNs>

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast played at Wittenberg Church door on guitar.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wugQSCl1mNc>

St. Paul's In Your Home Devotional for Thursday, July 2, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #103

No Lutheran Churches In Taiwan? Really?

^{NRS} **Romans 5:1** *Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (Rom. 5:1 NRS)*

When our organist at Our Saviour Lutheran Church in West Lafayette, Indiana was on sabbatical leave with her husband, we were most fortunate to find an excellent long-term substitute. Hwei Chun was a graduate student from Taiwan and grew up active in Taiwan's Presbyterian Church.

In talking to her about her church background and now working in a Lutheran church, I was surprised to learn from her there were no Lutheran churches in Taiwan. She had never, in fact, ever heard of the Lutheran Church.

This was particularly puzzling to me as I was about to go with several family members on a trip to China and Hong Kong, where I knew we had a Lutheran Seminary. Puzzling. So I focused on my other important little mission, which was to get Hwei Chun to write a note in Chinese about my garlic allergy that I could show the servers and have them point out what foods on the buffet to avoid.

One of the highlights of our trip turned out to be a visit to the seminary in Hong Kong. It was not officially on the tour, but the daughter of one of our pastors on tour was a roommate in college with the daughter of the president of the seminary. Therefore, several of us arranged to go there.

The president showed us wonderful hospitality along with his wife, who was the head librarian. She gave me several materials, including a brochure that showed the church logo and name. She took extra time to explain the Chinese characters for the church, when "lo" she explained the name. She showed me the characters for "church", and then the name before it, which when translated literally came out "*The Justification by Faith Church.*"

Aha, Hwei Chun was absolutely right! There was no Chinese "*Lutheran*" Church, not by that name, anyway. It was the "*Justification by Faith Church!*" Martin Luther would have loved that (see yesterday's devotion).

When I returned home, I showed Hwei Chun the cover of the brochure with the church seal, and immediately she said, "*Oh... the 'speaking Chinese name' church is very active in Taiwan!*"

To repeat, Luther would have loved that name, since it describes the heart of our faith, which is not devotion to Luther, but being right with God through Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

We thank you for the gospel of Jesus Christ, and for all who have shared this good news around the world. We especially pray for those sharing your gospel in countries not always so welcoming. We remember in our prayers today your whole world struggling to be well or stay well. Encourage all those who look to you for hope and healing. We pray for all the health care workers and those dealing with every kind of conflict. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. Since I was speaking of the “*Justification by Faith*” Church, it would have been great to find a JBF Church Choir. I might need a Chinese Keyboard and knowledge of Chinese. I did, however find some wonderful songs and hymns sung in Chinese by Chinese Christians. You’ll recognize the tunes for sure. Enjoy.

The Kingdom by Chinese Christian Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYpmJMpEU7w>

Steal Away National Taiwan University Chorus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hel1Dka-Z3Y>

Regina Caeli by National Taiwan University Chorus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1LapfuvJl4>

What A Friend We Have In Jesus by Penang Chinese Church Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOWxUSpN0GQ>

What a Friend Andrew Hwang (note Chinese subtitles. I suspect singing is either Mandarin or Cantonese, and subtitles translate to the other)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHd8gFYjGdY>

Because He Lives also in Chinese in small group worship setting

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOMaxZc7xiE>

Because He Lives and medley by another Chinese acapella group called Heavenly Melody

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keaP-gowEVI>

True Pundits and False Epidemiologists versus False Pundits and True Epidemiologists.

¹¹ And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the LORD: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years." At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way. ¹² Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah:¹³ Go, tell Hananiah, Thus says the LORD: You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! ¹⁴ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations so that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they shall indeed serve him; I have even given him the wild animals.

¹⁵ And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. ¹⁶ Therefore thus says the LORD: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the LORD." ¹⁷ In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died. (Jer. 28:11-17 NRS)

We've had a couple Old Testament Readings from Jeremiah these past couple of Sundays. That has prompted me to recall the big conflict between prophets Jeremiah and Hananiah. We read that these two had very competing messages.

Hananiah told the king and the people that all was going to be well. The threat of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon would be gone within two years. Hananiah told them exactly what they wanted to hear, and he was by far the popular prophet of the time. Jeremiah dealt with a lot of criticism for his warnings that all was not going to be well.

With two completely different messages, one prophet was a true prophet, and the other a false one. So which one was a true prophet; which one was a false prophet, and how did they know?

At the time they delivered the messages, it was hard to tell, but most certainly it was tempting to favor Hananiah, who calmed their fears by saying everything was going to be just fine. But in the end, however, they discovered Jeremiah to be the true prophet, for his dire message came to pass. Ahead for Judah was many years of suffering as they were exiled to Babylon. In the end, both Hananiah's message and Hananiah himself were dead, just as Jeremiah declared.

The closest thing we have today to prophets speaking the truth to our times, might be the political pundits and epidemiologists. Both have offered observations (and predictions) about what will happen as this coronavirus epidemic progresses.

We have heard messages that encourage us to open up the economy and get back to normal. We have heard messages that indicate the importance of taking great precautions to protect the public from viral spread.

Like in Jeremiah's time, we are tempted to favor words that tell us everything is fine, or at least not as worrisome as others suggest. At that this point, we hope they are right. Everyone wants to freedom to work and play as we did before. We all want it to be over so we can get back to life as we enjoyed it.

But if the political pundits are wrong, and the epidemiologists and scientists are right, (meaning we must do more than we are thus far willing to do), we may be in for a lot more suffering and many deaths.

It's too soon to tell. But the pundits who told us this coronavirus is no worse than a cold, or mild strain of flu, or that it would be over soon, or not to worry because most won't hardly get sick at all.... well, already we're seeing this isn't true.

I know people of faith are rightly saying we just need to trust God and we'll get through this just fine. I don't disagree with the "*get through this,*" but maybe not "*just fine.*" Every interview with someone who has gotten painfully sick is begging the rest of us to do everything we can (like wear masks and practice physical distance), persuades me to favor the epidemiologists. I am moved by the interviews with doctors, nurses and front-line workers in hot spots who are begging for testing, tracing, and mask wearing.

We shall keep praying and keep thanking God for every precious day where healthy breath is freely breathed. And hopefully practice what the practitioners preach.

Let us pray.

We continue to pray for hope and healing among the world's people, especially from the deadly coronavirus. Bless those who work tirelessly to minister to those who are sick, especially those on the front lines who daily risk their own lives to save others. Guide all those who study this, and other viruses to discern the best ways to treat and protect people. We pray that all who speak to the public as experts speak truth like Jeremiah and not simply say what people want to hear, like Hananiah. Bless all for whom we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S.

Finding YouTube songs that fit the theme of the devotion is often like Alice going down the rabbit hole in Wonderland. Where is this taking me? When I could find no "prophecy" section in the ELW Hymnal, I googled "Prophesy Hymns" and found a list to check out. "*Handwriting on the Wall*" is new to me, as is "*Babylon is Falling.*" These are not out of the Lutheran tradition, but I found

them quite engaging. I'll try to add a Lutheran standard at the end "just in case" your eyebrows are so raised you can't get your eyes shut again.

Handwriting on the Wall by Dottie Peoples and the People's Choice Chorale

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pseEVLE4ioU>

Handwriting on the Wall by Dorothy Coates and Gospel Harmonettes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNG2LTtWRXY>

Handwriting on the Wall by Clara Ward

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByOHTgShaoQ>

Babylon is Fallen by John Roberts and Tony Barrand

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hk28yXhmQjY>

Babylon is Fallen by Brass Farthing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoaxqZbkPOM>

Babylon's Falling by Little Singers of Armenia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQ5coeBnBlS>

Babylon's Falling by Cantares of Argentina

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZtmxu7-8Qo>

Babylon's Falling Choir from Bulgaria

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sRY2BVUbxM>

and as a bonus... *Isaiah, A Mighty Seer in Days of Old*, a bonified sing along Luther Hymn about the Prophet Isaiah with words and music by Martin Luther (but performed in a more contemporary style by Koine.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFh2F0VeaKM>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, July 4, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #105

God Bless America.

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. (Gen. 12:2 NRS)*

On this **Independence Day** I recall one of the great patriotic hymns of our time, "*God Bless America.*" It was not until recent years that I learned more about this popular song.

Did you know "*God Bless America*" was originally written by the great American composer Irving Berlin in 1918 to be part of a musical at a summer camp? Berlin actually left it out of the finished musical, and the song sat idle for 20 years.... until 1938.

The song was then revised and given to Kate Smith, a native North Carolinian, known then as the "First Lady of Radio." Kate Smith performed it on the radio for the first time on November 10, 1938... on Armistice Day 82 years ago this year.

Why Armistice Day? First, that is the day which marked the end of World War I. However, Armistice Day 1938 was also a time when Adolph Hitler was coming to power in Germany. In "*God Bless America's*" debut version, there is an introduction that recognizes the unrest brewing in Nazi Germany and provides the context to what Irving Berlin has composed as a prayer for our nation in a world where there are many enemies of freedom.

Here is the introduction:

*"While the storm clouds gather ...far across the sea,
let us swear allegiance ... to a land that's free.
Let us all be grateful ... for a land so fair,
... as we raise our voices ... in a solemn prayer..."*

Following this invitation to solemn prayer, comes the chorus, which is widely known:

*"God Bless America, land that I love.
Stand beside her ... and guide her ...
Through the night ..with a light ... from above.
From the mountains ... to the prairies,
To the oceans ... white with foam.
God Bless America, my home sweet home.
God Bless America, my home sweet home."*

God bless America and all of you ... on this (hopefully safe and) Happy Fourth of July!!!

*Oh.... about that Bible verse... It seemed the perfect verse to go along with “*God Bless America*,” but it should, (offering full disclosure) here, be mentioned that it’s not exactly about *America*. The “you” God is speaking to is Abram, who will be the Father of a great nation which is properly understood as *Israel*. If I added the next verse, we might be able to make a connection to America, “*I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” (Gen. 12:3 NRS. So ... If we think of “God Blessing Israel” and through Israel all the families of the earth being blessed, we can then include “God bless America.”

Let us pray:

Almighty and ever living God of all the nations. On this day of celebrating our Independence as citizens and residents of the United States of America, we begin by honoring all men and women throughout our history who have given of themselves so that America could become the land of the free and the home of the brave. We thank you for the hard work and sacrifices of our founding fathers and mothers who embraced a homeland ... where we could continue to welcome those from distant shores who also shared dreams of peace, freedom, and opportunities for their families. Forgive us for those times we failed to live up to our own ideals, and help us find a path forward to be a nation we can all be proud of. Bless our land and all who serve and have served their country. In Jesus Name.

P.S. I am happy I found a clip of Kate Smith introducing this “new” song in a 1943 movie.

God Bless America Kate Smith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmfeNq5x5aQ>

God Bless the USA by Lee Greenwood (a brand new version featuring Singing Sergeants and Home Free

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gs0fxy8rHo8>

God Bless America Denver Brass Flash Mob (we long for those days of gatherings like this)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDdY46iAwHI>

America the Beautiful US Navy Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSqVkuTegxY>

Battle Hymn of the Republic by US Army Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jy6AOGRsR80>

America Medley by Anthem Lights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NugUSJIFrel>

God Bless Our Native Land by Jeff Windoloski on pipe organ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aMX7suYF-8>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, July 5, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #106

When a good song is sung at the wrong service.

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. 2 The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. (Exod. 15:1-2 NRS)

There are numerous examples in scripture when events were commemorated in song. The experience of Moses leading the chosen people out of Egypt and bondage to slavery. They remembered this event in song, and even today, Jews sing *"The Horse and Rider/I Will Sing Unto The Lord"* to remember this.

There are lots of good songs commemorating many things. People have many favorite songs. Just because a song is good, or popular does not mean it is a good song for any given worship service. Here are two examples (in my opinion).

When I was a new parish pastor in Caldwell, Texas, I was invited by one of my members to attend a friend's son wedding in a neighboring town. The service would be for about two hundred, but the reception at a lodge in Old Dime Box was preparing for eight hundred, with live music and many many kegs of beer (and with that, I knew I was not attending a wedding in the pious Norwegian Lutheran tradition).

The wedding service was nice, but what I will remember about it most was the featured solo just after the vows. It was *Father and Son*, by Cat Stevens. Apparently, it was a favorite of the bride and groom, and I like it too.... but... what it is about is a father and son who are alienated from each other. The first verse begins like this:

*It's not time to make a change
Just relax, take it easy
You're still young, that's your fault
There's so much you have to know
Find a girl, settle down
If you want you can marry
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy*

Okay, there is a little wedding imagery here... but if it's not time to make a change, what are you saying, dad? Father continues with another verse but encouraging Son to take his time...Then the son sings:

*How can I try to explain? 'Cause when I do he turns away again
It's always been the same, same old story
From the moment I could talk I was ordered to listen
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away
I know I have to go*

Whoa!!! What is this groom saying to his dad by choosing a song with these lyrics? At the very least, the words do not fit with a festive wedding where, by all estimation, Father and Son were actually close.

Good song. But maybe not the best choice for wedding unless you really are saying “shove it” to your dad (Hope the bride’s dad was paying for all the beer).

I am also reminded of a classic folk song that became a Father’s Day tradition in a church my parents attended for a time in Arizona. The pastor and his son started singing it about the time the little guy first became comfortable singing, and it turned into an annual tradition. It was done at least a dozen times over the years.

The song is the late Harry Chapin classic, *“The Cat’s In The Cradle.”* When I saw it, it was sweet to watch this Father and Son performing together.... but.... *“Cat’s in the Cradle”* describes a boy’s desire to spend time with his dad, and the dad is always too busy. This repeats as the boy grows up, until at last the father has time. But then it’s too late. Now the boy has no time. The boy turned out just like his dad.

“Cat’s in the Cradle” is a wonderful cautionary tale of the what might be lost when time is not taken for relationship building within families. But I keep remembering that obviously close father and son singing words that describe the opposite of what they have together.

Another great song. But perhaps it misses the mark if your intent is to celebrate good fathers on Father’s Day.

Today is the Sunday of Fourth of July weekend. On these Sundays we have a tradition of including what are called *“Patriotic”* songs. Since the Fourth of July is a secular holiday and not a church festival day, we take care to select songs that are appropriate in a worship setting. We know most everyone loves singing the patriotic songs, but it is also possible for great songs not to be right for worship.

Perhaps the best examples of this would be *“I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy”* and *“Dixie.”* Great songs. Fun to Sing. But not during communion (or before, or after). *“God save the Queen”* would

be better for the United Kingdom. In a worship service where the cross is central, *"You're a Grand Old Flag"* would be better in another setting.

In our Lutheran hymnal, there is a section called *"National Songs."* It is from this list we pick our songs to sing. The common theme in these hymns is "prayer for the nation." In *"America the Beautiful,"* we pray, *"America, God shed his grace on thee..."* and *"America. God mend thine every flaw..."* *"Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory"* has been sung patriotically, especially on account of also being named *"Battle Hymn of the Republic."* Its focus is on the Lord transforming the world through truth.

"The Star-Spangled Banner" is not in the hymnal, but another wonderful hymn by Francis Scott Key is: *"Before You, Lord We Bow."* Key's faith is powerfully expressed in verse three: *"Earth, hear your maker's voice, our great redeemer own; believe, obey, rejoice, and worship God alone. Cast down you pride, your sin deplore, and bow before the crucified."*

Happy Fifth of July.

Let us pray.

Our prayers increase O Lord, for protection from coronavirus spread. As this silent enemy seeks to invade our bodies and spread throughout the planet at a time when we crave social life and independence, we pray for us all. Give us hope that the time shall come when songs of triumph and deliverance can be sung. Grant us good sense and science that helps. Forgive us for foolishness that kills. We pray for continuing hope as we assert strong and powerful healing faith amid all the unrest around us. Thank you for love that unites us all as brothers and sisters in faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. See yesterday's devotion for links to the patriotic songs. Links here will be to Horse and Rider, Father and Son, Cat's in the Cradle, Before You Lord We Bow.... and Lift High the Cross.

Father and Son by Cat Stevens w/lyrics

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yERildSsWxM>

Cat's in the Cradle by Harry Chapin w/lyrics

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OqwKfgLaeA>

Another *Cat's In the Cradle* performed live by Chapin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etundhQa724>

The Horse and the Rider (I Will Sing Unto the Lord) by Shiloh

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MID8oazqZ-8>

The Horse and the Rider song and dance at Passover Seder by Netzerim

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRR9kqjIF84>

Before You Lord, We Bow by Lutheran Songbird Project

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2oYgmMm8Ac>

Before You Lord, We Bow by Here I Stand Channel

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gYXBXMNH_4

and lastly, with timeless lyric...so shall our song of triumph ever be.. “*Lift High the Cross*”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbcBXP4AIE>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, July 6, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #107

Confessional Advice: Avoid Extremes.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn. 1:8-9 NRS)

For twenty years, these words were spoken every Sunday as part of our “*Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness*”. They became so familiar I wonder if people remembered they were lifted right out of scripture. Then followed the familiar words of confession:

Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

For me, they became so familiar that their meaning had less impact. That changed during a presentation I heard delivered by Trinity Lutheran Seminary professor Walt Bouman.

Bouman was a high energy presenter who regularly carried a briefcase full of books, and from them he pulled out things to share. One book, “*He Sent Leanness*,” by David Head, was tiny but had a big impact when he shared from it two alternative “*confessions*,” each from the point of view of what someone might actually be thinking internally while confessing.

I noted the book and later purchased a copy. You know how small it was by the price tag: \$1.95 (in hardback). From it, I'd like to share these two alternative “*General Confessions*.”

Benevolent and easy-going Father: we have occasionally been guilty of errors of judgement. We have lived under the deprivations of heredity and the disadvantages of environment. We have sometimes failed to act in accordance with common sense. We have done the best we could in the circumstances; And have been careful not to ignore the common standards of decency;

And we are glad to think that we are fairly normal. do thou, O Lord, deal lightly with our infrequent lapses. Be thy own sweet Self with those who admit they are not perfect; According to the limited tolerance which we have a right to expect from Thee. And grant as an indulgent Parent that we may hereafter continue to live a harmless and happy life and keep our self-respect.

Try reading this out loud. It sure sounds like a liturgical confession. It also reveals how one can sound religious or even sound faithful even when you look at it more deeply and see it reflects a shallowness that doesn't take sin or confession seriously. At all.

"Deal lightly with our infrequent lapses, O Lord?" Even addressing God as *"Benevolent and easy-going Father"* minimizes heartfelt and honest self-examination where we know and admit we fall and short and need God's help. Help from God isn't needed in this confession, as there isn't a real problem.

The alternative confession, by contrast takes sin seriously, but its view is so extreme that little hope comes from it. See what you think. (For emphasis, again read aloud).

Almighty Judge: we have lived far from thy ways like wild goats. We have on all occasions rebelliously followed our own inclinations. We have deliberately and shamelessly broken thy holy laws. We have never done anything we ought to have done; And we have done everything we ought not to have done; And we are utterly depraved.

We desperately miserable offenders can only expect thy harsh judgement. We live obsessed with the unrelieved knowledge of our guilt. The thought of Jesus Christ does nothing except increase the depth of our shame. We have no right to expect anything hereafter except the intolerable burden of our unrighteousness, and the hell of our eternal disgrace.

So here we have two confessional extremes. One minimizes sin so much that neither confession nor forgiveness is necessary. The other so maximizes sin through this harsh confession that forgiveness becomes impossible. Both polarizing extremes should make us chuckle at the absurdity of the positions.

It also demonstrates how the confessions we actually use in worship are honest and fair. We don't have to be defensive or make excuses. We don't need to make God's grace so cheap that it's just not required. And we don't need to exclude ourselves from God's saving grace by beating ourselves up beyond redeeming.

We neither minimize NOR maximize our failings... our sin. There is a healthy middle ground... where God's wonderful grace can, without restrictions, embrace us all.

We're thinking about confession and an honest sensible look at ourselves. But there's more. Especially these days, I wish it was easier to make the case for seeking healthy middle ground whenever extreme positions pull us apart. Confession is not just between us and God. It also happens as we seek to be honest with each other. Absolution and forgiveness is not just between us and God. It also happens mutually as we come together in honest dialogue. At least it can. With so many things tearing us apart and driven by extreme convictions, we pray for the grace to find

that healthy place where our relationship both with God and each other can be healed and restored.

Let us pray.

In looking at ourselves, each other, and you, O God, we pray for grace to see honestly into ourselves and faithfully into you. We pray for the means to heal our brokenness and our world, even when so deeply polarized. In this time of deep need, we ask for your mercy and help. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. *Confession and Forgiveness* themed song might be good today. Let's see what we can find:

Change My O God, by Brian Bontes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwudqCO7mSQ>

Change My Heart O God by Maryjoy Romano

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6toCCifDOMc>

Create In Me A Clean Heart O God by Don Moen

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AYoe_keWsA

Create A Clean Heart by Tania and Eric Lagerstrom

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GR8PyKeznmo>

Lord Jesus Think On Me by Christianna Helwig

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqQ1IPOIZwA>

Lord Jesus Think on Me by Soul Sanctuary Choir (listen for spirited transition)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8zwEOYRHHE>

Turn Thy Face From My Sins by Thomas Attwood sung by rovCantoDilode (great choral piece)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtqiY795sUM>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday July 7, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #108

If only we could see things from God's perspective...

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

(Ps. 8:1-5 NRS)

Whenever I have been puzzled or confounded or distressed I have regularly found myself returning to the words I wrote above... *"If only we could see things from God's perspective..."* and following that with the affirmation *"then we would know everything is going to work out okay."*

The fourteenth century English mystic Julian of Norwich (1342-1419) had a similar perspective when she wrote:

"And so our Good Lord answered to all the questions and doubts which I could raise, saying most comfortingly: I may make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well,... And you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well... and in these... words, God wishes us to be enclosed in peace"

"All will be well" is Julian of Norwich's oft quoted summary of her trust and optimism in God's promises. *"All will be well."*

I believe that. I believe all will be well. And I believe that if only we could see things from God's perspective, we would indeed lay aside all worry and fear and everything that daily so distresses us. From God's perspective, we would know that plan to make all things well was in place and is brought to fulfillment through Jesus Christ the Lord. Because God is in all time, at the beginning and at the end, God knows how everything is going to turn out. God knows all is well. God knows that we are secure in his love and promises. All creation is restored according to God's will and in God's own time and in God's own way.

That *"If,"* however is an *"if"* that only comes through faith and trust.

We are not God, so we cannot see things through God's eyes. We can only listen to the one who says "Follow me," and "Trust me", and "Believe in me," and all will be well.

The good news is that this is good enough. It good enough when facing every difficulty in life, to believe we are in God's good hands. God's got this. God's got us. And even if you're not blessed with the mystic visions of Julian of Norwich, you can let your own imagination be drawn through the scriptures to all those wonderful images of God in control and shaping out good future, in Jesus' name.

Let us pray:

We are sure, O God, that if we could just see things from your perspective, we would know that everything is going to work out and be well. We also know that we are mere humans and not you, so we must rely on Jesus' invitation to trust. Help us trust you in every circumstance. Help us keep believing even when we are afraid or confused or lost. During these troubling times, keep us faithful and hopeful. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. We are in God's hands. Trust.

He's God the Whole World In His Hands by Sing Hosanna

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDBJNQiugnM>

He's God the Whole World In His Hands by New Apostolic Church Silverton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYmKuipQoOE>

If You but Trust in God to Guide You by Sharon Wilson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoCf-NAFSZE>

If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee by Madeleinehymns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6iFUUoqjoY>

If You But Trust In God to Guide You by National Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m-L5QcWePA>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, July 8, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #109

The Holy Spirit as Advocate and Earworm.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

(Jn. 14:16-17 NRS)

Whether you know it as “earworm,” “brainworm,” “sticky music,” “stuck song syndrome,” or “Involuntary Musical Imagery (IMI)”, we know what it is. It’s a catchy piece of music that continually repeats in our minds long after it has stopped playing. It’s when you “can’t get that song out of your head.”

We’ve all experienced this. Different songs for different folks, but it happens the same way. You hear a song. It sticks with you. It keeps repeating. When you want it to go away, it may for a time, and then back it comes. An earworm.

During these past months of writing more than hundred devotions, I have listened to well over a thousand songs on YouTube. I discovered early on that songs have been a welcomed part of daily “St. Paul’s In Your Home.” More than five hundred songs have been attached for your meditating and listening joy. Based on feedback, I know occasionally this has had an earworm effect.

I make no apologies. In fact, I think it is good to have a song stuck in your head, especially one that that reminds you of the gospel.

An earworm is like the Holy Spirit that way.

When Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as *Paraclete* (variously translated *Advocate*, *Counselor*, *Comforter*, and *Helper*), the one who abides in you, it is quite like an earworm. God’s divine Holy Spirit presence is always singing and repeating a melody of God’s love through Jesus that we cannot get out of our head (or heart).

Nor do we want to. That’s because in a dissonant world that wants us to tune into discordant messages not focused on God, we need God to keep that clear, sweet song of Jesus’ love and hope coming back again and again. Here it comes again.

The next time you get a catchy little gospel song in your head (or a sweeping magnificent hymn), welcome it as God’s gift to you, celebrating that like an earworm, God’s Holy Spirit is not going away.

Let us pray.

Be in our heads and hearts Holy Spirit, that we might recognize your abiding presence. Like that earworm that won't go away, keep actively reminding us that we belong to you, that you created us to love and serve you and each other, that we are in this world to participate in your redeeming work through Jesus Christ. Your world has so many needs right now, and we humbly ask for your help. Bless those who actively work for peace and reconciliation; support those who work to heal this world of every sickness; guide those who are often so overwhelmed in trying to do good. Hear our prayers, as we lift our hearts to you. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S.

Not looking for an earworm song, but one that reminds us of God's love that won't let us go (like an earworm). I was surprised to see this song done so many ways....

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go by Eastward Missions, Australia (my favorite.... stunning!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGAPkKXBQKI>

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go by the Sound of Wales

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6iL_UInTVs

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go by Asisaactheband

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cqhdr5Z1Hg>

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go by Amy Grant

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hQhj1IsNd4>

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go by NYCPCD

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jv1kpnDZcql>

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go by 20Schemes Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJOUtCModPI>

..... and as a bonus... remembering with appreciation our Praise Team's version... Love Lifted Me with Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton (this might be your earworm song today)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRyvsFJErCE>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, July 9, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #110

30-Second Prayers that Will Change Your Life!

"Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior and my hope is in you all day long." Psalm 143:10

On the back inside cover of a 3" by 5" little booklet were these words: *Watch for new, exciting MICROMAGS! Look for Secret Word and Mystery Word magazines that offer you a chance to win \$1000! PLUS Seasonal Horoscopes and much more!*

You've probably seen "*Micromags*" in supermarkets near the checkout counter. They sit above the tabloids and have titles like "*Your Fall Horoscope*" or "*Secret Word*." I usually don't give them a second look, but the front cover caught my eye: "*30-Second Prayers that Will Change Your Life!*"

Upon opening the little cover, I was quite surprised. There were prayers from scripture, like the one quoted above (kind of a paraphrase, actually). There were prayers from people I recognized, like Lutheran Reinhold Niehbuhr (The Serenity Prayer), Roman Catholic theologian Thomas a Kempis and church father St. Ignatius Loyola, colonist William Penn, NAACP co-founder W.E. B. Du Bois, and an assortment of many others.

It was quite a wonderful little book. I would gladly have ordered and purchased more, but I've since searched and never found it again. It likely didn't make enough money when compared to the horoscope *micromags*.

One prayer, however, really stood out, and while it may not have changed my life, it certainly became a gift to me as I ministered to someone nearing death. It was a prayer written about 500 years ago by Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536). Erasmus was a Dutch Roman Catholic priest and contemporary of Luther (and one who favored reconciliation between Catholics and Lutherans).

When I read this prayer, I could imagine it being of great comfort to someone who was dying. At the same time, it spoke so directly to dying that I wondered if it might upset someone who knows their time has come to an end. I will always remember the time I shared it with a terminally ill person. That was Alma Graves, who died ten years ago last month.

Alma was a very open, direct, and very gracious person, so she would let me know if this was a good prayer to share with someone who is dying. Or not. From the little "*30-Second Prayers that Will Change Your Life!*" I read and we prayed this 500-year-old prayer from Erasmus:

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the only source of health for the living,

*and promise eternal life to the dying.
I entrust myself to your holy will.
If you wish me to stay longer in this world,
I pray that you will heal me of my present sickness.*

*If you wish me to leave this world,
I readily lay aside this mortal body,
in the sure hope of receiving an immortal body
which shall enjoy everlasting health.*

*I ask only that you relieve me of pain,
that whether I live or I die,
I may rest peaceful and contented. Amen.*

“Oh, that’s a good prayer,” Alma said. With her encouragement, I have shared it often during these past ten years at someone’s beside.

Let us pray.

We can’t imagine, O God, that when Erasmus wrote that ancient prayer, 500 years later it would be featured in a supermarket MICROMAG, just above the tabloids. But we thank you for those good words of hope for peace and contentment for all who are gravely sick this day. We pray for the health of the nation, physically and spiritually, and for all who share words of hope. In Jesus Name. Amen.

Just As I Am by Choir Masters Chennai India

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKw7Hq8Go4U>

Just As I Am by Acapeldridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8dnUns2dlw>

Just As I Am Mahalia Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tw-g4-DTKfU>

Just As I Am Nederland Zingt

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtPV94tJH_M

Just As I Am Willie Nelson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kv24jRNASQM>

Just As I Am Praise and Harmony Singers

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfXjE_qSpSY

Just As I Am Travis Cottrell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=460vFWX3ccs>

and.... as a bonus, remembering Wilmington native Charlie Daniels, here he is singing that wonderful celebration of the Risen Jesus Christ: *“He’s Alive.”* Go with God, Charlie. Rest in Peace.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtvXcRRiH3s>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, July 10, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #111

Don't Tell Mom. A follow up on the 30 second prayer devotion from yesterday.

One who gives an honest answer gives a kiss on the lips. (Prov. 24:26 NRS)

In yesterday's devotion I described my hesitation about sharing Erasmus's wonderful prayer with someone who is dying. One of our members wrote me an email wondering who might would take issue with that prayer. I appreciate that query because it has helped me recognize a shift in how we now are choosing to talk and pray with people who are dying.

So you don't have to look for the prayer again, here it is:

*Lord Jesus Christ, you are the only source of health for the living,
and promise eternal life to the dying.*

I entrust myself to your holy will.

If you wish me to stay longer in this world,

I pray that you will heal me of my present sickness.

If you wish me to leave this world,

I readily lay aside this mortal body,

*in the sure hope of receiving an immortal body
which shall enjoy everlasting health.*

I ask only that you relieve me of pain,

that whether I live or I die,

I may rest peaceful and contented. Amen.

Thankfully how we talk about illness with someone gravely ill has changed. Even so, for many years of ministry, times when a family has shared with me the terminal condition of a loved one has often been followed with, "Don't tell Mom." or "Don't tell Dad." Family members wanted to protect their loved ones from bad news, or information that might upset them.

So instead of telling the loved one how sick they are, what was often said were things like, "Don't worry. You're going to be just fine." Real feelings are covered up, which is hard for everyone.

It is good that things have changed. From work in pastoral care and in the medical community, we have learned 1) people most often really know how sick they are, 2) they appreciate being able to talk about it with someone they trust, and 3) when they don't talk about it with family members it is often because they are afraid of distressing them.

When I have been alone with someone gravely ill or dying, I soon discovered they are quite comfortable with being very direct about what's going on. They want to talk about what is happening.

I have seen so much value in the shift from *"Don't tell mom"* to now being open and honest about what is happening. It is so much better when family members can say to a dying loved one, "It's okay. You can go. We'll be fine," rather than persisting with the false narrative, *"You're going to be fine."*

Of course, when faith is shared you can rightfully say from a deeper fuller perspective, "You're going to be well soon" or "You're going home soon." Those words reflect our faith in God's eternal promises.

I'll always remember being in Director of Music Bill Remele's presence when someone, not aware that Bill's sick father had recently died, inquired, "Is your father better now?"

Bill paused for a moment, searching for words, and then smiled as he replied, "You know, I believe he is." Affirming God's promises, that's a great response.

I wish I had discovered that old Erasmus prayer years ago, as it leaves open the possibility of living or dying, but either way trusting in God. I will finish these thoughts today with another wonderful Erasmus prayer, good any time, but especially during these times when we so weary from all that is going on around us.

Let us pray.

*Lord Jesus Christ,
you are the gentle moon and joyful stars,
and watch over the darkest night.*

*You are the source of all peace,
reconciling the whole universe to the Father.
You are the source of all rest,
calming troubled hearts,
and bringing sleep to weary bodies.*

*You are the sweetness that fills our mind with quiet joy,
and can turn the worst nightmares into dreams of heaven.
May I dream of your sweetness,
rest in your arms,
be at one with your Father,*

*and be comforted in the knowledge
that you always watch over me.*
--Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536)

P.S. I was thinking about how God watches over us. Here are a couple of pieces with that theme:

His Eye is On the Sparrow by Eclipse 6
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRhgD0UtpL4>

His Eye is On the Sparrow by Chris Rupp
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTiHLfuzxc>

His Eye is On the Sparrow by Big Mama (group from Korea)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXdFmxWV-wQ>

His Eye is On the Sparrow by Gladys Knight
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuGLXhX0k5I>

My Heavenly Father Watches Over Me by Sandra Entermann
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ndz-GbCGXQ4>

My Heaven Father Watches Over Me by a couple of kids not named by HopeTVchannel
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-8IUJs2dP4>

My Heavenly Father Watches Over Me by Hal Leonard and Shawnee Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRuHGJaksSw>

My Heavenly Father Watches Over Me by West Angels COGIC Mass Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AewIH1GXGQ>

My Heavenly Father Watches Over Me by Oscar Mata
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOVTK5Kozy0>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, July 11, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #112

The time I "beat out" two experienced pastors for my first call. A lesson in humility.

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.
(Lk. 14:7-11 NRS)

As I was finishing seminary and was available for a Letter of Call, I had my first interview. It was by telephone. I sat in my dorm room at Luther Seminary, and a dozen people sat around a speaker phone in Caldwell, Texas. I only remember three questions from that interview: "1. Pastor, will you open our meeting in prayer? 2. How do you feel about old people? 3. How do you feel about young people?"

I should have anticipated the request for prayer. I could have written out a nice one. Instead, I remember fumbling, praying as if it was just God and me, like most nights in my dorm room, but this time with strangers listening in, with faces I could not see. We got to an "in Jesus' name, amen", and moved on.

How do you answer a question like "How do you feel about old people?" I know I actually said something close to: "Oh, I love old people. Some of my favorite people are old people. Old people are great. Really enjoy them." And to the young people question, it was a close variant: "Oh, I love young people. Some of my favorite people are young people. Young people are great. Really enjoy them."

Following my interview, I learned from the bishop that they were also interviewing two experienced pastors, so it was to my delight when I learned they had chosen, over them. My head swelled. I remember literally saying to classmates, "I 'beat out' two experienced pastors!"

After I began, it didn't take long to realize just how little we had in common. I was from Oregon. I had worked in the inner city and in a mountain retreat center. This was a small church in a small town with folks who pretty much stayed put. They were all family oriented. I was single.

It made me wonder what they had seen in me that prompted them to call me over two experienced pastors. Eventually, I had that conversation with someone I had grown close to, the church council president. Herman had grown up in the congregation, but had also been away for a number of years, participating in a Houston mission church. We had a trusting relationship, so I could safely ask, "Herman, why did they congregation call me? Why not the other experienced candidates. What did they see in me?"

The answer was simple and direct. "You were the cheapest." Direct quote. Boom.

Herman said it with affection, but it was true. If they could “get” a pastor for a hundred dollars below the minimum synod guideline, and that person could get along with old and young people well enough, really didn’t matter who it was.

That was an early lesson in humility. I began to understand the first half of Jesus’ statement, “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled.”

The second part was less clear, “*Those who humble themselves will be exalted.*” I keep thinking of that wonderful quote attributed to Golda Meir, “*Don’t be so humble; you’re not that great.*” True humility is a great quality, but more often comes through simple service, rather than trying too hard.

What I have experienced personally is that authentically humble people are person I most enjoy being around. Unpretentious. Authentic. Trustworthy. Modest. Centered. Loving. They are confident in their serving and don’t require praise (though I’m sure they like being thanked). They are non-competitive and easily others credit for good work.

How about you? I wonder what lessons in humility you have experienced? I wonder what has challenged you to re-assess your sense of self...especially if you (like me) have ever had an inflated sense of self? Food for thought.

For our prayer today, let us pray an ancient but still relevant one from the 5th Century:

*Into thy hands, O Lord, we commit ourselves this day. Give to each one of us a watchful, a **humble**, and a diligent spirit, that we may seek in all things to know thy will, and when we know it may perform it perfectly and gladly, to the honor and glory of thy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

P.S. Songs with *humble* themes would be good to enjoy today.

Humble Thyself / Awesome God by The Gibson Family

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DW3LYX4qeyA>

Humble Thyself In the Sight of the Lord the Acapella Company

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmYRszsjvdk>

Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service First Plymouth Lincoln NE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIPIyM2Qz4k>

Lord Whose Love in Humble Service Canto Dei Choirs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDj2poqKiDU>

..... and as a bonus... just because it’s such a good song, here’s a new group I discovered from Pambanar, India (Living Stones Quartet... singing “*In Christ Alone.*”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=887jcen5Pec>

And as a second bonus ... not a song, but another old sermon. After writing this devotion I discovered the very first sermon I preached at this new congregation. Given what I later learned about just how much we were not well suited for a long-term relationship, the language of this sermon is quite telling. (and FYI I'm not saying this is my best sermon... only my first). We did have our moments, though, and I'll have something about that another day...

Good Shepherd Sunday, May 6, 1979

Elizabeth Lutheran Church

1500 W. 9th St. Caldwell Texas

Pastor Mark Opgrand's first sermon as the new pastor.

Grace be unto you and peace from God and Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a calendar in the pastor's office which has a note written in the May 6 Box. It says, "Hooray, we have a new pastor."

That makes today kind of a special day, doesn't it?

Getting a new pastor is a lot like buying a new car. You see the brochure – if it looks good you can go and see it in person – even take it on a test spin and drive it around the block. If you like the way it feels maybe, you'll go ahead and buy it.

Have you ever notice how buying a new car always gives you a sense of hope and encouragement?

"Finally, we got rid of that old clunker, that gas gulping, repair ridden, bad starting beast. Finally, we're going to get ECONOMY—it's supposed to get 28 – think of it -- 28 mpg! (of course that's highway, might be a little less in town).

Anyway, we don't have to drive the 8 mpg pickup to church anymore. We'll have luxury, we'll have economy; it will get us anywhere we want to go, with cruise control no less (you know the little button you push, and the car will almost run by itself!!)

When you think of it, buying a new car is really exciting. So, you sign the dotted line, drive home, show the kids, show the kinfolk, show the neighbors.

Then... then... sometime later, after a while, then you begin to find out just what you purchased. Is it going to be a gem or is it going to be a lemon?

Buying a new car is finally a risk, isn't it? Buying a new car is kind of like calling a new pastor. He may look good, but how will he run? Does he need a push to get going or is he a self-starter? Will he try to run the church? Will we get good performance? Will he do better in town or in the country?

If calling a pastor is a lot like buying a new car, then accepting a call is a lot like getting married—especially when you are a single man and the church's name is ELIZABETH.

Perhaps Elizabeth attracted me by her soft and gently country ways. She promised me warm winters far away from the cold Minnesota nights. She promised BARBEQUE dinners prepared that special Texas way.

But will Elizabeth be open to growing together as we need to grow? Will she support me as I try to discover her needs so that I might effectively minister to her? Will she be patient with me if I cannot or will not be the way she would like me to be? Will she forgive me when I sin and fall short?

Will she be able to ask my forgiveness when she hurts or fails me? Will we be happy together? What kind of changes will each of us go through as we get to know each other?

Yes, accepting a call to a congregation seems very much like getting married.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus speaks as I have been speaking, through comparisons. If calling a pastor is like buying a new car, or accepting a call is like getting married, then according to our lesson, being the LORD OF ALL is like being a shepherd.

I know most of you are familiar with the text or at least have heard Jesus referred to as the Good Shepherd. One of the more famous paintings of Jesus is with him holding a lamb in one hand and a shepherd's staff in the other.

The text particularly meets us today as we gather to celebrate our new venture as pastor and people. I know we are meeting each other with certain hopes and expectations and in all that, it is very easy to shift the focus of attentions always from our Lord to ourselves.

This is true for me whenever I start planning "what I'm going to do in MY new church in Caldwell." It's not my church. It's God's church. We are God's people.

Maybe the same thing happens, this shifting of attention from your Lord to yourselves happens if ever you find yourself saying, "I can't do that" or "It's just not possible" or "we can't grow."

Whenever this happens, we are losing sight of just what the scripture is trying to tell us... and trying to give us – JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD, the one who gives himself to us AND TO ALL that we might be ONE FLOCK, one people, one church, united in his love.

And that's what the ministry is all about. God will work through us. He promises. And this is what we celebrate as we are meeting each other as new pastor and congregation – as old friends coming together and as new friends just meeting for the first time... one flock, one church, one people, and one shepherd, Jesus Christ. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home Devotional for Sunday, July 12, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #113

Egg cracking moments of joy.

Therefore, Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Sam. 3:9-10 NRS)

I've been enjoying "Moments of Joy" shared by the Evangelism Team. I've also been enjoying writing daily devotions and finding lots of good music to accompany my thoughts.

Thinking about moments of joy has also brought me back to what was the very first meditation I ever wrote, and the impact people hearing it had on me. On this Sunday of hearing the Parable of the Sower, I'm recalling how seeds for future ministry were planted long ago.

It's another ancient story. After my junior year of college, I worked at Holden Village for the first of what was going to be parts or all of six summers and a winter (between 1969 and 1974). Holden is our Lutheran family retreat center in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State.

I worked in the kitchen, and during the summer it was a large operation, with up to 500 people served per meal. For reasons I can't explain, I discovered that my favorite repetitive job was cracking eggs. I loved cracking eggs, and because I could crack them with both hands at the same time, I was fast. I had lots of practice and could even crack four at a time when I wanted to show off.

After breakfast it was the practice at Holden for a staff member to offer a morning devotion. It was toward the end of the summer that I finally had the courage to write something and share it. I'm tempted to edit it now as there are some rough spots (I was just 20 at the time), but I share it as is, as transcribed from my original hand-written note:

"Hi. I'm Mark Opgrand, and I work in the kitchen.

This morning I would like to share with you some joy I discovered while working in the kitchen. I am sometimes asked what sort of things I do in the kitchen and what I like best. I clean grills, make cakes, stock the freezer, bring frozen meat from downstairs, and a lot of making and baking. Of all the tasks I have done so far, I think my favorite job is cracking eggs. I might add that because we use so many eggs here, I have had a lot of opportunity to do this. I HAVE FOUND JOY IN CRACKING EGGS! How could I find JOY in such a seemingly simple task?

Perhaps the first seeds were planted by Herb Brokering, who has tried to get us to look at things in little different way. One day I started thinking about these eggs as I cracked them. They all looked pretty much alike, yet all were unique, for no two every cracked quite the same way. Some crack in a straight line-- some crooked-- some like a spider web.

This discovery alone might may have been enough to enjoy cracking these eggs, for I never know exactly how the next egg will crack; so there is always something to look forward to.

I began thinking about eggs more. Take an egg—it's safe inside its protective shell. If refrigerated it will stay fresh quite a while, but eventually will spoil. If an egg is left in the open it will remain safe for time, but will so go band and rot. An egg left this this fate is completely wasted.

In fact, all the eggs here would be DOOMED if it weren't for me, or someone like me. I go into the cooler and take these eggs and make them into something that benefits us all. Once freed from their shells they can become many things. They may be fried or scrambled or combined with other ingredients to make cakes, cookies, frosting or pancakes.

Only by taking them out of their shells and freeing them from their shells can they become anything.

Now so far this morning I have been talking about eggs, or perhaps I have been talking about people. For we, like eggs have shells around us too. And we, like eggs, can't really do much of anything for anybody as long as we stay inside these shells.

I can free an egg to become whatever I want it to be. That means I am Christ to an egg as Jesus is Christ to me.

I invite you to join me in prayer. *Jesus, crack my shell so that I too may be free. Amen."*

Fifty-one years later and writing daily meditations, that was the first. It was also the first time I heard someone say, *"You should be a pastor."* Of course, nowadays, someone "saying he is Christ to an egg," might suggest he needs more therapy than seminary. A seed was certainly planted that day, however, and we see what has sprung up from that. Blessings.

Let us pray.

O God you speak to us in many ways, through your holy scriptures and through common ordinary moments of joy when we think of you in our lives. During this time when it is often harder to find daily joys, help us see, even in the little things, the little things we love, that through them you are loving us. Bless today, all those who are sick and those serving them. Help people find joy without being careless in their behaviors. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. Maybe some seedtime- harvest- calling- songs today....

Bringing in the Sheaves by Tennessee Ernie Ford

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u67Lb1RyXTU>

Bringing in the Sheaves by Burl Ives

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFu1MvU0rfo>

Bringing in the Sheaves by isbaptist Toronto

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ad54bH-nQTM>

Lord Let My Heart Be Good Soil by stJLC virtual choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldjfh2GKVow>

Lord Let My Heart Be Good Soil piano cover by Samantha Wong

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdGTxYvFxOI>

Here I Am Luther College Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1W4gABkEGHA>

and in a “battle of the Lutheran College choirs”, here’s *Here I am* by Gustavus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=endq52Jw7ag>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, July 13, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #114

Marty Robbins' 'Cool Water.' Cool Song. But at a funeral service?

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. 18 I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. (Isa. 41:17-18 NRS)

I was only six months at my church in Caldwell, Texas as a new pastor when I learned that Bob, one of our members was in the hospital following a stroke. I hadn't met him yet, and since he had not been in church in twenty years, I might not have met him at all, except for the hospitalization.

He could not speak, but he could gesture and write, so when he wrote the word "water" on a slip of paper and pointed to a cup, I checked with the nurse and with a straw, held it to his lips. I offered a prayer, and that was it. He died later that afternoon.

In planning the funeral, his youngest son had just one request. He wanted us to play his father's favorite song, "Cool Water," by Marty Robbins. Since the service was at a Mortuary Chapel, we had a little flexibility; even so, I soon learned it was not without controversy even in the family.

Henry, the youngest son had four much older siblings. He was the product of a second marriage following his father leaving his first wife for a much younger woman. Henry came from that union. I learned the two older brothers continued to work with their dad on their large ranch, but the two sisters moved away and had no contact with their father for the previous twenty-five years.

The choice of "Cool Water" was further complicated by the lyric "Don't you listen to him Dan, he's a devil not a man." One of the older brothers was named Dan, and he was concerned that playing the song would imply their father was in hell. The sisters probably agreed with that, since their demeanor clearly projected a "he can rot in hell for all we care and we're only here for our inheritance" attitude.

I told the youngest son that if we played a recording of the song, we should play it at the beginning of the service. I also admitted, in light of his brother's concerns, that I would need help from him, explaining what the song meant to his dad.

I planned to speak about my experience with Bob in the hospital and tie it to his baptism. I would speak about his life as I learned about it, and maybe indirectly speak to those with conflicting emotions. I would celebrate Bob's life the best I could, proclaim God's promises, and trust in God to bring peace and reconciliation if possible.

What stunned, me, though was how Henry connected “Cool Water” with his father’s life and death. I read his words as part of the homily, just after sharing the story of Bob writing “water” on the slip of paper in the hospital. Here’s what Henry wrote:

“Bob had a favorite song. It was ‘Cool Water.’ To Bob, the words of the song possibly paralleled the struggle of men, crossing a desert, tortured by thirst, fatigue, and temptation, seeking solace – the real struggle of men – the day to day living of men, passing thru life – tired, frustrated, fatigued and seeking peace in the Bosom of Jesus Christ – the final and only real peace.

‘He’s the devil, not a man and he spread the burning sand with water. --- Clearly these words analogize man’s never-ending fight with the temptation to falter and follow the mirage instead of summoning our strength to reach the oasis.

Each day our thirst leads us to barren sand from whence we cannot drink. In the end – the oasis, ‘where the water runs free’ – the symbol of heaven, the FINAL PEACE, where a man’s thirst is constantly quenched—his troubled journey ended – in peace, comfort, and in the bosom of Christ.”

Wow!! I still have his hand-written note on the inside of a bulletin cover (he asked me for paper). That wonderful interpretation completely changed the appropriateness of that song in a worship service. Additionally, I will never hear “Cool Water” again without thinking of this interpretation.

I imagine there might be many other popular songs, when seen through the lens of the gospel that might reflect the awesome wonder of God’s mercy.

Let us pray:

Thank you, O God, for the cool waters of our Baptism that promise that in life or death, we belong to you. May these promises support us and hold us close to you throughout our lives. For those who are sick today and longing for relief, we pray you will offer your healing touch and blessed peace. Comfort those this day who are fearful of what’s ahead. Give them clear vision to trust in you alone. Grant strength to our hospital workers. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

P.S. Of course, we must have “Cool Water,” and a few other “Water” songs. Enjoy. I will also attach for the full sermon, where you can decide if my words deserved, from the two sisters, the most hateful looks I have ever witnessed in forty years of doing funeral homilies.

Cool Water Mary Robbins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2Ezf7PS3fw>

Cool Water Sons of the Pioneers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2Ezf7PS3fw>

Cool Water by Gene Autry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K2vDy2MUTw>

Take Me To The Water (To Be Baptized) by Nina Simone

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=If6i59NUfkk>

Wade In the Water by Sweet Honey In The Rock

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRpzEng14Hs>

Come to the Water (For Those Tears I died) by Marsha Stevens

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlrizhT_ckU

The River by Brian Doerksen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWyQsQxxvC8>

Come to the Water by John Foley S.J. (and nice stained-glass window)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huERPUnO-bo>

Come to the Water by Lutheran Capital University Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Evig6ouM1wk>

Robert Alford Funeral Sermon

August 9, 1979

Elizabeth Lutheran Church, Caldwell, Texas

Pastor Mark Opgrand (in his fourth month as pastor)

Cool Water Lyrics... recording played before service began.

All day I've faced a barren waste

Without the taste of water, cool water

Old Dan and I with throats burned dry

And souls that cry for water

Cool, clear, water

Keep a-movin, Dan, dontcha listen to him, Dan

He's a devil, not a man

He spreads the burning sand with water

Dan, can ya see that big, green tree?

Where the water's runnin' free

And it's waitin' there for me and you?

The nights are cool and I'm a fool

Each star's a pool of water

Cool water

But with the dawn I'll wake and yawn

And carry on to water

Water, water, water

Keep a-movin, Dan,...

Scripture:

For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. 21 But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

(Rom. 3:20-24 NRS)

To the family and friends of Bob Alford, grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

At the beginning of our service, there was a song played of the P.A. system called "Cool Water." Those of you who knew Bob well knew this was a favorite of his.

Yesterday as some of the family and I were putting together this service, we listened to the song and chose to begin the service with it. At that time I shared with them how the song moved me in a special way.

You see, I met Bob for the first time while he was in the hospital, and the only time he was able to communicate with me, he asked for water – by pointing and then writing "water" on a piece of paper.

Whenever I hear the song, I believe I will remember that moment.

However, there is more to this song than that way it recalls my meeting Bob. The words themselves offer a message. I would like to read an interpretation of the song that one of the family members wrote.

I am sure you will see how beautifully this reflection tied the song and Christian faith together.

"Bob had a favorite song. It was 'Cool Water.' To Bob, the words of the song possibly paralleled the struggle of men, crossing a desert, tortured by thirst, fatigue, and temptation, seeking solace – the real struggle of men – the day to day living of men, passing thru life – tired, frustrated, fatigued and seeking peace in the Bosom of Jesus Christ – the final and only real peace.

'He's the devil, not a man and he spread the burning sand with water. --- Clearly these words analogize man's never-ending fight with the temptation to falter and follow the mirage instead of summoning our strength to reach the oasis.

Each day our thirst leads us to barren sand from whence we cannot drink. In the end – the oasis, ‘where the water runs free’ – the symbol of heaven, the FINAL PEACE, where a man’s thirst is constantly quenched—his troubled journey ended – in peace, comfort, and in the bosom of Christ.”

Thank you for the reflection. In hearing the song and reading this, I also thought about how in the Cool Waters of our baptism, we are promised that we shall reach the oasis.

When I met Bob, he was a dying man, thirsting for cool water and awaiting his final resting place. You knew him in life, and now in death too.

You knew him as husband, father, grandfather, and friend. Bob Alford – who was one of those individuals not only known for his great physical strength (which he had), but equally for his strong will and determination.

This was Bob – a hardworking man who was strong enough to work a lot of cotton in his younger days and later work a ranch with upward to three hundred head of cattle on twelve hundred acres. I even heard he was strong enough to yell across a good share of the ranch when he wanted Bubba, the hired man, to come to breakfast.

Yes, as I have heard about Bob, I have heard about a strong and strong-willed person. But we are not here today because Bob was strong. No, we are here because in the last days, Bob’s body was weak – and even though he tried his hardest – with all his remaining strength—to fight off death – death still won.

We are here because death has come to Bob as it will come to each of us. This is the grim reality we face each day but especially on this day as this body and this casket are in view. As we meet together like this, death will always be a mixed bag—death always brings for those left behind mixed emotions.

Sitting here you may be thinking of Bob’s life... or your life with him. It may bring a smile and a warm thought to remember the fun times visiting, or riding in the pickup to check the cattle... or eve the big 85th birthday party... the one where he invited the whole town, but then broke his leg and had to attend his own party in a wheelchair.

These kinds of memories may bring warm but sad thoughts ... and grief for one who was loved and will be missed.

But along with these, there are also difficult and hard thoughts. Maybe you are also thinking of all the things you wished could have been better or different. Maybe you feel sad, or angry, or even guilty on account of an argument that wasn’t resolved, or peace that should have been made, or a relationship you wanted better.

Maybe you're a friend or relative who wanted to get over and do some visiting but things came up and now he's gone and it's too late. These are difficult and hard thoughts.

I think we make a mistake if we fail to recognize that whenever we gather like this, in the face of death, we come with many mixed, or even mixed-up emotions.

This does not negate the JOY we express in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

No, rather it admits the frustration of living a human existence, which always includes this difficult and painful moment.

The painful event of death (and we're part of it even now as persons who are alive)... the painful event of death speaks to us in LOUD BOLD FACED LETTERS... letter which say THINGS ARE NOT RIGHT.... THIS IS NOT RIGHT... DEATH IS NOT RIGHT.

And this, my friends, is exactly what St. Paul recognizes as he BOLDY proclaims the WORD OF GOD... and God who puts things right.

It is we who are helpless, thirsting. Over against this is God who comes to us with HIS STRONG WORD. Without this Word we are as hopeless as one crawling across a desert with no hope of water. With this WORD God puts things right and our THIRST is QUENCHED.

And what is this word? St. Paul continuously proclaims it – Jesus Christ our Lord crucified and resurrected FOR US.

The word is Jesus Christ, one who has fully entered into our humanity as one of us – ONE who lived – one who cried when a loved one died – and one who finally faces death itself – a horrible death in which he too cried out for a cup of cool water.

But as St. Paul says, Christ did this in order to put things right with God. Jesus goes ahead of us in death that he might conquer death and win the victory for us.

And that's why we are here today. We're here to celebrate Bob's victory for us – a victory in which he offers to us right not the cool water of his word, through our baptism,

It's a word which promises to put things right, bringing healing to all the pain, grief, hurts, and sadness we feel as we experience the heaviness of death.

The word is Jesus Christ – our hope and our Lord. And that, my friends, is a good word. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, July 14, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #115

The Presypiscidiscipentaunifrienbapmethocatholutherothernazarcics.

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, (Jn. 17:20-22 NRS)

It has been said that *"Odessa, Texas is not the end of the world, but you can it from here."*

Odessa was way out in the middle of west Texas, not far from No Trees (if that tells you something about the landscape). Odessa was an oil town. Unlike historic cities like Wilmington, almost everyone in Odessa came from somewhere else. Because of the oil.

Odessa was also well known for high school football, as chronicled in the book and movie *"Friday Night Lights,"* and inspiration for *"Friday Night Lights,"* the television series (8.6 rating on Internet Movie Data Base!). Imagine a high school stadium in town of 100,000 that can seat 20,000 fans (and has artificial turf)! They took football very seriously.

Odessa was also my home for three and a half years. I arrived during the oil boom in 1981 and left in 1984 when funding dried up due to the oil bust.

I was called as *"Campus Minister"* to an ecumenical *"United Campus Ministry,"* which supported by twenty local churches in eight denominations. That such a ministry could happen at all was highly unusual, as the supporting churches were Lutheran (ALC/LCA and LC-MS, Episcopal, United Methodist, Roman Catholic, Disciples of Christ, Cumberland Presbyterian, and Presbyterian (PCUS).

It was quite an amazing feat, garnishing support from all these bodies, but it was said that if you weren't Southern Baptist or Non-Instrumental Churches of Christ (the largest and most numerous church bodies) you had a lot in common.

I served Odessa Community College and the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, OC had about 4,500 students and UT-PB had 2,000. Since most of the students were part of the churches who supported the ministry, I was very much like a community minister at large.

It was a great ministry, and it was quite wonderful be considered each supporting church's staff person on campus. I never called this interdenominational or nondenominational. It was clearly cross-denominational, with intentional effort to affirm each student's background and affirm our common confession that *"Jesus is Lord."*

That's how we came up with our "nickname" ...

Presypiscidiscipentaunifrienbapmethocatholutherothernazarics. One day at a big lunch gathering I jotted down everyone's background, and we put it together. Have fun deciphering it!

The experience also uniquely shaped me for a broader view of Christian identity than I ever had before. I am solidly and confessionally Lutheran, but my Christian faith is not exclusively Lutheran. I was forever blessed by sharing faith with so many dear young people, also eager to deepen their understanding and respect for different faith traditions.

As a church I wish it was easier for us, to connect with and deepen respect for other faith traditions. Of course, no church ever gets too far with this when we put our focus and energy into proving how right we are and how wrong everyone else is. There are differences, but what unites us is far more important than what divides us.

I still can't get over how I managed to experience a ministry like this, but I can surely see the Holy Spirit clearly at work in this place. Odessa may not have been far from the end of the world but some churches there were very close to what Jesus prayed for when he asked God for unity.

Let us pray.

Grant us, O Lord, a vision of unity that can bring us together, even when we come with different histories, different spiritual temperaments, and different theological emphases. Give us a sense of your work in the Body of Christ through its many members. Help us unite in common mission to serve humanity as we have been called. Bless us with the common conviction and confession that Jesus is Lord. We continue to pray for our suffering world and for healing. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We Are One Body in Christ with multiple South African Languages by Tom Inglis and choirs
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3RptlgdGTE>

We Are One in the Spirit by Frisk Luft
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN9cyxeDDss>

We Are One in the Spirit by Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJbHYkszmCQ>

We Are One by King and Country
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7E7IARwUYw>

We Are One in the Spirit by Frisk Jars of Clay
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CI4qefRAi4>

One Bread One Body with virtual choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifSFQYTWOyM>

One Bread One Body with St. Louis Jesuits

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_VH4EmWRO8

One Bread One Body with John Michael Talbot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG9T8UmN6VY>

We Are One with Austin Stone Worship (lots of spirited dancing)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mjm64dremNU>

The Church is the Building Up by InChrist

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjRZMlt-pI0>

The Church is the Building Up by ATX YP

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSCPzWzk8rA>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, July 15, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #116

"My sister is dating a Rolling Stone."

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Lk. 1:1-4 NRS)

In order to believe the good news of Jesus Christ, it has been necessary to rely on eyewitnesses and those who told their stories, like St. Luke. As Luke begins his gospel, he describes how the words and stories we are about to read were handed down to him first by eyewitnesses.

In a world without advanced technology, it was necessary to trust that what was passed down was faithful and true. There was no fact checking. Some believed the stories; some believed they was too good to be true; some believed they were just idle tales.

When I was in seminary, I remember hearing a story that was pretty hard to believe.

I was sitting at a table in the refectory with a bunch of students when one of them casually mentioned his sister was dating a member of the *Rolling Stones*. I remember him being a rather quiet guy and not the sort who you think would be telling tall tales. At the same time, a Luther Seminary student's sister is dating a Rolling Stone? Really? How can that be? Oddly enough, it didn't garner a lot of "Oh, wow, tell me more." Looking back now, I wonder why.

The guy's name was Rodney Hansen, a name I never forgot probably because later I learned that he actually had a sister who was a supermodel. This is still years before widespread internet access, so all I could do was remember his name well enough that when, a few years later, in 1984, when I saw pictures in a magazine of Keith Richards' wedding to Patti Hansen, I knew it was true.

Nowadays there are many ways to verify the accuracy of stories and tales. Between published photos, video, social media, books, and Wikipedia we have many sources.

Rod was indeed Patti's brother. Search engines come up with a lot. We can all now find multiple articles describing Keith and Patti's 40-year relationship and 36-year marriage. I furthermore learned, for example, that Rod married a musician named Marsha, and she once did a fund raiser CD, accompanied by her brother-in-law Keith. I'll be attaching the YouTube link so you can see and hear for yourself.

Back in seminary, when Rod Hansen mentioned his sister was dating a Rolling Stone, it seemed hard to believe. Impossible, really. A Rolling Stone? Perhaps if I had known Rod better or had already known him to be trustworthy and reliable, I would have believed him without hesitation.

When the eyewitnesses to Jesus life, death, and resurrection passed along what they had seen and heard, I am confident that those hearing these eyewitnesses knew them to be trustworthy and reliable. The same is true for those who passed it further along. As our scriptures which have collected these eyewitness accounts. Even without Wikipedia.

Let us pray.

Thank you, O God for those eyewitnesses who saw and heard and passed along the awesome record of your love for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Thank you for the gift of faith that helps us trust the Holy Scriptures, and for the experience of faith that draws us further into the story as we ourselves become witnesses of your grace and wonder. During these stressful times, keep drawing us into the scriptures that we can find strength and encouragement from them. Bless those who are sick and suffering this day, and all those who seek peace and reconciliation in this hurting world. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

We give thanks for eyewitness accounts today:

The Peace of Christ Grosse Pointe Memorial virtual
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7titj1MgqvM>

Thank you, Lord by Shepherd's Gate
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYw-s461BZI>

Thank You, Lord by Don Moen
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K44trVhtZX4>

Psalm 91 My God In Him I Will Trust by Esther Mui
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67wC6-kWWSO>

Psalm 91 (live) by Renew Collective
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HLIF2Dq57o>

....and of course I better have a little something to back up my Rolling Stones Story...

Two are Better Than One by Marsha Hansen and Keith Richards
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eU9-fRXcUT0>

and Patti Hansen and Keith Richards together... (a little photo montage)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szXr6YmCuL0>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, July 16, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #117

Please wear masks. As you are able.

LORD, how they have increased who trouble me! Many are they who rise up against me.

2 Many are they who say of me, "There is no help for him in God." Selah

3 But You, O LORD, are a shield for me, My glory and the One who lifts up my head. (Ps. 3:1-3 NKJ)

For many years in worship, when it was time to stand, pastors or worship assistants simply said "Please rise" or "Please stand." Those without mobility problems may not have given much thought to those who, for health reasons, were unable to stand when directed. We stand. We sit.

When with "Please stand," the phrase "as you are able" was added, that showed awareness and sensitivity to differently abled persons. Speaking those words shows good hospitality and recognition that we welcome all people, including persons unable to stand when directed.

Because of the pandemic and the desire to reduce rate of infectious spread, many voices are now asking and sometimes requiring people to wear face coverings (masks). There is much scientific and medical evidence that supports how face coverings, along with frequent hand washing, and physical distancing, make a positive difference in reducing virus spread.

We are also experiencing fierce resistance to wearing face coverings. Not every country has this resistance. It was insightful to see a report on BBC News recently that contrasted the USA with the UK and Japan. In Japan, everyone wears masks in public places. It has become a well-accepted social norm and practice. Those interviewed about this spoke of it as their civic duty.

Does it make a difference? Yes. The death rate from Covid 19 in the US is 400 per million people; In the UK it is 600 per million; in Japan it is 7 per million.

But what about those who cannot wear face coverings? Here's where it gets tricky. There are persons who indeed have medical conditions that might their ability to wear masks. That would include someone with a respiratory disability, post-traumatic stress disorder, severe anxiety, claustrophobia, autism, and possibly cerebral palsy.

This does not include, however, those who claim it is a First Amendment right not to wear a mask (nor Second Amendment "right to bear germs"); it does not include people who disregard the pandemic is a hoax; it does not include those who are using fake ADA Exemption ID cards.

I remember a time before seat belts. My dad chose to get them installed in our old Studebaker so we would have added protection (in addition to how he always threw his arm across me when he

suddenly braked). In time, wearing seatbelts became mandatory. Most people comply now, not because it is law, but because we know seatbelts protect people and save lives.

Handicapped parking did not always exist. It became mandatory for obvious good reasons, even though there are always some who will misuse a permit provided for someone else, just to get a better parking place for themselves.

As one of the songs below expresses, "It's not an easy road." As Christian persons of faith we are called by Jesus himself to be good neighbors by doing what we are able for the sake of those around us. I feel some irony that the people of Japan, a non-Christian nation, seems to be expressing greater care for each other than our Christian heritage founded United States.

I am thankful to be reminded that not everyone can wear a mask. I will still pray, however, that people who are able to do so will do so, especially for the sake and health of those who cannot.

Let us pray.

We pray, O God, as we are able, to do everything we can to care for one another during this pandemic. We give thanks for those able to wear masks, practice physical distance, and hand wash regularly. May these practices help us reduce the rate of infection during this pandemic. We pray for a cure and good treatment options. Bless our front-line health care workers. Bless those who are unable to wear masks, and for the stress that causes. We pray they will not be subject to shaming. We also pray for those who choose to take chances and pray they will not later regret the harm that may come from those actions. For all who are living through this, bless them dear Lord, and help our faith in you guide all our actions, as we are able. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. After 116 devotions, by now you get this added song section. I try to select songs that resonate with the theme of the devotion. Sometimes the connection is clear; other times not. Either way, I hope every day you find a song, or part of a song that lifts your spirit and draws you close to God. Blessings.

Trust and Obey Acapella Hymns (sing along)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4U-yx6cFb0>

Trust and Obey with Chelsea Moon and Franz Brothers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrSCxfnN2B8>

Jesus Keep Me Near The Cross by Celebrating Holidays

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xrmlv806bGM>

Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross by Voice of Eden

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=py3kp1ggKlo>

Master the Tempest is Raging UoN SDA choir Kenya
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmLtRae65Bg>

I Know Who Holds Tomorrow by Alison Kraus
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3rlzgXJBX0>

It Is Not An Easy Road (nice acapella from A Few Good Men – South Africa
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wvG_MOmN4ac

It is Not An Easy Road from Sisters of Grace -- Africa
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PPYDWaOl1k>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, July 17, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #118

The Greatest Homecoming.

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. (Rev. 21:9-11 NKJ)

Today I'd like to share my all-time most favorite sermon to write. The first time it was shared was thirty-three years ago. Since it is more fictional story than traditional sermon, I've never shared it on a Sunday morning, except the first time. Back then, sermons routinely could be much longer than they are now.

I'm thinking about it today because in these uncertain times, it's helpful to be reminded, as the old gospel song goes, *"This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through."* St. John in Revelation reminded us of that as he shared a vision of a heavenly home as God gave it to him.

I would never claim to have a vision like that of St. John, but based on his vision, it is hopefully okay to use a little imagination. Inspiration for this also has come from C.S. Lewis's Narnia series, especially *"The Last Battle,"* and his fanciful trip to heaven in *"The Great Divorce."*

With daily Coronavirus case counts and deaths in front of us every time we turn on cable news, it's hard not to focus on the pandemic and fears about what is ahead. Therefore, let us take a moment and use our imaginations bring us to thoughts of heaven and the joy of what lies ahead.

Let us pray.

O God of Heaven and Earth. Remind us during times of uncertainty that you have prepared a place for us where all is well, where there is no more sickness or pain, no more hardship or friction or distress, no more unsettled relationships between peoples. Give us that vision so that we can do what we can here on earth, until that time, when we are all called home. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

This World Is Not My Home Ng'ambo ya Bahari by Ukonga SDA Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGHB-o21hQk>

There's No Disappointment in Heaven by SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7Tyx82AOSQ>

When I get to Heaven John Prine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdopXW00FuI>

My Heavenly Home by Front Range

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ6AGgHNBdo>

My Heavenly Home by Victor Paul

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7PBpgpgqUBU>

Heaven's Now My Home by Libby Allen Songs

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdUY_iVmhVI

Angels Calling Me Home by the Tenors

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc7PIIkIHPM>

Where We'll Never Old by the Church Sisters

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1bDJCkWpxM>

The Holy City by Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTolyViXNb4>

This is What Heaven Means to Me by Foster Triplett

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOR9622987s>

I Could Sing About Heaven by A Few Good Men (South Africa)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hWs5nDEfEM>

Gonna Shout All Over Heaven by Jasper Sea (Zambia)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59LlIKcyqJg>

The Greatest Homecoming
Thirtieth Anniversary Edition,
by Mark Opgrand
All Saints Day 2017
First Preached Sunday, November 1, 1987, at
Our Saviour Lutheran Church, West Lafayette, IN
Shared at Wednesdays Together November 1, 2017
St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:9-11,
Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction.

Thirty years ago ... today, on November 1, 1987 I shared a sermon that has been my personal favorite of all time. I'm not claiming it is my best, or even best received, just the one that I most personally enjoyed writing. I wrote this piece while a Lutheran Campus Pastor at Purdue University. Its memory came back to me when I recently visited my 94 year old mother Beth Opgrand. My mother thinks a lot about heaven these days. She loves *Heaven is for Real*, and other stories of someone's experiences in heaven.

On my recent visit to Arizona, I also attended a Sunday School Class at Peace Lutheran in Peoria, AZ, where one of the members (a charter member) quite out of the blue told me he still had a copy of this sermon that my mother had given him 30 years ago.

So, by way of introduction, here's what is helpful to know thirty years later. First of all, I have always been a fan of C.S. Lewis. I feel his influence here, through *The Last Battle* in the Narnia series, and *The Great Divorce*.

Also, there was also a rare set of circumstances that converged on that weekend thirty years ago. On November 1, 1987, All Saints Day, fell on a Sunday. Halloween and Reformation Day, October 31, fell on the Saturday before when Purdue University celebrated its annual homecoming football game.

The day before that, Friday, October 30, my grandmother Hilda Buesing would have celebrated her 99th birthday, had she lived. She died at 97 and was an avid Scrabble player until the end of her life.

My other dolor, Olga Opgrand, had a "near death" experience in the 1920's after the birth of her second child. She wrote of her encounter and shared more details about that with me when I was a seminary student. For her, heaven was most definitely for real.

In 1987, two weeks prior to this All Saints Day, there was a tragedy in nearby Indianapolis. A military jet had crashed into a Ramada Inn, killing ten people. The pilot had ejected safely moments before.

All these events converged for me in a very dramatic way which inspired the following fanciful journey, based on Revelation 21:9-11

Revelation 21:9-11

9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

My dear friends in Christ. Grace be unto you and peace.

I'm not sure where to begin this morning. Maybe with a couple of days ago. You see, I was planning to go to the game on Saturday and I knew that I wouldn't have time to get a sermon done unless I really got started earlier.

So just as soon as we got our campus ministry newsletter finished and in the mail, I started working on it.

Sometimes sermons take a long time to develop, especially ones which happen on festival days, like on *All Saints Day*.

The theme of the day is obvious, so it's important to think of good ways to relate the sermon to the theme. I'm happy to say it all came together. I even finished before game time on Saturday. The title was suggested before I began the sermon, thanks to one of our students.

She suggested "*Saints: Wanted Dead or Alive*." I liked that. I added a parenthesis (*Preferably Alive*). After all, we are of more value to God in this world when we're alive. I was pretty satisfied with the sermon and enjoyed a very nice day Saturday. Great weather, great game, great Homecoming, great Halloween, great Reformation Day.

Since the sermon was done and I don't like going out much on Saturday night, I decided to rent and watch a video with a Halloween type theme. I picked the 1956 version of "*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*." Good movie.

Anyway, it was just as I was watching Kevin McCarthy desperately trying to convince the authorities that he was not crazy and that these aliens were taking over everyone's bodies through these huge seed pods... when my door bell rang.

And I thought, *"Oh shoot, some kid is coming by here for a 'trick or treat' and I don't even have a single piece of candy or anything."* You see, in the apartments where I live we don't expect kids to come by trick or treating -- all those signs saying *"No Solicitors,"* I suppose.

So quickly I went for my laundry money hoping that a quarter be an okay substitute and then I opened the door. There was no one there. I looked around and there was no one to be seen. And I thought, "Oh, probably my neighbor across the hall is playing a little joke on me." I took one last look and then went into my apartment.

Then I closed and locked the door and turned around and.....OOOHHHHHH!!!! There was this thing..... Well, it was wasn't really a thing. It was a person, but dressed in a glowing white robe -- like when you used to put those glow-in-the-dark-plastic crosses under the light and then turn all the lights off.

That kind of glow. Sort of a moon glow. Well, I'm more or less scared out of my wits, you seeand I'mspeechless.

Then this stranger speaks to me. He says, *"Happy Homecoming. Let's go."*

And I stuttered, *"But... ah, ah who are you? And... where are we going?"*

"Never mind. It's Homecoming. Follow me."

"But I don't really like going out on Saturday night before Church on Sunday. Sunday's a big work day for me."

It didn't seem to make any difference and in a moment, I felt myself lifted up, like I was leaving my body, and I started floating I could see myself down below. I could recognize my bald head.

And I kept floating higher and higher --the stranger at my side guiding me through the doorways and making sure as we got out of the building and that I missed the trees and birds and airplanes. We began rising higher and higher.

So I'm pretty scared, quite frankly, and I turned and said to him, *"Did I just die?"* I've read about this experience before in those books on death and dying. *"My guide said "No, just hang on."*

Then came the tunnel of light. Whoosh! Like warp factor 10 in Star Trek or just like in 2001: A Space Odyssey at the end with all the lights streaking by. I said to the stranger in white "Are you, by any chance, an extra terrestrial?"

He smiled and said, *"Do I look like E.T.?"*

We kept going faster and faster. And finally, we approached the end of the tunnel. There was a bright light, and I could see there were two other strangers in moon glow white robes. They seemed to be checking people's I.D. But as we got there, they said to my companion, *"You can pass right through, sir. Everybody knows you, here. Heh, Heh."*

And there we were. How can I describe the indescribable to you? It was if you took the most beautiful place you could ever remember or ever imagine or ever dream of and then realize it was nothing, compared to this.

And the place just overflowed with joy. I could see groups of people gathering together and hugging each other, laughing -- hitting each other on the arm -- crying tears of joy. It was quite something to see. I turned to my guide and said, *"What exactly is this place? Where are we?"* He said, *"I told you, it's Homecoming. You've come home."*

"Well, I know one thing," I replied. *"This is not Medford, Oregon."*

"No, it's not," he said, laughing, *"but it is Homecoming and you have come home."*

"But who are all these people?" I said. *"Some of them look familiar, but I don't quite recognize them. Those who do look recognizable look younger than I remember them."*

"Yes, there is a feeling of youthfulness here, but that has to do more with energy than age. There is a lot of maturity, here" he said. *"Come along, there's someone waiting to see you."*

So we walked, and along the way I saw more groups of people gathering together. Some looked like they were picnicking or getting ready for tailgate parties. He did say it was Homecoming. Many of the gatherings looked very elaborate, anticipating a large and festive banquet. Tables were laid out as if a major feast was about to be served.

And everywhere I went, I saw signs that said, *"Welcome Home, Saints."*

I said, *"Who are these people?"* and my guide directed me to smaller signs near the groups who were gathering.

The first one I saw said, *"Zion Lutheran Church Luther League, class of 1932. Medford, Oregon."* There was a guy there who looked like this old man I used to know back home-- only much younger.

That group was next to another group which said, *"Martyrs of the Roman Games, 86 A.D."* (apparently, they still use "A.D.", "in the year of our Lord," instead of "A.C.E". --probably making a theological statement.)

Walking further along, there were other gatherings of martyrs, too. I saw a group that said, *"Washington Peace March 1970"* and *"Philippines Prison Camp, Class of 1945."*

Everywhere people were obviously enjoying each other and very glad to be together. Some of the groups had combined for a meal. One of them said, *"Purdue Hunger Hike, Class of 1972"* and *"Those Fed by Hunger Hike Proceeds, 1972."*

Another group said, *"Saints of the Signing of the Augsburg Confession."* There were having a joint dinner with the *"Saints of the Council of Trent."* This time the Lutherans and Catholics were shaking hands, and no one was *"anathema."* No one was *"accursed."*

One of the more interesting groups gathered had the sign which read, *"Lutheran Book of Worship Commemorations Group, Published 1978. pages 10-12."* My guide said that since most Lutherans had never heard of these saints, they thought they should at least meet each other. I especially enjoyed meeting Lars Skefsrud, Chief Seattle, and Birgitta of Sweden.

One of the most touching scenes I saw was a small group of about 10 people. They were embracing and obviously comforting a man in uniform who was crying. The sign next to them said, *"Victims of Ramada Inn Military Jet Tragedy, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1987."*¹

As we walked further, I noticed there were lots of families gathering together. I saw signs identifying family names, like *"Johnson, Yang, Kowalsky, Nagakowa, Shumulu."*

It was very joyous. Everyone was having such a great time. I realized, too, that people were moving in and out and between groups. Even though they were getting together by common experiences or family ties, they were always part of many classes -- many gatherings. At this Homecoming, there was a strong sense that everyone in each of the groups very much felt a part of every other group. It was beautiful.

We passed by one peculiar group, though. They were in a church building, rather closed off from everyone else. It was the only time I saw a church building. Inside there was a very sober, serious, pious, crowd. As we walked by, my guide said, *"Shh, they think they're the only ones here."*

"Ha ha," I said, *"I've heard that one before. I thought that was just one of those dumb earth jokes."*

"You're right." He laughed, "I was just a joke --and he snapped his fingers to reveal a group of pastors laughing themselves silly. The sign next to them said, *"Tellers of Bad Religious Jokes."*

¹. A couple weeks prior to this All Saints Day, a military jet crashed into the Indianapolis Ramada Inn, killing 10 people. The pilot had safely ejected moments earlier.

Then at last we got to the group my guide was directing me to -- the sign said, "*Augustana Lutheran Nursing Home.*" But there were no old, feeble, weak, people there at all --just healthy, vibrant, strong, celebrating people.

And there she was. I knew her from her sweet smile. "*Hello, grandson.*" she said. "*Been playing any Scrabble, lately?*" She gave me a big hug." It was my Grandmother Hilda who would have been 99 years old on October 30, had she not died two years earlier. Here she was ageless and very much alive. She was right about this place. No wonder she was ready to go.

I wanted to stay and talk, but then came the sound of a large whistle. I swear it sounded like the train whistle at Ross-Ade Football Stadium except louder. And immediately people left their reunions to gather at a large facility that seemed like a stadium or arena. And yet there were more people here than who could fill all the stadiums in the world.

My guide said, "*Right, a lot more than 144,000. It was just symbolic, you know.*"

"*So... what is going to happen now?*" I asked.

"*I told you,*" He said, "*It's Homecoming. This is Half-Time. Enjoy the show.*"

And what a show it was. The music, the pageantry, the singing. the spirit. They even played the old earth tune, "*For All The Saints*" like I'd never heard it before. It was magnificent. Incredible. Awesome. Fantastic.

But even so, I was still kind of confused about what all this meant. What was I doing here? If I was watching a half time pageant, what was going to follow? Then, as the teams took the field, I began to realize what was so unique about this Homecoming and this half time.

As the teams took the field. I realized that I was with the saints in heaven who were watching and cheering the saints on earth. I was with the blessed, broken, redeemed people of God, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the peacemakers, all the saints of God who have been brought home by a loving God who unites and reunites. This was the feast we foretasted long ago.

Here in this magnificent place the victory was won, even though the game still had to be played out before all the saints could... "*from their labors, rest*" -- before all the saints could come home.

Then, as I became part of that cheering mass, praising God like a wave that never wants to stop -- around and around and around--part of that joyful, triumphant mass of God's people, I only wished I could have had known more deeply the support we all had from this whole communion of saints.

Because, ... If I had only known more deeply, more completely, I would have been stronger dealing with all my day to day struggles of doing battle with those things that kept me from being the kind of saint I always wanted to be. I would have been stronger.

Then, my guide, who seemed to be listening to every one of my thoughts, turned and said, *"You're not staying, you know. You can't. You still belong on the field. Call it the mission field, if you will. Your place is still down there.*

Those people, those saints down there, need to be encouraged. And you need to go back so that you, like Saint John did through his revelation many years before, can share this vision, which is also true.

Tell them about our Homecoming. Tell them what it's like. Tell them so that they can enjoy little homecomings as they anticipate "The Greatest Homecoming."

Every Sunday can be a little Homecoming. Every gathering of two or three in my name can be a little Homecoming. Re-write your Sunday sermon. Call it 'The Greatest Homecoming.' Express my words. Share bread and wine. Tell them as they remember me, I am with them."

It was at that moment that I realized just who this mysterious stranger was. I should have known him all along. It was the mention of breaking bread that made me recognize....

"You don't look like your pictures." I said.

Again he smiled and said, *"Nope. Never did."* And he continued.

"Tell the saints down there about my victory over sin, death, and the devil -- a victory which is assured.

Tell them so that they may not lose heart during their life's second half. And tell them that we're all pulling for them.

Let them know the whole communion of saints are with them. Help them hear our cheering. And don't worry. You'll be back soon enough. We'll be waiting for you and all the rest"

"But wait," I pleaded, *"Can't I stay just a little while longer? There's more people I want to see...."*

I found myself back in my bedroom. I was in a bit of a cold sweat. *"Invasion of the Body Snatchers"* was just at the point where they're about to put Kevin McCarthy in the loony bin with his crazy story about aliens.

Watching him, I wondered if you people this Sunday morning would believe my story. I thought about going back to the original sermon. But then I thought, *"Well, even if they don't believe my vision, surely they'll believe the Revelation of Saint John."*

It's his vision, after all, which inspired mine.

Happy All Saints Day. Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, July 18, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #119

My first "Wheat and Weeds" sermon. What was I thinking?

"Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen! (Matt. 13:36-43 NRS)

Tomorrow during Sunday morning worship we are going to hear from Jesus the parable of the "Wheat and the Weeds," sometimes called the "Wheat and the Tares," as tares and wheat grow side by side and are difficult to tell apart. It prompted me to remember the first time I ever preached a sermon on that scripture.

The short version of the story is that in 1975 I took a summer parish job (like an internship) at a two-point parish in Noonan, North Dakota. Noonan was next to the Canadian border in very rural northwest North Dakota.

In the attached sermon I describe how truly wonderful it was to have that experience, but also share the time I naively stepped into a big controversy by trying to address it through the parable of the wheat and the weeds. I addressed the local hot issue of closing Noonan High School and sending the students to the neighboring larger town's high school. The image of stirring a hornet's nest comes to mind.

What is interesting about reviewing this experience forty-five years later is that I can easily see how today I could speak to other controversial issues and likely get a similar response. When Noonan that summer I applied the gospel to their very sensitive and explosive local political issue, it did not go well, with one family especially. Others may have compartmentalized their anger knowing I would be going back to seminary in a few weeks. I don't remember anyone saying, "That was a good sermon," or "We needed to hear that."

I invite you to take a look. Do you think I was being too political? Was I misreading an application of this particular parable? How else might I have approached this gospel? Are there similar controversial issues in our community or world today that this parable might speak address? Or is it better advised, for the sake of harmony (or the appearance of harmony) to avoid anything

where there are differences of opinion or perspective? I'd love your take on this. Email me at mopgrand@gmail.com.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, remind us, especially when living through controversial times and issues, that you all things are in your care. Help us trust that you will sort all that needs to be sorted, and that we can rely on you to make good your earthly harvest. Teach us to let go of anger and judgement and all those things that keep us from you and each other. For what we need this day and the days ahead, we turn it all over to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Wheat and Tares by Robin Calamaio

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxWGjxlm7x0>

God's Gonna Separate the Wheat from the Tares by Mahalia Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmxmEF7yCml>

God's Gonna Separate the Wheat from the Tares by Blind Joe Taggart

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0rj69-Jzlk>

We Plough the Seeds and Scatter done by unknown English church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWHMZsf-Ano>

We Plough the Seeds and Scatter (organ and words and great images; note yoke on horses)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du-5yPKfSRc>

We Plough the Seeds and Scatter by Scottish Festival Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ8dEkjmEMg>

All Good Gifts Godspell version by Kelly Leung

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_dfjovzvis

All Good Gifts by Godspell, Jr.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwFsZgKl7Tg>

Great is Thy Faithfulness by Chris Rice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3sd1Z75j7A>

Great is Thy Faithfulness by unknown English Church ... Seedtime and Harvest...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTKlqmdfHsk>

Wheat and Weeds: A North Dakota Story by Pastor Mark Opgrand

Pentecost 9A (11) 2008 , 8-1-93 Romans 8:26-27, Matthew 13:24-30

Another true story. It's about the first time I ever preached a sermon that got a family so mad at me that they walked out of church never to have anything to do with me ever again.

It was between my first and second years of seminary when I did a kind of summer internship in a small parish way up on the border of northwest North Dakota. The place was called Noonan.

I was excited about this possibility because I had never spent any time among rural farmers and I really wanted to learn what church life was like out there.

The pastor took a month vacation in the middle of the summer so I had all the responsibilities....(and no supervision).

It really was a wonderful summer. The people were friendly and welcoming. They really enjoyed showing this city boy their farmer ways. I learned particularly about wheat, and with pride I even became able to distinguish between some of the varieties.

I learned to say to those farmers..."Well, I see your durum is about ready to head out." (I felt so cool.) I witnessed many good things about life in a rural community, especially when one farmer had a sudden heart attack and died right before harvest. All of his farmer friends in the area took a day off from their harvesting and with 30 combines, and dozens of trucks, worked the entire day together to get his entire 1,100 acres harvested.

It was beautiful to see this generous and caring spirit. All summer, I had loved watching the fields of wheat grow. It also offered a strong image of wheat to draw from in preaching this text for the first time.

I had learned in seminary that a parable may be interpreted in multiple ways. So when I came to preach this text on that Sunday in the middle of the summer, I very much wanted to apply relevance to their situation.

Making application wasn't immediately evident because, with modern weed killer, waiting till harvest to separate wheat and weeds was a non-issue. So what might an appropriate application be regarding this parable?

What might its message be to them?

Well, we did have this one situation ...There was this one thing going on in the community that was causing a lot of hard feelings. It had not talked about it in church sermons, but I heard a lot about it in all my conversations.

There was a huge fight going on that summer about closing Noonan's small high school, and because it was the center of community life, this was an extremely emotional issue.

With a shrinking population of just 400 in town, it was getting harder and harder to justify keeping the school open. Many in the Noonan community saw people from the neighboring county seat, Crosby, as being the ones who were determined to close the school.

Some of them were. But the public nastiness and anger over this was really something to behold. To hear some of the people tell it, Crosby people were the scum of the earth, the enemy, the one's out to destroy "our" community and our way of life.

Now it seemed to me, and I realize now I was very naive I was about this, that, in this community, a lot of "wheat" had been damaged in this effort to destroy the "weeds." A lot of goodness was being squashed by nastiness and mean spiritedness.

So what I did was use this parable to talk about the situation between these two communities. I tried to empathize with the loss of the school, but also described the effect of anger and hatred emerging through the fight.

Needless to say, I had everyone's attention. Everyone was listening. Not nodding, but listening, and then I got to the point where I said:

"Anger is a weed which consumes everything around it and eventually it even consumes the person who is hating --even if the anger is for a good reason."

That's when I heard to first "Ha."it was a woman's voice at the back of the church.

Then again. "Ha...."

I continued. "There is more at stake here than a school. The gospel is at stake."

"HA... Ha.... Ha... ha..."

I said, "The gospel is at stake because the gospel of Jesus Christ and real life are inseparable.

(And then my fatal words) "If you think the church should stick to church business and leave other situations alone, then you've got the wrong gospel and the wrong Jesus.

"Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. HA HA HA...."

And she walked out. She, her husband, and her three big strapping sons walked out!

They missed how I concluded, where I said, “But through the Holy Spirit we’ll grow together and we’ll confess together ... and we’ll be healed together. God will bring us all to the harvest.

I told them that because God loved us first and most of all, nothing would keep them from God’s harvest. God will enable us to live together and find common ground even when we disagree.

Of course, one family didn’t hear that part. Soon after the service, someone explained that whenever the woman who laughed is extremely distraught, she breaks out into this unique maniacal laughter.

The woman never spoke to me again and furthermore never looked at me again.

Later I learned something else about that family. The family lived out in the country on a very large family farm that was just across the lane from another family who also had a large family farm.

The two farmers were brothers. Something happened between the two brothers a dozen years before; since then, neither family had anything to do with the other family.

They didn’t speak. They didn’t acknowledge each other’s presence. Their children were not allowed to interact with each other. Both families planted large hedges in front of the homes so they wouldn’t have to see each other.

One family was extremely active in the Noonan Lutheran church and the other extremely active in the rural Crosby Lutheran church. The children of one brother went to Crosby High School, and the children of the other brother went to Noonan High School.

What a terrible burden to have to carry. And I wondered how people can hear the gospel Sunday after Sunday and still carry so such anger and bitterness?

After my summer experience I occasionally wondered whatever happened to the families. A dozen years later when I was at Purdue I learned more.

While serving as campus pastor, I met new pastor who had just moved to Indianapolis from that very Crosby parish. I asked him if he knew these families. He just shook his head, and I learned that at least 22 years had now passed since the falling out ... with no change

He told me that one of the sons had married a woman the family disapproved of and he was kicked out of the family business and told never to return.

Quite a sad story, isn't it?

I'm sure many of you may know other tragic stories where people come into conflict with other people and cannot seem to ever get past the anger and hatred.

And maybe that situation calls us even more to hear this powerful and healing word from the gospel this morning a word that might make a difference if only we will hear.

Many people carry something around inside them that is so hard to let go. Many people carry grudges against people they see as the enemy ... people they see as the weeds ...interfering with God's kingdom of wheat.

In this parable, God tells us to hold off on this ... hold off with our judging and let God be the one to sort things out.

Do the work that Jesus calls us to do.

Bear a gospel of love and peace to all people. Be part of God's promised harvest. Don't worry about the weeds. Do right by God.

Certainly, we will have conflicts with each other... it may be over challenging family matter, or closing a school, or choosing a president, or changing how we worship.

We may even be convinced we're the wheat of God's good creation and someone else is the weed.

Remember then, this parable, that God will be the one to bring forth goodness in this world by bearing a love that invites us to join with all God's people into forgiveness and peace and joy and celebration.

God has a wonderful way of dealing with bringing good out of all situations, if only we will trust him. Hearing no maniacal laughter to the contrary, I would say we are in agreement. Let the people say "Amen." Amen.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, July 19, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #120

The Outskirts of Heaven. According to C.S. Lewis's *"The Great Divorce."*

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (Jn. 3:17-21 NRS)

It was theologian, pastor, and Biblical scholar Eugene Peterson who said this about "Judgment." *"Judgement is not an arbitrary lashing out from a despotic deity; it is self-inflicted. It follows from the deliberate, conscious choice of darkness over light, of evil instead of good."*

I wonder if he, like me, was influenced in his perception by C.S. Lewis's *"The Great Divorce."*

A couple of days ago, I attached my own personal "favorite to compose" sermon about an imaginary trip to heaven. In that fantasy, called *"The Greatest Homecoming,"* I imagined a grand reunion of the faithful. Within that story, the vision included me experiencing a joy that would send me back to earth with encouragement from all the saints.

What was missing in my story, focusing on all the saints, was the *"What about?"* question, that is, *"What about those who are not going to heaven, or those condemned to hell?"*

A couple of thoughts. One popular idea is that life is one great *"pass/fail test,"* and when you die, your life is reviewed and graded and the judge either welcomes you to heaven or sends you to hell. The challenge with this is that it often relegates a person's life to works, rather than faith. And while *"Faith without works is dead"* (James 2:26), we always emphasize faith, for we all fall short, and in order to be saved, we must rely on God's grace.

C.S. Lewis pondered this in *"The Great Divorce."* In his imaginative trip to heaven from hell by a group of ghosts, he imagines them meeting solid spirits, who invite them and try to persuade them to come to the *"High Country."* Lewis imagines that it is never too late to accept God's grace.

Some would argue that's too easy, because who wouldn't want to go to heaven? But that's where *"The Great Divorce"* is so compelling. Through a series of vignettes, Lewis shows any number of ways someone might refuse God's grace, even after death.

It's speculative, of course, but I am intrigued at how Lewis affirms the lengths God will go to be open to repentance (even after death).

In today's devotion, I will be attaching one of those vignettes along with a little introduction. Like the narrator of the story, we shall be witnesses to the meeting between the "*Solid Spirit*," from Heaven and the (not solid) "*ghost*" from hell.

The good news for people of faith, of course, is that such worries about "*where we are going when we die*" can be put to rest ... simply by trusting in God's promises through our baptism.

Let us pray.

O God, we thank you for the gift of salvation, freely offered through Jesus Christ our Lord. May nothing hinder us from trusting in the promise of eternal life as we live our lives faithfully as your forgiven sinners. Thank you for your grace, and for your Holy Spirit who helps us through times of doubt to let go of everything that keeps us from you. Bless all who call upon you today for hope and healing. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. I already offered quite a few "*heaven themed*" songs yesterday. But thinking about God's grace and promises, I am also drawn to these:

"*I Stand Amazed*," by Steph McCleod and Celtic Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmt5VNnrJIM>

"*I Stand Amazed*" by Southern Seminary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK1AWAwgFy0>

"*He Will Hold Me Fast*" by Norton Hall Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0345Ls4IJf4>

"*I Stand Amazed at the Presence*" by Sovereign Grace Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-44GH3NhdIA>

"*Milky White Way*" by Elvis Presley

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10KMDLJ-i_g

"*Precious Lord Take My Hand*" by Elvis Presley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsiq87InDE8>

Excerpt from *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis

Introduction. The Great Divorce is a fantasy written by C.S. Lewis. The divorce he refers to is the divorce between heaven and hell, and he is saying that there is a great gulf fixed between them. He seems to be saying that if we hold onto Hell—which generally turns out to be the human ego—we shall never see heaven.

The story begins in Grey Town, which is the name given to the place where the dead exist, those who have not gone directly to the High Country, or Heaven. Grey Town is a dim, murky place where nobody seems very happy or very sad and where the sun never quite sets and never quite rises.

Occasionally some people from Grey Town take a bus trip to the plains where they can view, off in the distance, the High Country. With the author himself, we board such a bus and take the trip toward the High Country. On disembarking, we are disturbed by the hardness of everything—even the grass under our feet is painfully hard, for such is the solidness of reality! As we look about, we see the high mountains in the distance. Soon there appear Bright Spirits coming from the mountains to talk to us who have come from grey Town. They are friends or relatives of the people—or rather Ghosts – from Grey Town. The Spirits try to persuade the Ghosts to return with them to the High Country where truth may be found, and God known. But the Ghosts, for various reasons, are unwilling to make the long, difficult journey up into the mountains. Here is one of the Bright Spirits approaching a rather startled Ghost:

Solid Spirit: Don't you know me?

Ghost: Well, I'm damned. I wouldn't have believed it. It's a fair knock-out. It isn't right, Len, you know. What about poor Jack?

Solid Spirit: He is here. You will meet him soon, if you stay.

Ghost: But you murdered him.

Solid Spirit: Of course, I did. It is all right now.

Ghost: All right, is it? All right for you, you mean. But what about the poor chap himself, laying cold and dead?

Solid Spirit: But he isn't. I have told you; you will meet him soon. He sent you his love.

Ghost: What I'd like to understand, is what you're here for, as pleased as punch, you, a bloody murderer, while I've been walking the streets down there and living in a place like a pigsty all these years.

Solid Spirit: That is a little hard to understand at first. But it is all over now. You will be pleased about it presently. Till then there is no need to bother about it.

Ghost: No need to boast about it? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

Solid Spirit: No, not as you mean. I do not look at myself. I have given up myself. I had to, you know, after the murder. That was what it did for me. And that was how everything began.

Ghost: Personally... Personally, I'd have though you and I ought to be the other way round. That's my personal opinion.

Solid Spirit: Very likely we soon shall be, said the other. If you'll stop thinking about it.

Ghost: Look at me now, I gone straight all my life. I don't say I was a religious man and I don't say I had no faults, far from it. But I done my best all my life, see? I done my best by everyone, that's the sort of chap I was. I never asked for anything that wasn't mine by rights. If I wanted a drink, I paid for it and if I took my wages I done my job, see? That's the sort I was, and I don't care who knows it.'

Solid Spirit: It would be much better not to go on about that now.

Ghost: Who's going on? I'm not arguing. I'm just telling you the sort of chap I was, see? I'm asking for nothing but my rights. You may think you can put me down because you're dressed up like that (which you weren't when you worked under me) and I'm only a poor man. But I got to have my rights same as you, see?

Solid Spirit: Oh, no. It's not so bad as that. I haven't got my rights, or I should not be here. You will not get yours either. You'll get something far better. Never fear.

Ghost: That's just what I say. I haven't got my rights. I always done my best and I never done nothing wrong. And what I don't see is why I should be put below and bloody murderer like you.

Solid Spirit: Who knows whether you will be? Only be happy and come with me.

Ghost: What do you keep on arguing for? I'm only telling you the sort of chap I am. I only want my right. I'm not asking for anybody's bleeding charity.

Solid Spirit: Then do. At once. Ask for the Bleeding Charity. Everything here is for the asking and nothing can be bought.

Ghost: That may do very well for you, I daresay. If they choose to let in a bloody murderer all because he makes a poor mouth at the last moment, that's their look out. But I don't see myself going in the same boat as you, see. Why should I? I don't want charity. I'm a decent man and if I had my right's I'd have been here long ago and you can tell them I said so.

Solid Spirit: You can never do it like that. Your feet will never grow hard enough to walk on our grass that way. You'd be tired out before we got to the mountains. And it isn't exactly true, you know.

Ghost: What isn't true?

Solid Spirit: You weren't a decent man and you didn't do your best. We none of us were and none of us did. Lord bless you; it doesn't matter. There is no need to go into it all now.

Ghost: You! *You* have that face to tell *me* I wasn't a decent chap?

Solid Spirit: Of course. Must I go into all that? I will tell you one thing to begin with. Murdering old Jack wasn't the worst thing I did. That was the work of a moment and I was half mad when I did it. But I murdered you in my heart, deliberately, for years. I used to lie awake at night thinking what I'd do if I ever got the chance. That is why I have been sent to you now: to ask your forgiveness and to be your servant as long as you need one, and longer if it pleases you. I was the worst. But all the men who worked under you felt the same. You make it hard for us, you know. And you made it hard for your wife and your children.

Ghost: You mind your own business, young man. None of your lip, see? Because I'm not talking impudence from you about my private affairs.

Solid Spirit: There are no private affairs.

Ghost: And I'll tell you another thing. You can clear off, see? You're not wanted. I may be only a poor man but I'm not making pals with a murderer, let alone taking lessons from him. Made it hard for you and your like, did I? If I had you back there, I'd show you what work is.

Solid Spirit: Come and show me now. It will be joy going to the mountains, but there will be plenty of work.

Ghost: You don't suppose I'd go with you?

Solid Spirit: Don't refuse. You will never get there alone. And I am the one who was sent to you.

Ghost: So that's the trick, is it? I thought there'd be some damned nonsense. It's all a bloody clique, all a bloody clique. Tell them I'm not coming, see? I'd rather be damned that go alone with you. I came here to get my rights, see? Not to go sniveling along on charity tied onto your apron strings. If they're too fine to have me without you, I'll go home. That's what I'll do. I'll go home. I didn't come here to be treated like a dog. I'll go home. That's what I'll do. Damn and blast the whole pack of you...

Narrator: And the poor Ghost, grumbling and whimpering a little as it picked its way over the sharp grasses, made off. The Bright Spirit, we may assume, was disappointed at having to return to the High Country by himself.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, July 20, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #121

What Happens on the Via Dolorosa stays on the Via Dolorosa ... except when...

After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. 21 They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. 22 Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). (Mk. 15:20-22 NRS)

“Via Dolorosa” is Latin for “sorrowful way” or “way of suffering.” It is also a road in Old Jerusalem, a path where Jesus was led in agony, carrying the cross on his way to Golgotha, where he was crucified.

For Christian pilgrims, the *Via Dolorosa* is a sacred place that has rich meaning for those who walk its path and contemplate Jesus’ Passion (his suffering for us). There is much that has changed on this road, of course, but even amid the vendors and shops that line the street, ancient walls still stand where Jesus dragged that cross, and later Simon of Cyrene who was called to help him.

Attached to these ancient walls are fourteen markers with numbers that identify the stations. Some come from the scriptures; some come from tradition. Here is a link for a more detailed description of the stations: <https://landlopers.com/2011/04/03/walking-via-dolorosa-stations-cross-jerusalem-guide>

And here are the stations:

1 Jesus is Condemned to Die. 2 Jesus is made to Bear His Cross. 3 Jesus Falls the First Time. 4 Jesus Meets His Mother. 5 Simon Helps Jesus Carry His Cross. 6 Veronica Wipes Jesus’ Face. 7 Jesus Falls the Second Time. 8 Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem. 9 Jesus Falls the Third Time. 10 Jesus is Stripped. 11 Jesus is nailed to the Cross. 12 Jesus Dies on the Cross. 13 Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross. 14 Jesus is laid in the Tomb.

Accompanied by sixty pastors from a variety of backgrounds, I had an opportunity during my second year at St. Paul’s (1998) to travel to the Holy Land. Part of our pilgrimage included walking the Via Dolorosa. I will never forget this deeply meaningful experience, (and not for the obvious reasons).

As we began this solemn procession, I felt I needed to remove my hat as a sign of respect. I hadn’t walked ten paces before I felt this massive SPLAT on my head! My colleagues looked on in horror.

I had just been “pooped on” ... by a very large pigeon!

The group around me stopped dead in their tracks. “**EEWWW!!!**” Then came the laughter; they couldn’t help it. They told others to come and see, and they laughed. As I reached up, it was so gross. And so much!

Thankfully one in the group had a small packet of Kleenex. It took several tissues to wipe (most of) it off, but since we did not have access to a bathroom until the end of the Via Dolorosa, I had to walk this sacred experience with pigeon poop on my head! I was never so thankful to be bald. But even so....

Looking back, (and I realized this as it happened), there might be a lesson to be learned here. While we pondered these stations devotionally, what happened to Jesus on that same street two thousand years ago was not only painful but humiliating. They laughed; they scorned; they jeered; they disrespected.

Fourteen stations on the Via Dolorosa are identified. Some are biblical; some are by tradition. Based on my experience, I could imagine a fifteenth station: “*Jesus is humiliated by a defecating bird.*” I know this is gross to imagine (or even suggest), but every time I think of that day I am reminded that it was with great humiliation and suffering that Jesus went to the cross for us.

Let us pray:

Thank you, Lord Jesus for choosing to live and die for us and our sins. We are grateful that the places you walked are literally still on this earth that people can visit and remember you and your saving work. During this time of global pandemic when many are unable to make religious pilgrimages, we pray you will strengthen them where they are. We also thank you for every thing that helps us strengthen our firm foundation in faith. We pray for those who are sick today, and those who serve them. We pray for all who despair of a world where there is so much conflict and suffering. Give us all hope we pray. In Jesus’ name. Amen..

P.S. I did not know about Via Dolorosa songs till I found them. I also found a video of walking the Via Dolorosa that can give you a sense of being there (except for the pigeons). Enjoy.

A video of walking the Via Dolorosa (a good visual into to the Stations)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R59EpPSIVBg>

Via Dolorosa by Lea Salonga

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67XrqXXTceM>

Via Dolorosa by Francislymsj

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ztbikk1hjzo>

Via Dolorosa (a neat version with music by Assyrian Praise and Worship)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6Tw7x-YiV4>

Via Dolorosa by Ginny Owens and Andrew Greer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dg71m7F2es>

Were You There When They Crucified My Lord by Annie Moses Band (all siblings)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9-1thLeoal>

Were You There When They Crucified My Lord by The Crystals

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uO9C3eYoik>

Cross of Jesus Cross of Sorrow by rovCantoDeLode

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPV_neMPDyl

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, July 21, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #122

The day I realized I was perpetuating my own false narrative.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices 10 and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! 12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Col. 3:9-12 NRS)

St. Paul admonishes us to look honestly at ourselves and not let lies or truth hinder our growth as God's beloved people. Easier said than done.

When I moved to the south many years ago now, I really wanted to fit in (and still do). Therefore, when southerners would hear my accent and say, "*Oh, you're a Yankee,*" I regularly tried to deny that by saying, "*Oh, no, I'm not a Yankee; I grew up in Oregon. We weren't even in the Civil War.*"

I repeated that many times. And for many years, I believed it, probably because growing up in Oregon, I don't recall any conversations about civil war heritage, either union or confederacy.

Our current racial unrest, and conversations about monuments has been causing me to reckon with narratives in my own life, especially those untrue or misleading.

For many years I have also claimed that I wasn't prejudiced because I grew up in all-white Medford, Oregon. How could I be prejudiced when I didn't even know any black people? The only time *black* was ever in our conversations was on account of Medford High School's mascot, the "*Black Tornadoes.*" "*Here we go Black Tornadoes, here we go!!*" Ironically, it was impossible for weather patterns in Southern Oregon to spawn tornadoes.

My false narrative was exposed recently while watching one of several lectures on the Civil War. In one, the presenter mentioned my home state. At first, I was proud to learn that my state outlawed slavery in 1844! That pride faded quickly when heard the second part of the law, that, under penalty of severe beatings and banishment, no black persons were allowed to live in the entire Oregon Territory.

Investigating this history further, I discovered that a major motivation for banning slavery was that landowners and business people feared they could not compete with slave owners and their cheap labor.

Darn! I had always been so proud to be a native Oregonian, but now I learn we have our history to reckon with as well. In a state priding itself on being so open, welcoming, and progressive this history of exclusion and white supremacy is regrettable.

Furthermore.... Oregon was admitted to the Union in 1859! Uh oh! That means we **were** in the Civil War after all! I cannot deny my Yankee heritage. If only I had been born in Washington State, (formed in 1889).

It is hard these days for many to deal with issues of heritage, especially when we say "it wasn't me," or imagine that "*we have moved on*", or "*it's better just not to talk about certain things*", or "*we need to try to look at things from a point of view that makes all this seem less problematic.*"

As a "*now aware*" Oregonian, I suppose I could learn about these things and never get into it, but personally I have seen value when confessing I have hung on to a false narrative. Why declare Oregon was not in the Civil War if indeed Oregon was? Why mention we never had "colored drinking fountains," when the reason was that my town was all white.

Despite the discomfort, I believe it can be very helpful to learn about ourselves, and our history ... even those things we are not proud of. It is good to embrace growth, and have opportunity to gain wisdom, insight, and discover new pathways forward in respect to how we can live together despite our differences ... despite these challenging historical reckonings.

Speaking only for myself, there are many things regret never thinking about. For example, I was deeply touched recently by an essay written by a young Black poet named Caroline Randall Williams. She immediately caught my attention with her headline: "*You want a confederate monument? My body is a Confederate Monument.*" My first reaction was, "*What?*"

Her opening sentence was even more provocative: "*I have rape-colored skin. My light brown blackness is a living testament to the rules, practices, and causes of the old south.*"

What an eye opener, revealing something that simply cannot be denied. Slave owners used their property for non-consensual sex (rape). Most light skinned black persons have this legacy in their ancestry. Some, of course, will argue this cannot be rape because a slave is property and property has no rights and can therefore be used however the property owner pleases. I do not interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ to support this.

I am going to attach William's powerful essay. I admit that I am concerned about doing this because I still want to please everyone, this is a very uncomfortable subject. It would be easier to keep perpetuating my own false narrative and face such things. But Oregon was in the Civil War. Oregon outlawed slavery but also residency for Black persons. Ancestry.com and modern genetics is unearthing the reality of what happened generations ago. The DNA does not lie.

For me, reckoning with such things is fundamentally related to how we live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. I am aware that others believe it is better to leave all this alone and stick to a safe gospel that leaves a lot of things alone.

We know it's true with anything challenging or unpleasant in human relations, that it is easier embrace whatever supports our own false narratives. But it also takes effort to cover things up, or stifle things, or control a palatable narrative when, in fact, Jesus offers us such a good alternative. With Jesus, we can face up to all things, even the hard things. We don't be afraid of the truth. We can experience the deep and amazing grace of God who will make all things new. Really!!

The true narrative I want to be repeating for as long as I live is the wonderful story of God's love through Jesus Christ for all people.

Let us pray.

Holy Jesus, our Savior and Lord: There is never a time when it is comfortable to learn uncomfortable truths about ourselves and our history. And while we the hard parts of the story are not the whole story, they are part of the story that when faced, will hopefully, and by your grace, draw us to a new place of comfort and joy. There is so much to unite us, especially as we experience reconciliation with each other. Bring us, we pray to the joy of that experience, in Jesus' name. Amen.

O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing with Chris Rice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0GwS3pqbU>

O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing with St. Michael's Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2e475ww32Jg>

O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing with Jason Payne (pipe organ solo)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUJazovyNaM>

I Love to Tell the Story by Oak Ridge Boys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gsbu1uJiZm4>

I Love to Tell the Story with EmmyLou Harris and Robert Duvall

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJaDRuOYHkE>

I Love to Tell the Story with Alan Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvDUJayhdPd4>

Amazing Grace by Judy Collins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDdvReNKKuk>

Amazing Grace by Celtic Woman

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsCp5LG_zNE

Amazing Grace Peter Hollens and Home Free

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n145-J8eig>



YYou Want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument

The black people I come from were owned and raped by the white people I come from. Who dares to tell me to Celebrate them?

By Caroline Randall Williams

Ms. Williams is a poet.

June 26, 2020

NASHVILLE — I have rape-colored skin. My light-brown-blackness is a living testament to the rules, the practices, the causes of the Old South.

If there are those who want to remember the legacy of the Confederacy, if they want monuments, well, then, my body is a monument. My skin is a monument.

Dead Confederates are honored all over this country — with cartoonish private statues, solemn public monuments and even in the names of United States Army bases. It fortifies and heartens me to witness the protests against this practice and the growing clamor from serious, nonpartisan public servants to redress it. But there are still those — like President Trump and the Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell — who cannot understand the difference between rewriting and reframing the past. I say it is not a matter of “airbrushing” history, but of adding a new perspective.

Caroline Randall Williams read her essay and answered questions on Instagram.

I am a black, Southern woman, and of my immediate white male ancestors, all of them were rapists. My very existence is a relic of slavery and Jim Crow.

According to the rule of hypodescent (the social and legal practice of assigning a genetically mixed-race person to the race with less social power) I am the daughter of two black people, the granddaughter of four black people, the great-granddaughter of eight black people.

Go back one more generation and it gets less straightforward, and more sinister. As far as family history has always told, and as modern DNA testing has allowed me to confirm, I am the descendant of black women who were domestic servants and white men who raped their help.

It is an extraordinary truth of my life that I am biologically more than half white, and yet I have no white people in my genealogy in living memory. No. Voluntary. Whiteness. I am more than half white, and none of it was consensual.

White Southern men — my ancestors — took what they wanted from women they did not love, over whom they had extraordinary power, and then failed to claim their children.

What is a monument but a standing memory? An artifact to make tangible the truth of the past. My body and blood are a tangible truth of the South and its past. The black people I come from were owned by the white people I come from. The white people I come from fought and died for their Lost Cause. And I ask you now, who dares to tell me to celebrate them? Who dares to ask me to accept their mounted pedestals?

You cannot dismiss me as someone who doesn't understand. You cannot say it wasn't my family members who fought and died. My blackness does not put me on the other side of anything. It puts me squarely at the heart of the debate. I don't just come from the South. I come from Confederates. I've got rebel-gray blue blood coursing my veins. My great-grandfather Will was raised with the knowledge that Edmund Pettus was his father. Pettus, the storied Confederate general, the grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, the man for whom Selma's Bloody Sunday Bridge is named.

So I am not an outsider who makes these demands. I am a great-great-granddaughter.

And here I'm called to say that there is much about the South that is precious to me. I do my best teaching and writing here. There is, however, a peculiar model of Southern pride that must now, at long last, be reckoned with.

This is not an ignorant pride but a defiant one. It is a pride that says, "Our history is rich, our causes are justified, our ancestors lie beyond reproach." It is a pining for greatness, if you will, a wish again for a certain kind of American memory. A monument-worthy memory.

But here's the thing: Our ancestors don't deserve your unconditional pride. Yes, I am proud of every one of my black ancestors who survived slavery. They earned that pride, by any decent person's reckoning. But I am not proud of the white ancestors whom I know, by virtue of my very existence, to be bad actors.

Among the apologists for the Southern cause and for its monuments, there are those who dismiss the hardships of the past. They imagine a world of benevolent masters, and speak with misty eyes of gentility and honor and the land. They deny plantation rape, or explain it away, or question the degree of frequency with which it occurred.

To those people it is my privilege to say, I am proof. I am proof that whatever else the South might have been, or might believe itself to be, it was and is a space whose prosperity and sense of romance and nostalgia were built upon the grievous exploitation of black life.

The dream version of the Old South never existed. Any manufactured monument to that time in that place tells half a truth at best. The ideas and ideals it purports to honor are not real. To those who have embraced these delusions: Now is the time to re-examine your position.

Either you have been blind to a truth that my body's story forces you to see, or you really do mean to honor the oppressors at the expense of the oppressed, and you must at last acknowledge your emotional investment in a legacy of hate.

Either way, I say the monuments of stone and metal, the monuments of cloth and wood, all the man-made monuments, must come down. I defy any sentimental Southerner to defend our ancestors to me. I am quite literally made of the reasons to strip them of their laurels.

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St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, July 22,2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #123

Turning “I have accepted Jesus as my personal savior” language upside down.

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. (Rom. 5:6 NLT)

For many years during Children's sermons, I have regularly asked the children: “What does the word ‘gospel’ mean?” They answer, **“GOOD NEWS!”** If the children and adults have learned nothing else from me, it is this: “Gospel” means “Good News.”

I remember a conversation many years ago with my friend Paul Hinderlie where he put “gospel” as “good news” in an entirely different light. We were talking about those familiar words people often speak when they are talking about their faith. You've likely heard the words, “I have accepted Jesus as my personal savior.”

These words are often spoken when someone is witnessing. Sometimes it precedes an invitation to believe, like **“I have accepted Jesus as my personal savior. Have you?”** Or maybe it just comes as a question: “Have you accepted Jesus as your personal savior?”

For many Christian traditions, it's been important to say the words, because saying the words mark your conversion. People using this language often can point to a specific time and place when they “accepted” Jesus (or even “got saved.”)

According to friend Paul, we have this upside down. “Accepting Jesus as your personal savior is not the gospel”, he said. “It's backwards. Me accepting Jesus may be good news for me, but how is it good news for you? This way of speaking puts the focus on me, rather than Jesus.”

Paul H. turned the phrase upside down, and by doing do, made it gospel. He said, “Instead of saying ‘I have accepted Jesus as my personal savior’ we should be saying **“Jesus has accepted us as his personal sinners.”**”

Think about it. Does that not put the action of salvation where it belongs? It is not what I have done, but what God has done.

I remember once being asked, by a street corner evangelist, “Are you saved?”

I said, “Yes.”

He said “When?”

I said, “Two thousand years ago on a cross.”

“No,” he said, “I mean when did you accept Jesus as your personal savior?”

I replied, “Jesus accepted me by God's grace when I was baptized,”

"When were you baptized?" he said.

"When I was a baby," I said.

"That wasn't baptism. You have to be old enough to accept Jesus for yourself," he said.

And around we go. When you emphasize (or focus on) the *"human side"* of the decision, *"I have accepted Jesus as my personal savior"* makes a kind of sense, just like waiting for someone to determine for themselves if they are saved and then follow it with the act of baptism. If you are unsaved but happy for me in my good news, and like what you see, you might want this for yourself.

But consider this: When you emphasize (or focus on) the *"God side"* of the decision, the reversed language *"Jesus has accepted us as his personal sinners"* is arguably a lot more hopeful. Why? Because, rather than proclaiming my decision, it proclaims God's saving action in Jesus Christ.

The blessing of the gospel, the blessing of God's good news, is that we have an awesome God who comes to us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. There are good intentions in the language accepting Jesus as our personal savior, but *"I have accepted Jesus,"* is not the good news that *"Jesus has accepted us"* is!

We are the *personal sinners* who Jesus has died for, that we might be saved... that we might be reconciled to God ... that we might forever belong to God.

St. Paul said it well in Romans 5:6: *When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners.*

My friend Paul also said it well when he proclaimed, *"Jesus has accepted us as his personal sinners."*

Let us pray.

Dear Jesus. Thank you for accepting us as your personal (and forgiven) sinners. May this good news become good news for all as we recognize and celebrate your saving grace. Strengthen us with this good news that always focuses on what you have done and are doing in this world. Help us learn to share the good news that celebrates our own journey but always emphasizes what you have done and are doing. Bless us today and the days ahead as we live out this good news through acts of love and service. Bless those who need you. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. Looking for songs that emphasize God's action, here are a few:

Sweetest Music, Softly Stealing Elaine Hagenberg
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySl_FyHAFIE

Praise to the Lord the Almighty by Travis Cottrell
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVrrqgFu2cg>

Praise to the Lord the Almighty by SE Samonte
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roxlm_gCb7c

The Day Thou Gavest Lord is Ended by Choir of Abbey School Tewksbury
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pigh8VHr-ZE>

Jesus Shall Reign by St. Michael's Singers
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNjdpdiK24I>

Come Thou Almighty King by Coral Ridge Presbyterian
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEeoIRXFM9Y>

Come Thou Almighty King (a very spirited version by Glengarden Baptist
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGHA9a8xyIU>

Come Thou Almighty King (another spirited version by Voice of Watchmen)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7M3NkoCT9J8>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, July 23, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #124

***Justified*. No, not the old TV show. Rather, our relationship with God.**

NRS Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (Rom. 5:1 NRS)

As St. Paul's In Your Home continues, I've been asked where the ideas come from? Sometimes it is like this: My wife Rebecca and I have currently run out of the good TV shows we have been streaming in the evening. Like most of us, not going out as often means more time looking for good shows to stream. Having run out, we decided against picking mediocre, and opted to watch something good we hadn't seen for a long time. We selected *Justified*. (Rated 8.6 on the IMDB scale).

Justified gets its title on account of U.S. Marshall shooting someone in self-defense. *Justified*. The title (not the show) got me thinking about our relationship with God. Justification by faith is one of the core affirmations in Christian faith, especially during the time of the Reformation when justification focused more on things we did in order to get right with God. Many of those things, like paying for indulgences or performing religious rituals had little to do with faith, and nothing to do with what God had done through Jesus Christ.

Justification is not an easy term to wrap our heads around, even though we Lutherans say it a lot. In pondering it further, I turned again to one of my favorite writers, Frederick Buechner, as he discussed "*Justification*" in "*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC.*" So let me co-author today's devotion with Buechner:

Justification

"In printer's language to '*justify*' means to set type in such a way that all full lines are of equal length and flush both left and right; in other words to put the printed lines in the right relationship with the page they're printed on and with each other. The religious sense of the world is very close to this. Being justified means being brought into right relation.

Paul says simply that being justified means having peace with God (Romans 5:1). He uses the noun '*Justification*' for the first step in the process of salvation.

During his Pharisee phase or '*blue period*,' Paul was on his way to Damascus to mop up some Christians when suddenly he heard the voice of Jesus Christ, whose resurrection he had up till not considered only an ugly rumor. What he might have expected the voice to say was '*Just you wait.*' What in effect it did say was, '*I want you on my side.*' Paul never got over it.

As far as Paul was concerned, he was the last man in the world for God to have called this way, but God had, thereby revealing himself to be a God who was willing to do business with you even if you were in the process of mopping up Christians at the time.

Paul also discovered that all the Brownie points he had been trying to rack up as a super-Pharisee had been pointless. God did business with you not because of who you were but because of who God was.

All the Voice seemed to want Paul to do was believe that it meant what it said, and do as it asked. Paul did both.

At a moment in his life when he had least reason to expect it, Paul was staggered by the ideal that no matter who you are or what you've done, God wants you on his side.

There is nothing you have to do or be. It's on the house. It goes with the territory. God has '*justified*' you, lined you up. To feel this somehow in your bones is the first step on the way to being saved.

You don't have to hear a Voice on the road to Damascus to feel it in your bones either. Maybe just noticing that the sun shines every bit as bright and sweet on Jack the Ripper as it does on Little Orphan Annie (only maybe a little hotter will do the trick. Maybe just noticing the holy and crazy givenness of your own life."

End of Buechner. Return of Opgrand.

Some people argue today that "*Justification*", or "*getting right with God*" is an ancient concept that has little meaning in today's world where "*self-justification*" is the norm. At the same time, one can make a strong case for many things being "*off kilter*," or "*out of whack*" or just plain "*off base*." Even when we are not sure what "*right*" looks like, we do have a very clear sense when things are "*not right*." Not right with each other. Not right in human relations. Not right with our environment. Not right with the world.

"*Justification*" speaks to getting right, and with it a kind of peace. Is it more inner peace than outer? Probably. But when we hear of God's justifying action in Jesus Christ, and when we trust that God continues to move in and around and through us to put things right, it is a word that can change each and every "*out of alignment*" day we experience... for the better. Blessings.

Let us pray.

Sometimes we wonder, O God, if anyone still feels the need to "get right" with you, especially when there is so much pre-occupation with our own selves. Even we know there is much that is "off" in this world. So much hurt. So much sickness. So much anger. So little peace. Help us trust that as

you made things right with us through Jesus Christ, we can also be right with each other. For those times when that happens, thank you Lord. Help us build on that foundational experience. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S I was searching for *Justified by Faith* Songs and found quite a variety I didn't know about. I begin, though with a Lutheran favorite, *Lord, You Have Bought Us* (Love Divine All Loves Excelling Tune).

Lord, You Have Bought Us traditional with music for sing along Mt Olive
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qnlnKe-zxA>

Lord, You Have Bought Us contemporary version by Koine
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIYZtf8uqvl>

Therefore Being Justified By Faith by Bruce White
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AV2xylFhZuM>

Therefore Being Justified by Faith by Mark Smith
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTcye7_xD8Y

Justified by Faith Tramaine Hawkins
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzxTlzhVxG0>

Justified by Faith by Witness
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYERE4C-Ngg>

Romans 5:1-5 Song by Karen Silverhall
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BK_3Q_x4cq0

Therefore Being Justified (an unusual be bop version from India)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDILxf46ls4>

Therefore Being Justified by Faith by Samuel Chia
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTwhblWPN8>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, July 24, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #125

Have you taken any hymns for granted, lately?

*"Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!"
(Jer. 33:11 NRS)*

I have been reading a book just published by world renown Old Testament Scholar Walter Bruggeman entitled *"Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty."* There is much to digest in this timely book, I and hope to draw good insights from it.

One new insight I gained from Bruggeman was about a hymn. As you know from reading these devotions, I am constantly exploring YouTube for hymns and songs to attach. As often as I can, I try to find hymns that include lyrics. Sometimes the lyrics are written in the video description or in the comment section.

I hadn't really thought about it, but it is true that when looking at lyrics, I rarely think about the context from which these lyrics and hymns were written. Most of the time I just take that for granted, and only consider how the words speak to me today or how well I like the tune.

Unlike scripture, which requires studying context for deeper understanding, hymns for the most part just get sung. We don't have introductions either in our bulletins, or by the pastors or musicians as they invite us to sing.

Maybe this doesn't matter. Powerful lyrics are timeless. They can speak to every age. But would we appreciate them more, if we knew more about what was happening in the composer's life when he or she wrote them?

After reading Bruggeman commenting on *"Now Thank We All Our God"* that is a big YES! In his book, Bruggeman remembered this hymn as he was reflecting on Jeremiah chapter 33's anticipated thank offering following a time of waste, disaster, and devastation.

Bruggeman recalled how this best loved hymn by German Evangelicals was written by Pastor Martin Rinkart during Germany's terrible Thirty Years Wars (1618-1648)!

Rinkart originally wrote it as a table grace for his family. At this time his home city of Eilenburg, Saxony, was a walled city which served as a refuge for many fleeing wars and pestilence. Rinkart was the only pastor in the town, and regularly buried as many as forty or fifty persons in one day. His wife was among those who died.

So he wrote this hymn not only during a long running war, but also in the face of terrible pestilence that decimated the population, much like a deadly pandemic. Thinking of the time of its composition, I wonder if it provides deeper meaning to this hymn of thanks as we sing it, today. Here are the words:

Now Thank We All Our God

1 *Now thank we all our God
with hearts and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom this world rejoices;
who, from our mothers' arms,
has blest us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.*

2 *Oh, may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us,
and keep us all in grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all harm
in this world and the next.*

3 *All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given,
the Son, and Spirit blest,
who reign in highest heaven,
the one eternal God,
whom earth and heav'n adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.*

Text: Martin Rinkhart, 1586-1649; tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1827-1878

When we consider these words, initially they seem best suited when everything is fine and when counting our blessings comes easily. However, when the world is such a mess, like it is now, they seem misplaced, especially with the virus and unrest and polarization and never-ending conflicts and wars. How do you sing, “*Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices? Who wondrous things has done*” with all this around us?

But when you think of what Pastor Rickart's world was going through, and how, in faith, he could still summons the means to thank God, the words have earned a timelessness, speaking to every age. For it is God's grace that "frees us from all ills" in all imaginable futures.

Bruggeman observes "Rinkart's words are as sure, bold, and awe-filled as is Israel's best doxology in Jeremiah 33:11: 'Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!'" (Jer. 33:11 NRS)

With "Now Thank We All Our God," (and every other hymn for that matter), it is easy to sing lyrics without thinking too deeply about them. It's easy to sing "Now Thank We..." without knowing it was during years of war and uncertainties and pestilence they were first spoken. Not only that, but they were spoken as prayer around the dinner table, where Rinkart and his children sat, counting their blessings.

I won't be taking that hymn for granted any more. Blessings.

Let us pray:

Thank you, O God, for this hymn. For four hundred years we have sung this hymn of Thanksgiving that celebrates your wondrous gifts that happen even in the midst of great turmoil. May we be lifted in our singing and help us see you despite those difficult things happening around us right now. Bless us as we turn to you. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. It all "Now Thank We All Our God" today... but offered in a variety of ways. Enjoy.

Now Thank We All Our God by massive assembly in England

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s99dNPKYtHk>

Now Thank We All Our God by Affiliated Designs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0dmfmwFLn0>

Now Thank We All Our God by New Apostolic Church in Cape Town, South Africa (Rutter Ar.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSIFFFLOWpo>

Now Thank We All Our God by Michael Lining (virtual acapela)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKNM5KD9_Q

Now Thank We All Our God organ solo by Paul Manz

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XJVV5HYSDw>

Now Thank We All Our God first on organ and then original piano arr. by Lila Viss

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utyOoqsyATk>

Now Thank We (Yoruba language version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WV0UzTYxET0>

and on Array Mbira African instrument (new to me)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnpK4W3KJ_8

St. Paul's In Your Home Devotional for Saturday, July 25 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #126

Merry Christmas (In July)!

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered ... (you know the rest....) (Lk. 2:1 NRS)

I was not thinking about the Hallmark Channel while researching "*Christmas in July*." I was thinking about my first summer at Holden Village, our Lutheran retreat center in the mountains of Washington state. On July 24 and 25, we made Christmas cookies, sang carols, decorated a tree, had a special skit with Santa, and celebrated a traditional Christmas Eve service. In a community without television, radio, or telephones, there was something wonderfully organic... and authentic about it (despite being in July).

According to "*Southern Living*" magazine, the first identified "*Christmas in July*" was celebrated July 24 and 25, 1933 at Keystone Camp right here in Brevard, North Carolina. That celebration included carolers, a Christmas tree, Santa Claus, presents, and fake snow made out of cotton. A worship service was not mentioned.

Have you wondered who today celebrates Christmas in July most often? Not the church. We're celebrating the "*Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*." Malls, maybe? Actually, no. When I typed in "*Christmas in July*" do you know where I was linked? "Black Friday in July." Not "Christmas in July".

Last chance. Who celebrates "*Christmas in July*" more than anyone else? The answer: "*The Hallmark Channel*" (Ohk, you saw the clue in my opening sentence?) On "*The Hallmark Channel*," between July 12 and July 25, viewers have 130 opportunities to watch a "*Christmas*" movie.

On the channel lineup, "*Christmas*" appears in many titles, but when reading the descriptions, I could not find a single film about the actual "*Nativity of Jesus*." There might few that include creches for added Christmas atmosphere, but for the story of Jesus birth, you'll need to look elsewhere.

We could start with the book, of course. At least Luke, chapter two, or Matthew, chapter one. But should we? In July? Many would suppose it weird to celebrate Christmas in the middle of a hot summer. Of course, in Australia, New Zealand, and in all tropical climates, December 24 and 25 is in their summer. I learned there are some in Australia and New Zealand who prefer celebrating Christmas in July, because it's cold, as they believe Christmas should be (Thank "Frosty the Snowman" and a host of cold weather or Santa Christmas songs for that).

Because no one actually knows the date of Jesus' birth, we have a lot of flexibility here. The first recorded celebration was December 25, 336 A.C.E, initiated by the Christian Roman Emperor Constantine.

The most important part of any Christmas celebration, regardless of date, is that we are celebrating the wonder of a most amazing God who chose to enter into God's creation just as each one of us do... as a baby. With that, let me simply wish you all a very merry Christmas in July today, as we give thanks, just as we do every day, for the birth of Jesus, who has become the greatest gift humanity has ever received.

For our prayer, I would like to print one from our hymnal for Christmas Day:

Let us pray. All powerful and unseen God, the coming of your light into the world has brightened out weary hearts with peace. Call us out of darkness, and empower us to proclaim the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one, God, now and forever. Amen. ... and bless those who need you today...

P.S. Some of might suppose I crafted this particular devotion so I could include some nice Christmas music. Okay, you got me. Here are some I like, and I bet you'll like them too, even in July! Actually, I have loved listening to these as I write this.

Hark the Herald Angels Sing St Paul's Cathedral London

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDPwNPAV6tA>

Hark the Herald Angels Sing by Pentatonix (done for Christmas in July)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaOGqEadTsM>

O Come All Ye Faithful by Voctave

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CljN1YlxHil>

O Holy Night by Home Free (The guy with the hat is no longer in the group. Take off your hat, dude. You're in church!)... but great arrangement!!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CO6OZIY-IYw>

O Holy Night Kings College Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTFG_nvreol

Silent Night Winchester Cathedral Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRZOv31n1sY>

Silent Night in German by Dresden Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGA6djLsDgs>

Silent Night Home Free w/violin

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AICTG4b_teY

Joy to the World by Acapellridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mnC8zMiwaQ>

Joy to the World by Celtic Women

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDmIddF7DfQ>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, July 26, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #127

If “Euangelion” translates as “Gospel” and “Gospel” means “Good News,” what does it mean in Chinese?

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3 the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, 6 including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, (Rom. 1:1-6 NRS)

When I was Lutheran Campus Pastor at Purdue, I had the rare and wonderful opportunity one year, to meet and have regular conversation with a visiting scholar from China.

We met at a yard sale. Every year the church I worked with hosted a yard sale, which was extremely popular with the international students who lived in apartments. At one of these yard sales, I met Cui Jiang, a 50-year-old visiting scholar in mechanical engineering from X'ian, China. I offered him a ride home in a pickup with all his stuff, and he invited me in for tea.

That began a year of weekly get togethers for conversation. Unlike younger Chinese students, English was a struggle for him. Our conversations helped. I also shared information about American customs, including rules for football. He told me about his life and family, living essentially on a military base where he was a flight test engineer. This was his first trip outside China.

Probably most interesting to me is that Jiang was the first person I met who had never heard about Jesus Christ. There are Christians in China, but very few to the whole population; he had never met a Christian, much less a Lutheran pastor. Trying to share the gospel with a language barrier was a whole new world for me.

If I had met Jiang a few years later, it might have been a different story. It was then I met two young Chinese Christian students who invited me to preside at their traditional American wedding. They were part of a Chinese Christian Student Fellowship who used our church for worship. Their witness would have been a big help.

Around the time Cui Jiang and I were talking, the ELCA was publishing a multicultural newsletter, and one of the articles was in Chinese. Aha! Maybe this could help me. I shared the article, and Jiang translated as he read. In the article, a young woman was describing how she came to know

Christ through a church she visited in New York. Jiang was sharing the story, and then he came to this sentence, where he translated, “And then I heard the.... and then I heard the....” He looked up at me with a puzzled look on his face. “Happy Words?”

In a moment, an internal bell went off. Ding! “Happy words! Good News! Gospel!” Without ever hearing or seeing in his own language the word we translate “gospel” from the Greek “*euangelion*” meaning “*gospel*” or “*good news*,” the best he could come up with was “*Happy Words*.”

But that’s pretty good, isn’t it! Hearing the wonderful story of God’s love for us through Jesus Christ are “*happy words*” indeed. “*Good News. Gospel.*”

A year after he returned to China, I had occasion to take a trip with my father and several family members to China, and one of the cities was X’ian. Cui Jiang and I were wonderfully reunited, and boy was he different. I had no idea how much struggling with the language hindered his natural personality. He took me out to go shopping and a little off-tour sightseeing. With effervescence and high energy, he shared with people how we became friends; and he refused to let the vendors charge me the “*tourist*” prices. It was great.

I wish I could say he became a Christian. I know it would have been hard to live in a very restricted community where he would be unsupported by Christian fellowship. I am confident, however, that something stirred through those “*happy words*,” and I am trust that God did for Jiang what God does for us all. Love.

Let us pray.

We pray for your gospel O God, that it might be good news for all who hear those “happy words.” Bless those who seek you wherever they are. Lift us up by your gospel, that we may model the love of Jesus in all our relationships. Bless our world, we pray, and all those who serve you and those in need. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

P.S. We didn’t have YouTube when I met Cui Jiang. If we had, I would have shared these Christian songs sung in Chinese. I was deeply moved to find Chinese language versions of these familiar songs. Hope you enjoy them, too.

What A Friend We Have In Jesus by Penang Christian Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOWxUSpN0GQ>

10,000 Reasons by Chinese Grace Christian College

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWnYaQ0hKig>

Amazing Grace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3U9kKmoib-I>

Gospel: Chinese Choir singing Swahili song. Wow!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Apz-IQmoJpw>

Selections from largest Christian Church in China Chong-Yi, Hangzhou

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUS-II5JWSk>

Amazing Grace (Our Chains Are Gone) on Guzheng Chinese instrument

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9Ur6W4SLso>

You Are My All In All in Mandarin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qc6vnPPM-JE>

The Lord's Prayer in Mandarin (quite beautiful)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xbSU3NpW5w>

Shout to the Lord in Mandarin

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln2grj_HKis

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, July 27, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #128

When anger becomes all the rage.

[Jesus said,] there were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." 28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

(Lk. 4:27-29 NRS)

I've been thinking a lot about anger and rage these days. It's everywhere. Streets. Stores. Schools. Social Media. Especially social media. Twitter. Facebook. YouTube. TikTok.

As you have gleaned from these devotions, I have returned many times to theologian and pastor Frederick Buechner for theological and biblical insights. Of all he has written, I have probably come back to his brief description of "Anger" more than anything else. Many times, in conversations with people about anger, I have shared this:

Anger:

"Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possible the most fun, To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

He sets this up so well, starting with that experience of anger we so easily identify with, that part of anger we so enjoy, especially when we believe we have been wronged. "To smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come..." Buechner sure has that right. "A feast fit for a king."

But then he turns that upside down, revealing what dare not admit when we are devouring anger. We are eating ourselves. "The skeleton at the feast is you."

I wonder what he would say about *rage*.

Maybe *rage* is the damaged landscape of your anger, including everyone who is affected by out of control anger.

The word “*rage*” comes from the Latin word “*rabia*” or the Old French word “*raige*,” meaning madness, insanity, or anger. For a long time, its idiomatic usage, as it “it’s all the rage,” referring to something immensely popular, like when a certain band or fad or product becomes all the rage. When *rage* is used in the Bible, it connotes *wrath* or *fury*. The passage above describing reaction to Jesus’ words in the synagogue fits this. They “*all*” were so angry they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff!

These days *rage* seems to fit the reaction to Jesus mentioned above. I think of all those captured on video these days getting in people’s faces and shouting (and I am so sorry for the wonderful “Karen’s” I know whose names have been attached to this kind of anger and rage). I suspect *Karen* will not be a popular baby name for a while.

I have heard “*anger*” defended when it awakens people to making right that which is wrong. But *anger* so easily turns to *rage*, and when *rage* is out of control, many others, besides yourself, may be “*eaten alive*.” *Rage* also spreads like a virus, and works its way through the whole population. When our nation becomes consumed by rage, will anyone survive?

Of course, maybe that won’t happen if the half of the nation that is *right* destroys the half of the nation that’s *wrong*.

Another option, of course, is carefully to consider Jesus. I don’t mean trying to reduce this to a simple “*Jesus is the Answer*” neon sign, or another “*What Would Jesus Do*” bracelet. I’m talking about Jesus centered soul searching that comes when we are truly in crisis. When the world is truly in crisis. As we are.

When we don’t know how to get our children back in school, we are in crisis. When a pandemic continues to spread without indication of when it will be over, we are in crisis. When a growing number of people put their faith in sinister malevolent conspiracy theories where no one can be trusted rather than in God working good in and through those called to serve, we are in crisis.

I read a recent editorial by Tom Nichols, author of “*The Death of Expertise*” where he describes how many persons, consumed by rage, are without restraint, endangering others but experiencing that as a sign of empowerment. In other words, by their *rage* they are telling other whom they believe are looking down on them that no one, no matter how smart or accomplished, can tell them what to do. Nichols suggests the motto from this rage is not “*In God We Trust*” or “*E Pluribus Unum*” but rather “*You’re not the Boss of Me*.”

Rage is a very real danger in a time of great unrest and pandemic. Especially when our own survival depends on finding a way to work together for the good of all. I’m not for displaying this in neon, but I do believe “*Jesus is the Answer*.” And for those who wonder what we should do, there is every indication in scripture that, following Jesus, the love of Jesus motivates and brings forth

goodness. Furthermore, the love of Jesus sets a table where we come in peace to heal and move forward. If we can just let go of the anger in order to eat some real food.

Let us pray.

Today we pray for a way out of the anger and rage that so easily consumes us. Help us learn to listen to each other with caring and compassion and model the love of Jesus who constantly shows us a positive path forward. Make us passionate about the gospel and serving each other as we are called. Bless those who keep loving and keep serving (however imperfectly) for your love's sake. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. First up is one just posted and new to me, but given today's hard reflection, is a wonderful gift to me.

The Call by Z. Randall Stroupe sung by Gross Pointe Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qo7nQ7dz7E8>

Lay My Burdens Down by Ryan Long and Ellie Holcomb

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUhF3nhNWe8>

Since I've Laid by Burdens Down by John Hurt

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXEtNknolKY>

Tis So Sweet to Trust In Jesus by Casting Crowns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DdgvnsHjM>

Trust and Obey by Chelsea Moon and Franz Brothers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrSCxfnN2B8>

I'm Pressing on the Upward Way (Higher Ground) by Bekofi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovxCROUvfn4>

Higher Ground by SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2emsPPCH4c>

and as a bonus... not a song, but a deeply inspiring TED talk by a woman raised in the hateful Westboro Baptist Church, and how her life was transformed as she encountered honest and earnest engagement with those she had been taught to hate and mistrust. It's just the length of a sermon, and well worth fifteen minutes of your time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVV2Zk88beY>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, July 28, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #129

Ever call "Dial a Prayer?"

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
(Matt. 6:5-6 NRS)

Caldwell, Texas. 1979.

"Hello. You've called Dial A Prayer. On behalf of the Caldwell Area Ministerial Alliance, this is Pastor Mark Opgrand from Elizabeth Lutheran Church. Let us pray..."

Some of us can remember really wonderful cutting-edge new technology that is downright primitive by today's standards. Such was the case of Caldwell's "Dial A Prayer." That great new technology was an answering machine with an audiotape through which you could record a message. When someone called that number, they could hear your message!!! Awesome.

A local insurance company located on the small town's main square donated the line and the location where we pastors and ministers could take turns taping the recording. The answering machine was in their office's storage closet, at the end of a hall, next to an employee-only bathroom. I cannot remember just how many of us were in the rotation, but I remember I went as often to the "Dial A Prayer" closet as I did to Sunday morning worship.

Doing "Dial A Prayer" isn't really much different from sharing general intercessory prayer. I remember praying regularly that the anonymous caller (no caller ID yet) would be granted healing or good health, hope for the future, a restoration of a broken relationship, and getting a job if unemployed. I always remember giving God thanks for the day, the opportunity to come to God in prayer, and for our nation and all families in need.

What our "Dial a Prayer" system did not have was the option for someone to leave a message. That wasn't its purpose, though I wonder now, years later, what those messages might have been. If someone could have left a message, might it have been: "Thanks for the prayers" or "Please pray for my mother in surgery" or "Please call me. I need more than a prayer today."

In that closed storage room, we recorded prayers not knowing what anyone needed specifically. But every time I prayed, I thought about how someone either opened their phone book to "D" for "Dial A Prayer" or dialed it from a notepad kept near their phone. I tried to imagine their needs.

The very first time I recorded, “Hello, you’ve called ‘Dial A Prayer...,’” it seemed peculiar, not so different from the first time I recorded Prayers of the Church for our online worship service.

Despite changing circumstances, technology, and times, it remains true that real people are always on the other end of the line (or the wi-fi) and they are eager to trust that communication between them and God is happening. By God’s grace, it is.

Let us pray.

We thank you, O God for all the prayers throughout all the centuries that have been lifted up by people of faith. Once spoken, many prayers disappear like vapor. Some are recorded and can be shared later. But you O God, hear and remember all our prayers, spoken and unspoken, written and recorded, personal and intercessory. Thank you for the gift of being able to communicate with you, and for all your servants who, in prayer, bless each other. Hear the prayers of those who call upon you today, those with prayers of thanks and those who have urgent needs. We ask for hope for the future and healing from Covid 19. Heal our strife and unrest, we pray. In Jesus Name. Amen.

O Lord, Hear My Prayer by Taize

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVIdY8ECJyg>

Hear My Prayer O For the Wings of A Dove (Mendelsohn) by Pernilla Ivarsdotter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIMoN95FTZg>

A Living Prayer by Alison Kraus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKpy15xBW4w>

Hear My Prayer Maranatha Vocal Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViklW4EyYu4>

Hear My Prayer Moses Hogan Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKSVCudYFxA>

... and this one I just stumbled from a French father and his kids, Jubilate Pop Louange. I had to do Google translate “Would you like a little song for Jesus?” “I will bless you O God.” I dare you not to smile watching this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX8lnhaRNRo>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, July 29, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #130

If you had a choice.... cancer or dementia?

[Peter writes:] Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. 13 I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, 14 since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. 15 And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. (2 Pet. 1:12-15 NRS)

One of the thoughtful questions I have contemplated about terminal illness is this: Is it better to live your last days with a failing body and sound mind or with a failing mind but sound body?

It's kind of an *Alzheimer's* versus *Cancer* question. I have seen it both ways in people I love.

One person who contemplated this in a very personal way was poet and Unitarian Minister Ric Masten. I met him several times when I lived in Odessa, Texas. Years later, I was still following him on a blog where he wrote this thoughtful poem and afterward:

DEMENTIA

Almost imperceptibly the ship began to move away...
when I was 19
my parents went around the world
leaving
from the San Francisco marina on a freighter
with passenger accommodations

back in those days
when the gang plank had been raised
and the ship was ready to depart
the passengers
would line up at the rail looking down
throwing serpentine
colorful paper streamers
to friends and family on the pier below

we would hold tight to one end
while those we hold dear
held on to their end
of these

slender fragile ribbons
then slowly
almost imperceptibly
the ship began to move away
the paper connections
snapping
one by one
as the steamer headed out into the bay

after fifty five years together
my cancer is incurable
and your memory is fading
which makes me acutely aware
of time circling the drain
running out of the clock
wondering whether
the love of my life
will slip over the horizon
before I am forced to leave the dock
+++

--Ric Masten

AFTERWORD — I have been putting off writing DEMENTIA for about six months. Usually when bad things happen, they immediately become inspirations, grist for my "poetic observation" mill. As you know I have raked a lot of chestnuts out of the advance prostate cancer fire. But when Billie Barbara was diagnosed with the beginnings of dementia I froze.

.....So far only her short-term memory seems to be affected. Her long-term memory is fine. I mean, she still can remember everything I ever did wrong for fifty-five years. It's just that she doesn't remember what day it is or who she just talked to on the phone, that sort of thing. And I can't let annoyance creep into my voice when she doesn't remember or I have to answer the same questions again, or it upsets her. This poem is the only one I have written that Billie will never see.

.....I must have started working on this piece twenty-five times, but my fear wouldn't let me keep at it. I told a few people about the memory that seemed to explain how I felt, and after I returned home from the hospital I knew it had to be written and the words simply poured out of me in about thirty minutes.

.....Billie Barbara and I don't have much to say to each other these days but we tell each other we love each other all the time and hold hands in bed when we go to sleep. .

.....Years ago, there was a wonderful old couple that lived close to us in the Carmel Highlands — Ephraim and Rosa. When Ephraim died at eighty-four Rosa was in the early stages of Alzheimer's and for over a year she would wake each morning and ask for Ephraim only to be told that he had

died. For over a year she lost her husband every morning – all the more reason for me not to leave the dock before Billie Barbara slips away.

Final thoughts from Pastor Mark:

Ric preceded Billie Barbara in death at age 78 in 2008. She died four years later. His thoughtful words reflect a kind of pain and loss that cuts two ways.

Given a choice, I suspect most would choose to lose body over mind, especially if they have lived through losing a loved one slowly and over a long period. But no one really has that choice.

What we do have is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness, who keeps promising us that in every circumstance, not only do we belong to God, but we can trust that his memory will not fail. His love endures in this lifetime and the next. For as it is written:

*18 Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love,
19 to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.
20 Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield.
21 Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.
22 Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you. (Ps. 33:18-22 NRS)*

Let us pray:

We especially remember today those with dementia and how this confusing time is even more confusing. We pray for their caregivers, especially those who may be sick themselves. We thank you for your constant care and for always remembering and loving us. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Jesus Remember Me Taize Community

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGB2E0NzO2A>

Remember Me by Deborah Governor

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CCXo8vliQw>

Remember Me by Gracias Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6Ndea2C8eU>

We Remember by Marty Haugen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vziylo20Im0>

You Are Near by Dan Schutte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bsc-T5edJrU>

Psalm 73 by Hangad (w/lyrics)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSlmII4p-9E>

Lead My Home Jamey Johnson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiLT4lOStXA>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, July 30, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #131

Apostles Creed Contemplations. Part 1.

When we say....*"I believe in the.....holy _____ church,"* what *"church"* do we believe in? The *"holy catholic church"* or the *"holy Christian church?"*

When we say *"He descended into hell"* or *"to the dead"* where did Jesus descend? Into *hell* or to the *dead*? (Or to the *dead* who are in *hell*?)

Let's start with something we can easily clear up. When our worship leaders say *"Let us now confess our faith in the words of the Apostles Creed"*... they don't mean it.

Agreed? It's *not* the *words* we believe in. The words *point* us to God. The words summarize our faith. We confess our faith, *using* the words of the *Apostles* or *Nicene* or *Athanasian Creed*.

The Apostles Creed is our oldest summary of faith. A shorter form called the Old Roman creed is referred to as early as the third century, but not until the eighth century was it published in its more current form. Early versions were both in Latin and Greek.

-

So what of these other little phrases that have contributed to some credal confusion?

Let's start with the easier one: *"I believe in the holy catholic church."* The Latin version says *"Credo in Spiritum Sanctum, sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam.* Even if you don't know Latin, you can probably figure that out. Credo (I believe... like creed); in *Spiritum*(Spirit) *Sanctum*; *Santum* (like *Sanctify*... making holy); *Ecclesiam* (church... like *ecclesiastical* ... churchy) *catholicam* (catholic... note catholicum with small 'c' not meaning "Roman Catholic." The Greek version is close to the Latin.

So, what then, am I talking about when I refer to *"I believe in the Holy Christian church?"* Here's an interesting tidbit: In both Latin and Greek texts, it translates *"holy catholic"* not *"Holy Christian"* church. If it were translated *"Christian Church"*, the Latin would be *"Ecclesiam Christiana."* *"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,"* (referring to the "holy universal church") is an accurate translation of both Latin and Greek texts.

Where, then, did *"Holy Christian Church"* come from? Did you know when we look up the Apostles Creed in English language Lutheran hymnals published prior to 1978, they all include *"Holy Christian"* not *"holy catholic"*? in?" So have you figured it out yet?

When Lutherans in North America began adopting English for worship, they printed hymnals in English. This was also during a time when there was much anti-Roman Catholic sentiment among Lutherans. My parents told tales of family crises when a Lutheran child dated a Catholic.

Anti-Roman Catholic sentiment was still present in 1978 when the *“Lutheran Book of Worship”* was published, and virtually all Lutheran pastors had to teach parishioners that this catholic word in our beloved Apostles Creed was with a small “c” and that meant *universal*, not *Roman Catholic*.

It is interesting to note that when the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod pulled out of the *“Lutheran Book of Worship”* project just prior to publishing and decided to create their own hymnal, guess what was retained in the *“Apostles Creed”*? You guessed it: *“I believe in the Holy ‘Christian’ Church.”*

It may be that “Holy Christian Church” is more easily understood than “holy catholic church” (small “c.”) If, however, for centuries, every Christians church used the Apostles Creed saying *“holy catholic”*, it should have been pretty well understood that “catholic” meant “universal.”

I guess they those nineteenth century Lutherans in North America didn’t have Pastor Mark doing children sermons. If they had... they would hear this:

“What does the word *“gospel”* mean? **“GOOD NEWS!”**
and what does the word *“catholic”* mean? **“UNIVERSAL!”**
and what does *“universal”* mean? **“For EVERYONE!!”**

Let us pray:

Thank you, O God, for words that help us summarize what we believe. When we share these good words together in worship and devotionally, we are grateful for all faithful people centuries ago who worked hard to choose good words to express our joy in believing. Thank you for the scriptures and our creeds and every good word that points us to you. Bless all who look to you today, and for all united in prayer that we might experience healing and hope, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

P.S. I know I didn’t get to the “descended into hell/to the dead” contemplation today. Stay tuned for part 2. In the meantime, let’s listen to some music... and a special surprise at the end ...

The Apostles Creed Song by Adam Zarn

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTG2hLu6ZcA>

The Apostles Creed in Chinese(note English translation)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gSzPkJPY8g>

Third Day *Apostles Creed*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3i-VWxOAc>

Rich Mullins *Creed*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-61MaWETIU>

Chicago Folk Service Creed by John McCreary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaSBRBz4ha0>

Faith of our Fathers Fountainview Academy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFOWzm-xBoA>

Faith of our Fathers John Wesley Slider

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RziT4wJMrGQ>

Ancient Words 1Beloved Son

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vmTkXNpwzs>

Ancient Words Michael W Smith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouTgX9hcwk4>

Ancient Words Michael W Smith (solo)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWLJOIBOeKY>

and just for fun... *Dancing Priest does Hamilton (We'll be back)*... dedicated to our Regathering Team!!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFduNE4pXAQ>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, July 31, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #132

Did Jesus really go to hell? Apostles Creed Contemplations. Part 2.

25 For David speaketh concerning [Jesus], I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: 26 Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: 27 Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. (Acts 2:25-27 KJV)

Pondering this question, one might consider the wisdom of the fundamentalist Churches of Christ (the ones who rejected much of church history due to apostasy and began a Restoration Movement in the 19th Century which boldly asserted "No Creed but Christ.") They are also the ones who reject all instrumental music since it was not part of the historical New Testament Churches.

If we were a "No creed but Christ" (and no book but the Bible, they add) Church, we wouldn't need to ponder "Holy Christian" versus "holy catholic" language or "he descended into hell" versus "he descended to the dead."

I have discovered, however, that even among current churches of Christ scholars, there are some who regret such a strong stand against this historically effective, and accurate summary of Christian faith.

So let's ponder where Jesus descended after he died, and why the authors and compilers of the creed included it. Our first observation is that by following "crucified, died, and was buried," with he descended..." this became a way of reinforcing that Jesus was really dead. Not a "near death experience" but a "real death" experience.

It's like when the munchkin coroner in the Wizard of Oz declared upon examining the Wicked Witch of the East (after Dorothy's house fell on her) ... "As Coroner I must aver, I thoroughly examined her. And she's not only merely dead, she's really most sincerely dead." (It's fun to say this aloud).

Okay. Jesus is not only *merely dead*, he's really *most sincerely* dead. So where'd he go? The most common English versions of the Apostles Creed say either "he descended into hell" or "he descended to the dead." Lutheran versions include both, with an asterisk after 'hell'* taking us to small print below *'to the dead' or 'to the dead'* with an asterisk taking us to *'hell.'

What about the Latin, you say? Or the original Greek? Well Latin says "*descendit ad inferos.*" Aha, "*inferos.*" Like "*inferno*," right. Like "*hell*," right? But the Greek says "*apo ton nekron.*" "*Nekron*," which means "*corpse.*" So it's either to the "*inferno*" (fire), or to the "*corpse*" (dead).

Some of this imagery comes from the above cited scripture, Acts 25:27, which includes the “hell” in the old King James Version. But the Greek word here is “hades,” and various other English translations say “hades,” “the dead,” “the grave,” “netherworld,” or “underworld.” Old Testaments roots speak of the place of the dead as “Sheol,” which is more in line with place of the dead Hades than fiery inferno hell.

Here’s what the Apostles Creed and these phrases affirm: Christ’s saving work was not limited to those at the time of his death and only generations to come. That was really important to those who heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen Lord as good news.

Again, it was not only good news for them but for all their loved ones, living or dead. Those who first sought good and helpful language to summarize our faith wanted us to be sure of this. Jesus died for all, and nothing, not death, hell, or hades would stop him.

Let us pray.

Again we thank for the gift of the Creeds from our forebears in faith. For the good words that remind us of the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, who lived and died for us and for all people, we give you thanks. May we be confident through all trials and tribulations that we are supported by you and the whole host of heaven. We continue to pray this day for those seeking your face and grace in their lives, especially during these most uncertain times. Bless our beloved sick and all our health care workers. Help us be gentle but firm in advocating safe health practices that can spare needless suffering and death. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

We Know that Christ is Raised and Dies no More Phinney Ridge Lutheran

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMA_ezWJW_w

We Know that Christ is Raised and Dies no More St. Andrew’s Episcopal

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmKznhvNGJY>

I Know My Redeemer Lives the Christian Hymns (traditional)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tMqpruzpv0>

I Know My Redeemer Lives by Allie Gardner (alternative version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtOphglXPNU>

For All the Saints by HIMaachen

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y-yvL2P_FY

For All the Saints Orchestra version Ralph Vaughn Williams

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1cPSDx3vis>

Christ is Risen Alleluia (organ version sing a long)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdwQV54AEk4>

Christ is Risen Jay Althouse

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rP6yphdfL5I>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, August 1, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand #132

From Pastor Mark: I am happy to present guest writer Chaplain Robert Weeks, retired ELCA pastor and Navy Chaplain and member of St. Paul's, along with his wife Sylvia. I'll still add song links at the end.

Guess Who's Back

By Chaplain Robert Weeks

Introduction

"This son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found." Luke 15:24

When we lived in Key West, Florida, my daughter and wife looked out of the front door window one day and spotted a black and white cat. Without my knowing, they fed the cat. To their dismay, he went away for a couple of days, and then one day, one of them said, "Guess who's back?" Old Tom came back and made himself at home. He was soon named Muffin; however, at first he did not give up his street life. He would disappear and then return all beat up and in need of food. The Prodigal Son had some of Old Tom in him.

The Prodigal Son had some of Old Tom in him, but so do we during this pandemic.

Remember the story:

Jesus had an audience of Pharisees and teachers of the law from the temple. They were muttering, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." One of the parables he told the crowd was about a lost son.

There was a man who had two sons. The younger son said to his father, "Give me my share of the estate." So the father divided the property between the sons. Not long after receiving his share of the estate, the younger son gathered all he had together and set off for a far country, and there squandered his wealth on wild living. After he had spent himself broke, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to the fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.

Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's hired hands have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, "I have sinned against heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son, make me like one of your hired persons." So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was a long way off from his home, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The son said to his father, “I have sinned against heaven and you and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.”

But the father said to the servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.”

It was like the father was saying, “Guess who’s back!” like my family said about Old Tom.

As I said before, the Prodigal Son had some of Old Tom in him, but so do we. While we enjoy the comfort of being part of God’s family, our independent nature at times gets us into trouble, and we end up spiritually – and sometimes even physically – starved and wounded.

This is happening as we dread each day of living through this pandemic. Everything is different and difficult. How do we shop? How do we visit? How are our children going to get back in school? Some are wondering about their income. In fact, some of you might be worried about your income. It is a stressful time in the nation with racial unrest and protests.

We Lutherans, however, need to remember that the first thing we do in worship is confess our sins. The first thing God says is, “Your sins are forgiven,” like “Guess who’s back!” God, like the Prodigal Son’s father, never turns his back on us.

On one occasion, a young lady came to me concerned about receiving holy communion. She said, “Pastor, I used to be a good Christian. I have fallen away and now I don’t think I am worthy of receiving holy communion. I am not perfect with God anymore.” I told her the story of the lost son and assured her that Jesus always forgives the sinner who seeks forgiveness. I assured her that Jesus would be delighted that she receive his body and blood – she would be welcome. She would be welcomed back. Finally, she did commune and was overjoyed. It was like I could observe Jesus saying, “Guess who’s back!”

Scripture reports to us that God always welcomes us back. His welcome mat is always out, no matter how many times we stray. You see, God has always known that Christians have been running on empty for 2,000 years. But, because his son’s tomb is empty, our lives can be full of love from him.

No matter how many times Old Tom wandered off, it was a day of rejoicing when someone at our home shouted, “Guess who’s back!” Someone would put out some food for him, let him in the house, and pet him.

During this pandemic, we are tempted to wander. God sent his son to welcome the sinner, even though our willful nature and this pandemic causes us to stray from God's loving care.

At St. Paul's, we are very fortunate. Our church is offering holy communion. Even though it is a drive thru communion, we can see and hear the pastor bless the communion elements over the internet. We can confess our sins, pray the Lord's Prayer, get in our cars, and drive thru to receive the body and blood of Jesus. We can know that the real presence of Christ is still available. We can know Jesus is saying to each one of us, "Guess who's back!"

Prayer:

O God, our life, our strength, our food, our forgiveness, we give you thanks for sustaining the members of St. Paul's with the body and blood of your son. By your Holy Spirit enlighten our pastors as they serve and give them strength through these times. Guide our lives as we serve this community and its many people, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

P.S. I'm going a little different direction today. Today I am picking songs from just one YouTube channel, in this case from **The Acapella Company**. I find myself being so enriched by this wonderful acapella singing. Enjoy.

Hero of Israel (Surely A King) by Praise and Harmony

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uquwPeHAdE>

The Reason by Praise and Harmony in English and French

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMjkkQYDPwE>

Great is Thy Faithfulness by Praise and Harmony

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzQk0a6Zc50>

Let it Rise by Praise and Harmony

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VelBcd_vd60

Christ is Risen by Praise and Harmony

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4k1yP_ACy8

10,000 Reasons by Praise and Harmony

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZHIxvFgevc>

You Will Reign Forever by Praise and Harmony

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrDQrdMvdMI>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, August 2, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #134

Hearts of flesh for hearts of stone

Therefore I have set my face like flint. (Isaiah 50:7)

Long before writing "*St. Paul's In Your Home*" I had written several devotions for "*Christ in our Home*." I never did it again. Why? Because it was just too hard to squeeze thoughts into less than 250 words and then do it eleven more times. (I admire those who can, however.)

"*Christ in our Home*" saves some space by not printing the full assigned text, but since this is not "*Christ In Our Home*," here are the verses assigned to me for that day, March 23, 1999:

4 The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.
5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 6 I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. 7 The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; **therefore I have set my face like flint**, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; 8 he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. 9 It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? (Isa. 50:4-9 NRS)

And now here is that devotion with an all-new afterword:

Stone-faced. I remember the little boy in the choir loft who sat, Sunday after Sunday, as far away as he could get from worship yet near his father and mother, who sang in the choir. He did not want to be there; he had set his face, and it would not be moved.

The prophet set his face as well. But his face was set for the Lord and against all those who would insult or ridicule or harm him. "The Lord God helps me... He who vindicates me is near" (v. 7,8).

It would be years before the full import of Isaiah's faithfulness would be realized in the one who bore insults, ridicule, and death on a cross. When Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), he may have thought about both the stone-faced little boys of the future.

There are days we each choose to ignore the forgiveness he freely offers. But Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem for all his stone-faced children' he was the same God who had promised, "I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26). The one who vindicates us is here.

Lord, melt my heart of stone today and give me a heart of flesh. Amen.

Prayer concern: For those who are angry and defiant.

Afterword 2020: I enjoyed finding this old devotion after writing every day now for more than four months. I have valued not being restricted by words or theme or length. I think it's almost too short.

What "*Christ in our Home*" also does not provide are links to all the great music I have enjoyed sharing. As you have gleaned, I begin by looking for music that fits the theme of the day. Sometimes that is a challenge. For example, "*You are the Face of God*" is the only song I could find with the word "*Face*" in the title.

But then I thought of another song I have absolutely loved, "*Baba Yetu*," which is "*The Lord's Prayer*" in Swahili, but also featured as a computer game introduction and Grammy award winning song. Besides being such an inspiring piece, when I look at the faces of those singing, I am stunned by their joyous expressions. No stone faces here. That's how we can pray the Lord's Prayer... with great "no stone faced" joy!

You Are The Face Of God by Karen Drucker

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aamqpKNISrl>

Baba Yetu(Lord's Prayer in Swahili) by Peter Hollens and Malukeh

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17svtURunUk>

Baba Yetu by Stellenbosch University Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCa8RxaOPW8>

Baba Yetu by Angel City Chorale

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8d9xURuls5M>

Baba Yetu by Gospel Choir in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFEx0jY5emc>

Baba Yetu by 100 Voices of Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17svtURunUk>

Baba Yetu opening sound track from video game Civilization IV (also has lyrics in description)

Baba Yetu directed by composer Christopher Tin at Cadogan Hall London

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noneMR0p_E8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5e0Qelqp-Cc>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, August 3, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #135

Baba Yetu and the Munchkin Coroner

"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name..." (Matt. 6:9 NRS)

"He was crucified, died, and was buried..." Apostles Creed

No, this is not a revision of *"Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves."* It's further reflection on two previous devotions. In **#132, Did Jesus really go to hell? Apostles Creed Contemplations. Part 2.**, I underscored the sentence in the Apostles Creed, which asserts "he [Christ] descended to hell."* (* "to the dead") by remembering the iconic line from the Munchkin coroner in the Wizard of Oz.

The Munchkin coroner declared the total death of the Wicked Witch of the East, when he said, *"As Coroner I must aver, I thoroughly examined her. And she's not only merely dead, she's really most sincerely dead."* Similarly, the Apostles Creed asserts that Jesus really died.

That Jesus also really rose from the dead, is asserted in the Apostles Creed. That is why I linked one of our great hymns *"Christ is Risen Alleluia."*

That prompted member Stan McLeroy to do some further reflecting and he sent me the following recollection, which I enjoyed so much that I asked if I could use it or my own further reflections.

"I found it very amusing that you quoted the munchkin coroner from The Wizard of Oz, and then chose Christ is Risen Alleluia as one of your musical selections. Why? Well, I've never told anyone, because I know I would get eye rolls, but for years I've thought that the way that refrain ends -

"...Christ is risen frommm thuhhhh... DEAD!" -
reminds me of the end of another song -

"Ding dong the witch is dead..."

... Fa la la la, la la la, la la la.

Fa la la la lahhhhh LAHHHH!!..." BOOM!! <smoke! Screaming munchkins! Wicked Witch of the West appears!>

Sorry, that's just the way my mind works. There must be some parallels here, tho. Witch is dead, another one must continue the evil traditions; Jesus is "dead" but he himself returns, and will return, to carry on his mission. Or something.

-Stan"

Or something. Indeed. I hadn't thought of the musical similarity between "Frommm thee DEAD" and "laaaa laaa LAHHH. In one case one form of evil is replaced by another. In the other, we are

promised that evil will not triumph forever. As we say in our Holy Communion Liturgy: **Christ has died. Christ is Risen. Christ will come again!**

So how does this relate to “*Baba Yetu*,” that beautiful “*Lord’s Prayer*” in Swahili? When I first discovered “*Baba Yetu*,” I did not know it was originally commissioned to be the introduction of a video game called “*Civilization IV*”, composed by game fan Christopher Tin.

When you think about it, this is quite a curious thing. Clearly the song is the “*Lord’s Prayer*” in Swahili. Here are the words and the translation,

“Baba yetu, yetu uliye
Mbinguni yetu, yetu amina!
Baba yetu yetu uliye
M Jina lako e litukuzwe.
Utupe leo chakula chetu
Tunachohitaji, utusamehe
Makosa yetu, hey!
Kama nasi tunavyowasamehe
Waliotukosea usitutie
Katika majaribu, lakini
Utuokoe, na yule, muovu e milele!
Ufalme wako ufike utakalo
Lifanyike duniani kama mbinguni.
(Amina)

Our Father, who art
in Heaven. Amen!
Our Father,
Hallowed be thy name.
Give us this day our daily bread,
Forgive us of
our trespasses,
As we forgive others
Who trespass against us
Lead us not into temptation, but
deliver us from the evil one forever.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On Earth as it is in Heaven.
(Amen)”

We can easily imagine this as part of a worship service, especially when we know it is the Lord's Prayer. At the same time, the song is also an introduction to "Civilization IV," described as follows:

"Civilization IV follows some of the 4X model of turn-based strategy games, a genre in which players control an empire and "explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate", by having the player attempt to lead a modest group of peoples from a base with initially scarce resources into a successful empire or civilization."

This is curious, and certainly something we don't see every day. For every non-Swahili speaker gamer, (and there are millions), this version of the "Lord's Prayer" comes as encouragement to control an empire and "*explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate*." In this context, "Baba Yetu" is a cool song that has nothing to do with its own words.

I discovered this when selecting links to "Baba Yetu." As the Lord's Prayer and showing the joy of people praying, it is truly awesome. As a soundtrack to violent images of empire building, it falls short.

I am imagining millions of gamers, when hearing this song, will be reminded of their relationship to the game.

For those who have never heard of or played the game, or those who speak Swahili or have learned what the words mean, the song will remind them, like the Lord's Prayer itself, of their relationship with God.

For Stan, I'm not sure if it was "Ding Dong, the Witch is Dead" that reminded him of "Christ is Risen, Alleluia," or the other way around. For dedicated "Civilization IV" gamers, it's unlikely the song itself would take them anywhere near a church or God, unless somehow "forgive us our trespasses" is petitioned after wiping out a neighboring civilization.

I am encouraged however, that long after gamers have discovered the next big game or when Civilization IV can no longer be played on aging platforms, the song will remain. Why? Because it is that good, and despite its unusual origins, it has a timeless and relevant message.

Let us pray:

Our Father, (Baba Yetu), we thank you for teaching us through Jesus, that you are our divine parent. Thank you for that prayer, and for all, who speaking many languages, know they can always talk to you like a loving father or mother. We thank you for the creative energy of a composer like Christopher Tin, who brings out joy in all who sing this together. We pray for those building imaginary civilizations online that hearing this song might spark an interest in you, creator of heaven and earth and all civilizations. We bless you for Jesus Christ, who was crucified, died,

and was resurrected that we might follow a path that does not tear down, but build up. Bless all who seek you in prayer today. Amen.

P.S. Because I mentioned it and for further reference, I will link you to “*Ding Dong the Witch is Dead*” and “*Christ is Risen Alleluia*”, followed again by a couple of versions of “Baba Yetu” (including the computer game intro).

Ding Dong the Witch is Dead from Wizard of Oz (fast forward to end)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOEq-lmGWJ0>

Christ is Risen Halleluia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPNjJ6fTup0>

Baba Yetu (original soundtrack from video game)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjHDmyhE1A>

Baba Yetu from Stellenbosch Choir, South Africa (my personal favorite)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCa8RxaOPW8>

Baba Yetu by Gospel Choir Tanzania

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFEx0jY5emc>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, August 4, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #136

ees-ah-EE-us and eee-sah-JAY-kob

See, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong; like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters; with his hand he will hurl them down to the earth. (Isaiah 28:2 NRS)

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. 2 He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. 3 He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. 4 But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

(Genesis 33:1-4 NRS)

I am writing this during the *"calm before the storm."*

To have lived in this area any amount of time is to have experienced *"calms"* and *"storms."* We prepare, and we wait, wondering about what kind of damage we will experience. We always hope for a storm that will essentially be forgettable. Most of us struggling with how to pronounce ***"Hurricane Isaias"*** hope this is the name of a forgettable we will not often have to repeat.

The word *"Isaias,"* is a Latin-Spanish derivative of the Hebrew name, *"Isaiah,"* meaning *"God is Salvation."* There is a word of encouragement before a storm right there. However, it was when trying to learn how to pronounce *"Isaias,"* that I thought about *"Esau and Jacob"*. Speaking aloud *"eee-sah-JAY-kob"* helped me remember *"ees-ah-EE-us."*

I have been recalling the life of these two brothers Esau and Jacob, and how for Jacob, the great fear he experienced before his reckoning with Esau. This was Jacob's own *"calm before the storm."* As Genesis 33 begins, you can feel the fear Jacob had of Esau (and his personal militia). He was about to get what he deserved, and he hoped and prayed his family might be spared.

Recalling their history, the boys were twins, and Jacob had essentially spent much of his life being a crook. Twice he cheated his arguably not too bright brother out of what was coming to him; he took advantage of his old blind father; he out-did his double-crossing father-in-law Laban by conning him out of most of his livestock, and later on sneaked off with not only both of Laban's daughters but with just about everything he could pack up. Learning Esau was looking for him, even after all these years, Jacob so feared for his life that he created a final elaborate ruse to increase his odds of escape.

Who Jacob could not escape from was God, and Genesis chapter 32 describes Jacob's encounter with God through a wrestling match that both injures Jacob and changes him. Now called "Israel," he is prepared to accept his fate and hope for mercy from his brother.

In one of those beautiful scenes from scripture, Jacob/Israel throws himself down before Esau. What does Esau do? Take what is rightfully his? Finally get his revenge?

No. What Esau does is embrace his long-lost (and lost in many ways) brother. It's a beautiful reminder of the power of God to redeem and transform people.

Let us pray. *O God, it may be that this devotion now follows the storm. We pray that damage has been minimal and manageable. The larger viral storm continues to rage, and we pray for all those affected, the victims, the health care professional, the essential workers, and all those facing such great uncertainty regarding what is coming. Help us learn to trust, not only you as our ultimate source of trust, but also those who have spent their lives learning things that can help everyone. Bless all who look to you today for hope and healing. In Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

Till the Storm Passes By SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JQX25fnDGE>

In the Arms of God by Tony Alonso

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOHCBZBbyjg>

Sheltered in the Arms of God by Linda Randle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szRzDFQI4Ow>

He Giveth More Grace by Living Stones Quartet

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzhKGPireAA>

When the Storms of Life Are Raging (Stand by Me) by David Lohman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpjYwXjmnCE>

We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder Bernice Johnson Reagon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EW6z-fftJeg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-qQsW6pdVM>

May the Road Rise to Meet You Lori True

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSUHBqOpXY4>

and "Hear My Prayer O Lord" by Purcell sung by Voces8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OISUntqbXvc>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, August 5,2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand #137

We welcome back guest writer **Pastor Michael Megahan, Ph.D.**

What's your center?

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (NIV): Col 1:15-17: 15

The words I focus on in the following meditation are found in the final phrase of Col 1:17, namely, "and in him all things hold together." Of course, the "in him" refers to Jesus the Christ, through whom all things were created.

Every time I read Col 1:17, I remember the 1st stanza of Yeats poem "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Without a firm center, our relationships—one-on-one, family, even society—become broken and we lapse into estrangement and anarchy. Even an individual who does not have a center that can hold falls apart.

Many years ago, when I was a very young pastor in my first parish, I received a phone call very late at night (about 1a.m.) from the local sheriff. He wanted me to come to an address, which I did not recognize as one of the parishioners, so I was curious (as well as groggy with sleep). Now he had called me not only because he knew me as a minister, but also because I was chief of the volunteer fire/emergency medical services or our small community and he wanted me to bring the ambulance. But he stressed not to run siren or sound the alarm. When I arrived, I found numerous police vehicles with lights flashing. A deputy was waiting for me at the door. He cautioned me to be careful.

We went in and I immediately notice at one side of the room a young man with a handgun pointed towards an older man at the other side of the room, who also had a handgun pointed at the young

man. The deputy muttered, “This isn’t the problem. Follow me but be careful or they might aim at you.”

Ducking under the weapons, I followed him down the hall into the bathroom. There, sitting on the floor, her arms hugging the toilet close as if it were a life preserver, was the mother sobbing and screaming over and over, “If I let go, I’ll fall apart.” All I could do was sit with her and gently coax her until she let go of the toilet and took my hand.

We managed to soothe the men. The deputies took the weapons and I spent the rest of the night pouring coffee down them in an attempt to bring about some sobriety and counseling them. They did not have a center—as individuals or as a family.

When we let go of Christ, nothing can hold us together. Society tumbles into anarchy. Family members become estranged from one another. Individuals fall into despair. We reach out for anything—politics, riches, drugs, alcohol, even toilet bowls—to hold us together. But none of those things or a thousand myriad other false gods can hold us together.

But when we let the quiet whisper of the Spirit calling us as individuals and when we gently coax each other back to Christ the Center with empathetic listening, dialogue and prayer, we will be restored to the life God intended us all to have. He will hold us together. That’s a Promise! That’s Good News!

Prayer: Father God, through your Word Jesus, you created all things, seen and unseen. In him alone, all things hold together for he is the center of all things. Let him be the center of our lives. Teach us to gently and lovingly coax all others to join us, holding onto the same Center Jesus no matter how different we are. As Paul taught the Philippians, help us to not do things out of selfish ambition, but to look to the concerns of others as well as to our own concerns, to be joined in one purpose out of love and compassion. Amen.

Lord Keep Us Steadfast In Your Word by Lyle Lovett

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8ZsskiAcFw>

Lord Keep Us Steadfast In Your Word Treble Voices

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lyk4BoXltCY>

Lord Keep Us Steadfast organ version

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLMBiLri8JQ&t=113s>

Lord Keep Us by Koine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aIA13eKBNo>

Lord Keep Us Steadfast (original words.. “restrain the pope and Muslim horde”... didn’t know that one.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afCERFJqw8w&t=107s>

Lord Keep us Steadfast historical introduction (interesting)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aa0Q31IAo2A>

Alleluia Sing to Jesus Eamon Younis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8leWEhlimc>

Alleluia Sing to Jesus Choir of Norwich Chapel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bkt-qoeACJM>

Alleluia Sing to Jesus St. Johns carpet project (Bill Remele’s dream come true)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQPww9Xo6Pw>

Alleluia Sing to Jesus Broadway Baptist Hymn Festival with great introduction

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2x4icfIZuE>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, August 6, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #138

Pray without ceasing. Or else.

Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess. 5:16-18 NRS)

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (Matt. 2:12 NRS)

Do you remember your dreams? Some dreams, maybe? How about nightmares?

I cannot prove that God has ever spoken to me in a dream, like God has done in the Bible to Abimelech (Gen 20:3), Jacob, (Gen 28:12), Laban (Gen. 31:24), Joseph (Gen 37:5), Pharaoh (Gen 41:25), Solomon (I Kings 3:5), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2:1), Joseph (Matt. 1:20), or the Wise Men (Matt. 2:12).

I do believe however, that in a dream I once had when I was a teenager, I learned the hard way something very important about prayer. Especially praying without ceasing.

The dream began about as badly as can be imagined. I died and went to hell. It was just exactly the fiery inferno of our worst fears. Fire. Brimstone. Hideous demons screaming all around me. It was horrible. I closed my eyes and prayed. Oh, how I prayed. I said how sorry I was for everything. I begged for another chance to be good. I promised I would turn my life around. *"Dear God, dear God dear God. Help me help me help me."*

Then, as I was praying, I felt myself being lifted up. The screams faded. It grew cooler. Up and up and up I went, until at last all around me was the sweet smell of spring. Still praying, I opened my eyes. It was beautiful. It was heaven. There were mountains and trees and flowers and angels and a gentle brook. It was everything you could ever imagine heaven could be... and more.

I stopped praying.

Immediately I fell, not just onto heaven's meadow, but down and down and down, back to hell. Back to the inferno. Back to the screaming demons. Back to the anguish and utter hopelessness. Again, I closed tight my eyes, and prayed as fervently as before. *"Help me help me help me O God. Save me. I'll do anything."*

Again, I rose up. Up and up and up until at last I was back to that sweet place I had just barely glimpsed earlier. Opening my eyes, it was so wonderful. Again, I stopped praying and again I fell. I was back in hell; I shut tight my eyes and prayed. And up again I went.

I soon concluded that as long as I kept my eyes closed tight, and as long as I prayed without ceasing, I could avert the fires of hell. But it was also like treading water in the middle of the ocean. How long could I keep up? Praying without ceasing I went up. Ceasing without praying I sank. "Heeeelllpppp meee."

My ordeal ended at last, when the demons gave way to "Mark, wake up." It was my mother, poking me to get up because it was Saturday morning, and time to go to church for confirmation class. Thank God for confirmation. In a very cold sweat, I departed that nightmare ordeal, hoping and now praying this is not what St. Paul warned of when he said "pray without ceasing."

All these years later that dream remains vivid. I suppose it reveals a part of me that worries I'll never be good enough for heaven, even if I pray without ceasing. More importantly, though, it reveals the absolute importance of God's grace, which is always reminding us that it's never about how good we are, but always about how good Jesus is.

Let us pray: *Gracious and ever living God, with thankful hearts we bless you for your grace and love, Thank you for lifting us up from our pit of fear and hopelessness to that heavenly place you have prepared. Remind us by your grace that Jesus died for our sins and that your Holy Spirit is always interceding for us especially when we are weary or discouraged. Come to us in our dreams and transform our nightmares into occasions for drawing close to you. Hear our prayers on behalf of all who suffer. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

After recalling that nightmare, I needed some calming, encouraging, eyes, vision, heaven hopeful songs. Here's what I found:

I Lift My Eyes (Psalm 121) Dan Forest

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEZGj_Qb4Y

Be Thou My Vision by 4Him

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIMhshpf0Y4>

Open the Eyes of My Heart by Michael W. Smith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idQ1n3cdgfo>

Before the Throne of God Above by Selah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MUNywHsZPU>

Pray Without Ceasing by Gary Freeland

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-s3QhdyyySo>

Be Thou My Vision by Audrey Assad

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXDhCEnM-bQ>

Bompaye (Pray Without Ceasing) by Amos Nkansah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vHsz3sy-i8&t=167s>

Pray Without Ceasing Thank You Album by Natalie Howard

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDc_N_5Sb4

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, August 7, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #139

The real reason.

"Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool. (Isa. 1:18 NKJ)

For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason, it is through him that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God. (2 Cor. 1:20 NRS)

Many of us spend a lot of time on our computers, laptops, tablets, or smart phones. Access to the internet has given us powers beyond our imagination to investigate all manner of things. We have become a culture of "searchers." We search for things. And in the process of searching, advertisers insert additional invitations for us to take a look at other websites.

Here's how we fall for it. Advertisers understand we have a desire to know "the real reason" for many things, even things we don't care about. So we may be invited to link to "the real reason" a favorite TV show got cancelled. Or "the real reason" we don't hear from certain actors anymore. Or "the real reason" someone stayed with a show or left a show. Or "the real reason" someone's relationship ended.

It's all a trick, of course, appealing to our curiosity to find out the real reason about something even if we don't care about the "official" reason. It preys on the idea that things we have been told simply aren't true. So even if you have never watched a certain TV show that got cancelled, you still want to know the "real reason" it was cancelled. Click. They got you.

I wonder if we'd have more interest in Bible stories if we promoted "the real reason?"

The "real reason" Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden.

The "real reason" Cain killed his brother Abel.

The "real reason" Noah built the Ark.

The "real reason" Jacob stole his twin brother Esau's birthright.

The "real reason" Moses parted the Red Sea.

The "real reason" Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho

The "real reason" David slew Goliath.

The "real reason" Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

The "real reason" Jonah was swallowed by a whale.

The "real reason" Daniel was in the Lion's Den

The "real reason" Mary became the mother of Jesus.

The "real reason" John the Baptist was beheaded.

The “real reason” Jesus chose Peter to be his rock.
The “real reason” Jesus healed so many people.
The “real reason” Jesus said, “This is my blood, shed for you.”
The “real reason” Judas betrayed Jesus.
The “real reason” Jesus died for our sins.”
The “real reason” Jesus rose from the dead.
The “real reason” God sent the Holy Spirit.

Now you really want to know, don't you? So check it out. Open your Bible. No tricks. Just don't expect to find a new “real reason” God loves you when the “real reason” has been there all along. Gotcha.

Let us pray:

O God, we thank you that you have revealed the real reason behind everything you have done for us. Thank you for your love. For creating this world in love. For speaking to us from love through the prophets. For coming into this world in love through Jesus. For loving us enough to die for our sins. May your love revealed through Jesus be reason enough for us to turn our hearts to you for support, guidance, and direction as your loving and faithful followers. Help us share your love so that people have reason to investigate your grace. Amen.

Come Let Us Reason Together by Ken Medema

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoPTU3e0WKE>

Come Let Us Reason Together by Scott Wojahn and Susie Stevens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmU7Cfs7jTw>

Come Now Let Us Reason Together by Kerry Alexander

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ua6F4kzNAA>

I know Who Holds Tomorrow by Alison Kraus and Cox Family

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GKNbmYOAow>

Ancient Words sung by 8 year old (beautiful)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rU7F-snR35k>

Ancient Words by Capital University Chapel Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CHwU77LubA>

Ancient Words by On Heart African Acappela

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFWbUz8_gHo

St. Paul's In Your Home for Saturday, August 8, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #140

Thoughts and prayers.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. 9 "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:7-11 NIV)

I wonder if *"thoughts and prayers"* has become a kind of default response when we really don't know what else to say when there is a disaster, family tragedy, or untimely death. *"Our thoughts and prayers" are with you.*

Full disclosure. I've said this plenty of times myself, imagining this to be a serviceable response in a time of tragedy. Many times I have spoken this condolence, hopefully showing my care and concern.

Increasingly, I am wondering if these words are enough. They have been used so often by so many that they barely skim the surface of how God invites us to be in thoughts and prayer together. I realized this when I came across an absolutely awesome prayer composed by Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman in his most recent book, *"Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty"*. It was based on Matthew 7-11 (printed above) and goes deep into our relationship with God.

The Giver of Bread and Fish (Matthew 7:7-11)

We do "thoughts and prayers easily and glibly;
we do "thoughts" without thinking;
we do "prayers" without praying.

We commit that glib act
because it is what we know how to do with an anemic god, or
because we are embarrassed to do more, or
because it is convenient and costs us nothing.

Now, however, we are driven to unthinkable thoughts, about

all that is ending, and
all that we have lost, and
all that leaves us with a sinking feeling.

Now, however, we are driven, some of us, to
unutterable prayers.

We are driven to such prayer
by awareness that our usual reliabilities are
gone.

We are driven to you, the abiding God
when other helpers fail and comforts flee.
Thus we are bold to ask, because it will be given!

So we pray for the end of the virus,
for the health of the neighborhood,
for the recovery of the economy.
We are bold to seek, because you will be
found!

We seek your mercy and your goodness and
your generosity, so let yourself be found by us.
We are bold to knock, because it will be
opened.

We know many doors slammed shut,
doors of health and safety and comfort and
fun.

Open to us the door of life, and love, and
peace, and joy.
Here we are in your presence:

We ask for bread:
the bread of life,
the bread of abundance,
the bread of neighborly sharing.

Do not give us a stone or a crumb.
We ask for fish:
the fish of a good diet,

the fish of your abundant waters,
the fish that signs the gospel.
Do not give us a snake or the hiss of poison.

We dare to pray, not because we are at our wits
end,
but because you are at the center of our life.

Our hope is in no other save in thee alone!
So hear, heal, save, restore!
Be the God you have promised to be. Amen.

Afterword: I have read through this prayer now several times. I am grateful for Bruggeman taking us far deeper and longer and wider than simple "*thoughts and prayers.*" I think "*Abide with Me*" is the right hymn to follow this.

Abide with Me by Eclipse 6

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB-q8dO_svw

Abide With Me by Exeter University Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnCFsYGaL3U>

Abide With Me Kampen Boys Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rif5TF342Yc>

Abide With Me by 90,000 Fans at FA Cup Wembley Stadium (tradition since 1927 and surprisingly moving)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_VuQFZ5cPE

The story behind *Abide with Me* and FA Cup tradition

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPc0koW7G0Y>

and for you organ fans.... *Blijf bij mij Heer (Abide With Me)* improvisation by Gert van Hoef

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4uw-Gtlcv4>

and a second Gert van Hoef piece just because it is so good!!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXa12Y4Nq7Y>

THE MAINSPRING OF MARRIAGE

By Chaplain Robert Weeks

INTRODUCTION

As a clock repair person, I find that there are comparisons between the movement of human love in a Christian Marriage and the movement of a clock movement. Let me explain.

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A mechanical clock has a mainspring designed to make it keep accurate time. This mainspring provides power through a series of wheels (usually four wheels) called a "train of wheels." These wheels take the power of the mainspring to a wheel called "the escape wheel."

Next, a part called "the verge" (which is shaped like an arc) is attached to the clock pendulum and rocks back and forth when the clock pendulum swings. This action causes the verge to touch and release the escape wheel teeth. There are two ends to the verge. One end is called "the entry" and the other "the exit." As the "entry end" touches a tooth of the escape wheel, the movement stops momentarily.

Next, when the pendulum swings to reverse the verge, "the exit" end of the verge catches a tooth and holds it until the pendulum swings again in the opposite direction (thus the movement stops and starts again.) Most people think a mechanical clock movement runs; however, a mechanical clock movement stops and starts constantly. This rocking back and forth action allows the mainspring power to escape.

The mainspring of Christian marriage (a marriage blessed with God's Word) is the love expressed by each partner in the marriage, which is supplied to them by God. The first prayer in the Marriage Service of the ELCA asks for this love, "Gracious God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ into the world to reveal your love to all people. Enrich (the couple is named) with every good gift, that their life together may show forth your love. . ."

The condition of a Christian Marriage depends on the strength of God's love expressed by each partner. There are two partners in a Christian Marriage.

One might say that the two partners of marriage become the verge in a Christian Marriage. There is only one verge in a clock movement, and as Jesus taught about couples in marriage: "So they are no longer two, but one." As these two people live in the marriage relationship, each one can touch the escape wheel (power available from God) to help them live harmoniously.

No marriage relationship is perfect. In marriages, sometimes love does not work smoothly. The mainspring of God's love can be denied a partner by the action of the other partner. There are times when a clock movement verge hangs up and has to be adjusted to begin working again. There are times when married love stops and has to be started again.

Events happen to married couples that cause love to stop moving smoothly. Applying the idea of a mechanical clock verge movement, there are times when God's power has not been allowed to touch a partner so that the marriage will work properly.

The great thing about a Christian Marriage is that there is always available power to adjust either partner in marriage. This adjustment happens when the couple adheres to St. Paul's advice in Colossians 3:12: "Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them together in perfect unity."

Such an adjustment will allow the marriage to continue. Daily, the couple blessed by Jesus, will be like a verge (arc) sharing compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, back and forth as needed.

The mainspring of a mechanical clock has to be wound, either daily or weekly or monthly, to provide power. The mainspring of a Christian Marriage also has to be wound. This winding takes place when the marriage partners ask for God's help to keep the marriage relationship working.

This winding process can take place many ways, such as when partners pray for each other; as they pray with each other; as partners read God's word daily; as the couple have daily devotions together; and, as the power of the Holy Spirit calls them both to remember their vows.

During this pandemic great stress is applied to marriages; however, Christian couples need to remember that Jesus gladdened the wedding at Cana. He added his blessing to marriage in the scriptures of Matthew 19:4-6 when he said, "Haven't you read, that at the beginning the Creator made male and female and said, 'for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become flesh'"

This calls couples to be verges that rock back and forth touching God's escape wheel in such a way that they can receive His love daily.

CONCLUSION

The mainspring of a Christian Marriage is God's love.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, without your love no promise will last in marriage. Strengthen the marriages of our congregation with patience, kindness, gentleness, and all other gifts of your Spirit, so that they may fulfill the vows they have made. Keep them faithful to each other and to you. Fill them with such love that they may build a home of peace and welcome. Guide them by your word to serve you all their days; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Afterword by Pastor Mark. It's fun to learn new things. Thanks, Bob. Not being a clock repair person, I could never had made these comparisons. What I can do is link us to some wedding service music. Perhaps some of you have had these played at your weddings.

Trumpet Voluntary played by Gert van Hoef

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJiR3zZanEk>

Prelude to the Te Deum (Charpentier) played by John Coulton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCsqtRBxMIw>

Prince of Denmark's March played by Natural Trumpet

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6pExaRPg84>

Mendelssohn Wedding March Berlin Philharmonic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Oo4z37OUEI>

Canon in D (Pachelbel) Wedding String Quartet

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=es_3F3TLJSO

Canon in D Brooklyn Duo

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ptk_1Dc2iPY

O Perfect Love by The Worship Team

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIs0SrJYJUk>

and this one, new to me, but nice: *He Has Chosen Me For You* sung by Sarah Pipes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpkYB5Yn5x8>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, August 10, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #142

Wrestling with Marriage Versus Marriage with Wrestling.

"So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." (Gen. 32:24-26 NIV)

Chaplain Bob's devotion yesterday prompted me to recollect some of the weddings I have officiated at since moving to Wilmington. If you love presiding at weddings, which I do, Wilmington is a great place to reside. Not only have I enjoyed doing weddings in St. Paul's beautiful sanctuary, but I have also performed many weddings "elsewhere," including parks, plantations, chapels, gardens, lakeside, riverfront, piers, beaches, clubhouses, riverboats, and yachts.

The weddings I enjoy most, of course, are the ones where there is a close relationship between the bride and groom and St. Paul's. I love sharing not only their special day, but continuing our relationship, including baptizing their children when they become parents.

From time to time, I have also been persuaded to say "yes" to someone "outside" the church. I value the challenge of unusual settings, especially when I anticipate a good story emerging from the experience. Here is one of those good stories:

(This is the also the one I *name dropped* in order to impress St. Paul's new Senior Pastor Jonathan Conrad, and wrestling fan, that while age-wise his senior, I was still a cool guy because I had married a WWE professional wrestler and his bride... on a yacht!)

I met Robert Howard (A.K.A. "*Bob Hard Core Holly*") and his fiancé Michele through a local wedding coordinator I had first worked with at an Arlie Gardens wedding a year earlier. Not being a big wrestling fan, Bob's fame was a little wasted on me, but nevertheless I have been very happy to tell the tale, and even have the photos to prove it.

The wedding was unusual not simply because of being on a yacht, but because of who else was on (or not on) the yacht. It was a bit "*Gilligan's Island*," with the bride and groom, the Skipper too ... the first mate, the photographer, the videographer, the chef, the wedding coordinator, and the preacher. No family. No friends. It was a bit like shooting a reality TV show to be aired later.

The best part for me was the challenge of crafting a wedding homily for this well-known pro wrestler (and race car driver) and his private investigator fiancé. Except for the homily, the service was quite traditional (not much of a procession, however). But the homily gave me that a rare

once in a ministry opportunity to do what I never would have imagined, that is, to base the homily on the story of Jacob wrestling God in Genesis 32.

You will not find this text among any recommended scriptures for weddings. Not anywhere. If you do, I will preside at your next wedding at no charge.

What I discovered from this experience is there are many untapped lessons from scripture, just waiting to be discovered when the right occasion comes around. This is no unlike observing how clocks work ... like marriages. God bless you in all the ways scripture and life experiences speak to you.

Let us pray.

Thank you for the lessons from scripture, the obvious ones we are familiar ones, and those who speak to us in certain special circumstances. As we wrestle with the scriptures, reveal yourself to us O God, that we can be formed and shaped by your steadfast love and faithfulness. We continue to pray this day for all who struggle with this every changing world, and for those who seek to live and serve as you have called us.

P.S. I hope the devotion teased your interest in what I actually said the bride and groom on that yacht. The homily, and an un-doctored photo to “prove” I did this will be attached. And here are a few more wedding songs.

The Wedding Song by Paul Stookey

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdNPEX7bY-k>

Wedding Song by Anna Johnson Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxjKXkQHpMg>

When God Made You

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sldnp0zOOCA>

For A Lifetime Ryann Darling feat. Cory Ard

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFqPv_oT4FQ

and for fun, Kenny G’s Wedding Song played by brother of the bride.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4qWmzrbvGw>

Wedding Homily for Michele Woodward and Bob “Hard Core Holly” Howard

June 12, 2002 Wrightsville Beach NC on a Yacht

Bob and Michele, I would like to share some scripture with you this evening as part of our celebration of your marriage. But as I do this, first of all I want to affirm once again that yours will be a wonderful marriage.

I know you remember when we and you shared your story with me. As you did that, I asked if I could take your picture so I could remember the way you looked at each other and held each other even as we visited for the first time.

It truly doesn't get any better than this. I have confidence that yours is a MATCH... made in heaven. Now you can enjoy a lifetime together celebrating the deepening of your love for one another.

As I searched the scripture for an appropriate word of promise and hope, I couldn't help but think initially about your work lives. Work does, after all take up much of our activity and livelihood, and for both of you it has given you ... how shall we say... alternate personalities.

Indeed, the first time you met, you could have easily first talked with each other not as you true selves. You, Michele, could have been undercover narcotics trailer girl Michele, or secret camera fraud investigator Michele (not a real lady, as Bob described you to me).

And of course, many people know who else you can be, “Hard Core Race Car Carburetor Holley ... (not the soft, centered, sensitive man you really are) ...

But because professional wrestling and undercover work has been a part of who each of you are, I couldn't help but take a look at what I might find in the Bible that might talk about that... at least as a place to start.

Did you know there is quite a story about wrestling in the Bible?

It's in the book of Genesis, and it's about a man named Jacob. Jacob undergoes a transformation... a new way of understanding himself after wrestling with God all night.

What's neat about the story is that it's kind of the way it is with you and the WWE folks, Bob. It first looks like we don't know who might win, Jacob or the “unknown man” whom we later realize is God.

Let me share the story: Genesis 32:34ff

Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against Jacob, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him.

Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." He said "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel. For you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed."

Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. (Back then God did not give out his name until he met up later with Moses at the burning bush).

Even so, this story might have been the Biblical beginnings of the WWE. We know it was a hugely entertaining story for those who told it and heard it.

Looking back, the Israelites realized the "man" was God... and there's no real way Jacob could prevail in a match against God. One touch from the "man" took out Jacob's thigh.

But in that real struggle, God wanted a certain outcome. One where everyone was finally a winner. And that, for Jacob, is to be blessed.

That's because in real life God wanted Jacob, who was one of the Bible's bad guys, to become one of the Bible's good guys.

This is the kind of thing we learn about God when we go investigating, which is much more down your alley, Michele. There is also quite a bit about that in scripture.

Even the writer of Luke's gospel wrestled with all he had learned about Jesus, and began writing a summary of this good news with these words:

Luke writes in chapter 1: Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed over to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

So begins the gospel of Luke.

Of course, investigating or searching for God is not just something we do.

One of the great things about seeking God or ever wrestling with God is when we discover a wonderful God who have also been looking for us all along.

And this draws me to the words of the 139th Psalm, where it is written:

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. (a little investigator imagery here)

Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. (A little wrestling imagery here)

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will hold me fast. (a little Bob and Michele holding each other imagery here)

These are wonderful words of affirmation as we celebrate that in your life together ... of course in your REAL life together, not as alternate personalities ... there has been little need for investigating... Or wrestling with “Do I want this relationship, or not? Do I want love to prevail, or not?”

No, you know almost from the moment you met, that there were strong forces drawing you together, rather quickly inviting you to a place of deep intimacy and sharing ... a safe place where you would learn to love each other deeply and trust each other faithfully. I want to tell you this is a gift from God. A rare, precious wonderful gift. Not many people have this kind of experience.

Goodness, not many people I know can talk non-stop seven hours on the telephone or have the kind of communication you have. This is special. You are blessed. I want you to hear on this special day when you unite your hearts together as husband and wife.

I also want you to know, as your pastor, that God wants to be in your hearts just as you are in each other’s hearts. Because, with God at your side and in your heart, there is no end to the depth of what you love for one another will become.

Nothing will separate you from each other. Nothing will separate you from God’s love. This is God’s promise to you as you make your promises to each other. Remember God’s promises as you remember your promises.

You will continue to grow, because you have also experienced the wonderful difference between made-up personalities and your deepest truest selves.

Your truest selves have been found by each other, and this is a wonderful gift that will keep on giving. I celebrate this with you as you now make your vows and promises to each other.

May you also be blessed with God’s deep and abiding love as you continue to love each other with all your hearts and with Christ at the center. Amen.



St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, August 11, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #143

Lad: A Dog. Do you Copy? Holy Bible: Would you copy?

My heart overflows with a goodly theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe. (Ps. 45:1 NRS)

If you were asked “What was your favorite book as a child or young adult?”, I wonder what you would answer?

It would likely be one that you enjoyed reading many times. My mother would have said “*Heidi*,” by Joanna Spyri. She especially enjoyed reading it again when she was in her nineties. As a young person I probably read more Superman comics than novels, but I remember reading “*Black Beauty*” and “*Johnny Tremain*” in the back seat of our car on a trip to Minnesota once, and I first discovered the “*Chronicles of Narnia*” when sixth grade teacher Mrs. Ely read “*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*” to us. The “*Chronicles of Narnia*” are still all-time favorites of mine.

I cannot imagine anyone, however, loving one book more than my sixth-grade classmate Rosalie Parks. She was absolutely in love with a book called “*Lad: A Dog*”, by Albert Payson Terhune. How much did she love this thick hard cover novel for young people? She loved it so much that not only did she continuously check it out of the library, but she did it so she could hand copy every single page!

That’s quite a remarkable feat. I have vivid memories of Rosalie with her many notebooks and pencils carefully copying every single word, day after day, month after month until at last she made a hand copy of her favorite book. By the end, *Lad: A Dog* was a story she knew backwards and forwards.

Nowadays it would be impossible to imagine anyone doing such a thing. Books are so much more easily accessible and affordable.

I don’t know if, as an adult, Rosalie ever delved into genealogy research, but I can’t help but wonder if she might have had ancestors who were scribes and who loved the scriptures so much that they meticulously hand copied them so generations could have access to God’s Holy Word.

As the ancient scribes copied the Bible, word by word, verse by verse, chapter by chapter and book by book, theirs was a labor of love that we can hardly appreciate.

The invention of the printing press changed how books were duplicated, and nowadays, with a keystroke, files large enough to contain the whole Bible can easily be copied in seconds. With “one click” I can download *Lad: A Dog* to my Amazon Kindle App.

When I think of Rosalie copying her favorite book sentence by sentence, I appreciate what someone might do out of love and devotion. For generations, the Bible has not only been a favorite book for the faithful people of God, for thousands of years it depended on faithful “Rosalies” who loved the Bible so much that they would copy it word for word so we might all come to know this greatest story/book ever written.

As we come back to the Bible again and again, I am confident we will not only learn those same stories backwards and forwards, but also discover how God meticulously writes God’s words of love on our hearts for all the years ahead. Blessings.

Let us pray:

We remember and give thanks today for all those who so loved the scriptures so much that lifetimes were spent carefully copying them so we would all have access to your word. Bring us joy and delight as you open the holy scriptures to us and bless us always in our reading. May the scriptures be helpful to us especially now that we deal with such fragility and uncertainty in our lives. Heal our world, we pray. Amen.

Thy Word by the Mullet Family featuring Chantaya (8) and Kyra (7)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Afz0q0cQjll>

Wonderful Words of Life by First United Methodist Church, Houston TX

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WGCQvwUUJA>

Wonderful Words of Life by Christian Choristers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0okXPC50cY>

I Love To Tell the Story by Alan Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xXFzw3Ukc8>

O Word of God Incarnate by First United Methodist Church, Houston TX

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rI7jSvGb_Y

O Word of God Incarnate featuring trombonist Bill Pearce

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2uZpolbPFQ>

Jesus Word of God Incarnate by Mozart performed by First Presbyterian Georgetown TX

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt_zwFcS72A

and another by that sweet Mullet Family “*I Can Only Imagine.*”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDOC19vSlzw>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, August 12, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand but BY Pastor Michael Megahan, Ph.D. #144

**CRUX SOLA EST NOSTRA THEOLOGIA
(The Cross Alone is our Theology [Martin Luther])**

(NIV) 1 Cor 1:22-25: 22 Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

The game of hide-and-seek is popular, in one form or another, among children throughout many different cultures. My siblings and I loved to play it on the cold, dark winter days in St. Louis. I had a special place in the basement that was only discovered when I got so claustrophobic that I had to reveal myself.

The game of hide-and-seek is, perhaps, a very appropriate metaphor for the relationship humans have had with God since Adam first ate of the forbidden fruit. In Genesis 3:8-9 it is written (NIV):

“8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”
10 He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

Ever since that day, there has been a hide-and-seek game going on. First God seeks humans, then humans are called on to seek God: see 1 Chronicles 28:9; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Isaiah 55:6; Jeremiah 29:13-14.

God is a hidden God, as Isaiah 45:15 so boldly confesses (NIV): “15 Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself, the God and Savior of Israel.”

The concept of the “hidden God” is central to Luther’s (and the Apostle Paul’s) theology. Many Lutherans know about the ideas of “by grace alone” and “by faith alone,” but very seldom do we talk about the foundation upon which those truths are built: The Cross Alone is our Theology.

Luther’s most profound theology is stated in the simple fact that we can only find the hidden God by looking at the cross. God is hidden before our very eyes on the cross. The “crucified

God” (Luther’s phrase) is the foundation of Christian faith and the only way of knowing the nature of God and, thereby, the nature of humans.

The injunction to seek God while he may be found raises the question, where do I seek him? The answer: on the cross. It is in the suffering, poverty and disgrace of the cross that seems to be the most unlikely place to find God. But that is precisely where God is to be found, hidden, yet revealed. Any person who desires to know God, to stand in the presence of God, begins at the foot of the cross and meditates on the cross day and night.

Where is the cross in our lives today? We encounter the crucified God in Word and Sacrament and in meditation on the cross. We meet the cross of Christ when we become involved with the marginalized and oppressed of our societies, suffering with them, listening with empathy to their story and suffering with and for them.

I remember the first time I went to church camp. I was about 12 years old. I had to fill out a questionnaire. One of the questions was, what is your favorite hymn? I wrote, “The Old Rugged Cross.” I did not know, at that time, the depth of my perspective. But it is true. Only the cross, a symbol of suffering and shame, is the place where God is to be found.

Prayer: God of all power, teach me how your power is truly revealed in the suffering and weakness of the cross. Let me never be ashamed of the cross but lift it upon my shoulder each day and follow you. I believe that you can perform miracles. I know that you can teach me great wisdom. Let the greatest miracle in my life be the placing of the cross as my center and the greatest wisdom be the understanding of what it means to be a cross-bearer. Amen.

The hymns for today focus on the cross, including several variations of Lift High the Cross:

Lift High the Cross by Schola Cantorum of St. Peter’s of the Loop, Chicago

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwbz5jqGRFg>

Lift High the Cross, King of Glory Lutheran Dallas, TX

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gIK-XUfd10>

Lift High the Cross played by Paul Manz

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ug-56sLxy8w>

Lift High the Cross played by Kimo Smith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjr9--91Li0>

Lift High the Cross A Capella by Chris Rupp

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TetkXEiCrOk>

The Old Rugged Cross Fountainview Academy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avjXaEFKd5E>

Cross Medley by Anthem Lights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLeHDfCGKMO>

The Old Rugged Cross by Alan Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5fHmxC4Qjc&t=75s>

In the Cross of Christ I Glory Grace Community Church Sun Valley CA

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MW_F1MMH2r4

Beneath the Cross of Jesus Hastings College Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr7_i8HJ-Jo

Beneath the Cross of Jesus by Topeka Festival Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRSVufDSIUu>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, August 13, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #145

Dying Ruby. What can you say?

One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. 18 Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; 19 but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. 20 When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." (Luke 5:17-20)

It began with a phone call from someone who has a friend who was dying. The friend, who I will call Marie, didn't call to ask if I could heal her friend, but if I would visit her and hopefully be able to share Jesus with her. Marie was an active devoted Christian, and her friend was not.

According to Marie, her friend, whom I'll call Ruby had a falling out with either her church or pastor twenty years earlier, and she has described herself as an unbeliever ever since. I'm not exactly sure why Marie asked me to visit, but I do know that she wanted me to be sure not to mention this conversation. "If Ruby knew I had called you, she would never speak to me again." she said.

Listening further, I learned is that Ruby was a chain smoker who had finished treatment options and was in her last stages of lung cancer. Ruby is also an alcoholic.

Marie reminds me of those friends who brought that paralyzed man to Jesus in Luke's gospel. We don't know about the paralyzed man's faith. We only know about the friends' faith. "When Jesus saw THEIR faith" Luke tells us that Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven you.

Marie is doing exactly what a faithful friend or loved one would do, praying and hoping that her friend would know the Lord and be at peace. I promised Marie that I would make the visit. What I wondered... Would even be invited in?

Ruby had not asked for a visit from a pastor. Ruby had been adamant about her unbelief, and furthermore had been annoyed at Marie for trying to get her to believe something she doesn't. Therefore, I wondered what I would do if she said "Don't come in", or if she was feeling too weak for a visit.

So what I decided to do was write a letter to her and bring it along in case "this was not a good time." That way I could say in the letter what I would have wanted to say if I had been let in. I could leave my number and come back again. I will attach a copy of that letter to this devotion.

So what happened when I came to her front door? It turns out that Ruby didn't have much choice. Another friend (one of her caregivers) was with her and he answered the door and he said immediately, "Oh come on in!" In his own way, he tore the hole in the roof and lowered me in.

So there I was. I introduced myself, and essentially shared what was in the letter, beginning with how sorry I was to hear about her illness and how hard it had been. Ruby expressed appreciation for those who had been caring for her.

She also lit cigarette after cigarette, barely able to hold them to her lips. She coughed as she inhaled and said to me, "I really shouldn't be doing this." As we talked about her life, I was looked for an opening to ask about what was happening with her spiritually.

Here's how I did it. Similar to what I had composed in the letter, I shared how, when I am with people who are gravely ill, they often tell me that they have been thinking a lot more about God. I asked if this had been true for her.

She said, "Well, I don't believe." I tried to be gracious about this, and suggested that even if we don't believe that doesn't change whether or not God exists. I reminded her of God's promises made to her in her baptism. I shared that God will love her and be faithful to her no matter happens...whether she believes or not.

I spoke of her parents bringing to be baptized and trusting in those promises. "Well, they didn't really believe, either," she said. (Which made me again think of the importance of those baptismal promises that parents and sponsors make.)

I shared that I hoped there might yet be just a spark of faith within her, so that she can be more at peace. I said that because, in her, I could see no peace. What I saw someone desperately hoping the radiation had shrunk the tumor enough to give her more time, even though her quality of life was down to sitting in that chair or bed continuing to drink (and now with morphine) and lighting up smoke after smoke after smoke.

How different this was from all the time I had seen joy among those full of faith at the end. How often I had been with faithful members as they are dying sharing with me, "I am at peace. I'm ready. I know that God is with me. I see angels all around me." Marie had told me that Ruby had seen gremlins.

With Ruby I ended in prayer. I asked her first if I could pray for her. Even unbelievers are unlikely to say "no" to that. Especially when the pastor asks. I prayed essentially much what I had written in my letter, but I do remember adding something like:

“God, I know it’s possible you don’t exist and that this prayer is rising up to thin air, but “Lord, if you are real I pray you will make yourself known to Ruby in a clear and special way so that she can be at peace and trust you in what’s ahead.”

I prayed that she would be without pain and able to enjoy the love of those who care for her and trust in those promises made at her baptism. I asked that God bless her.

When it comes to faith and believing during one’s final days, I continue to trust that all this is finally between God’s and God’s beloved child.

At the same time, we who have been blessed by faith... even imperfect occasionally doubting faith...must have courage to share that good news and keep drawing upon the promises God has given us.

And who knows... the last thing Ruby said to me was... “I would like it if you could come see me again.”

Let us pray.

We pray today for all those who, for whatever reason, have difficulty believing in you. For those who had a bad experience in their church or with other people of faith, we ask you would open the door for faith to be restored. For us who do believe and trust you, encourage us like those friends in Luke’s gospel, to do all we can to bring our friends and loved ones to you. Bless those who are sick, and especially those who are drawing closer to you in these final hours. In Jesus Name.

Healer of Our Every Ill Marty Haugen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rZDFEktMI>

Hear My Prayer Moses Hogan Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKSVCudYFxA>

Heal Me O Lord Don Moen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UmIGzQfUQM>

Come Ye Disconsolate by Roberta Flack and Donnie Hathaway

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmnnMHGvVJc>

Come Ye Disconsolate by Lilly Chapel Press

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jprT33d2TvY>

You Are Mine by SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9L1dGKLWuY>

Lord Jesus You Shall Be My Song Shenandoah Christian Music Camp

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFxmIT_NJyo&list=RDxFxmIT_NJyo&start_radio=1

Here is my original letter to “Dying Ruby.”

August 12, 2010

Dear Ruby,

I heard that you have been very ill so I decided to stop by and say hello. If you are reading this, that means today was not a good day to visit. Anticipating that possibility, I decided to write you this letter and you can read it when you are able.

My name is Mark Opgrand, and I am one of the pastors at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church. It is my understanding that you remember me from sometime in the past, though it would probably be a long time since our paths crossed. I am sorry to hear that your illness has left you gravely ill and that your options for treatment are now very limited.

If so, that means you are now where each and every person ends up in life, that is, facing the end of life. It is my hope and prayer that you will remember the promises God made to you in your baptism. You were too young, of course, to remember your baptism, but your parents who had you baptized trusted in those promises and they themselves lived in the hope of eternal life at the end of their life’s journey.

I do not know where your thoughts about God are taking you these days, but often at the end of life many people turn toward these thoughts as the worldly things begin to have less meaning. It is my prayer that you will watch for signs of God’s presence in your life now.

In the end, it is God who will be doing his work to love you and care for you. This was the promise God made to you. That promise is not dependent on how you respond to it. This is about God’s faithfulness. That’s why we call the gospel “good news.”

Therefore, if you have wondered about God, or doubted God’s presence, I pray that you will now be confident in the love of God who loves you unconditionally. I believe this may well help you be more at peace with the process of dying.

If I was able to see you this morning, then perhaps we talked of these things. If not, then at least I can leave this note to let you know I have been thinking about you. I will certainly keep you in my prayers and ask God to bless you during this final part of your journey in this life.

Let me conclude with a prayer.

Gracious God, I ask your blessings on behalf of your child Ruby. Make your presence known to her, O Lord, so that she can be at peace about this life and the next. Help her know that you are

God, that you are a faithful and loving God, and that she belongs to you. Help her find peace in the promises made at her baptism, that nothing will keep you from her.

Bring a special grace to these days ahead, that she will keenly feel your presence and the support of the whole host of heaven, including her loved ones who are with you now. Keep her from pain and suffering, I ask, and bring her at last to the wonderful place you have prepared for all those who trust in your promises. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Joyfully in Christ,

Pastor Mark Opgrand (910) 620 9021

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, August 14, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #146

How in the "heck" did you get this room?

NIV John 14:1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.

2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (Jn. 14:1-3 NIV)

When I was 43 years old and serving as Lutheran Campus Pastor at Purdue University, I woke up one morning with weakness in my ankles. As the day progressed, I felt more weakness and unsteadiness on my feet along with difficulty gripping. When I tried to walk a straight line at the local "Medac", the doctor immediately sent me to a neurologist (no waiting!) and after a couple of tests, he sent me straight to the hospital.

Well, that sure troubled my heart. What was going on? I learned that I had Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a rare auto immune neurological disorder where the patient suffers paralysis. Usually beginning in the hands and feet, it can progress to the point where, because the autonomic system has broken down, a person may need to be on a ventilator. I had never heard of this, so it was quite scary. By the end of the day, I could not walk operate my hands and arms.

The hospital which admitted me was a private Roman Catholic owned hospital in Lafayette, Indiana. It was full when I arrived, and I was put in a room with another patient who was clearly dying. That was difficult too, as there were so many of his family members in this "semi-private" room holding vigil over their loved one. I asked if I could be moved. The staff understood that request.

The only open room in the hospital was a most unusual. Indeed. I had never seen anything like it. It was a two-room suite. The outer room was a combination living room/dining room/den. It has a big oak desk, a dining table under a beautiful chandelier, and a large leather couch and easy chair. The bathroom had a marble sink. It was a suite they created in case a bishop or visiting dignitary got sick. That's where they put me.

Lutheran Campus Ministry at Purdue had a covenant relationship with a local church, so I essentially served not only as campus pastor but as an associate to the congregation. I had also just finished filling in full time while my colleague was on sabbatical, so when people "heard," about my illness, they were eager to visit and find out how I was doing.

However, not one person walking through the door of that suite asked "How are you doing?" Not one. But to a person, every single one instead looked around and exclaimed, "How in the 'heck' did you get this room?"

I had so many visitors that the nurses were glad I had that outer room for people to visit. And they could stay as long as they liked. And bring lunch. And sit at the dining table under a chandelier. Or read a book in the easy chair. Or sleep over.

Two weeks later I was discharged, and after months of physical therapy I happily returned to good health, but with a deep appreciation for what it is like to experience a disability. I further gained a deep appreciation for the love and support of my community of faith.

Jesus told his disciples, "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" I would like to hope that when we die and go to that place Jesus has prepared, we might be in for a similar surprise. "How in 'heaven's name' did I get this room?"

Grace.

Let us pray:

We thank you, O God that Jesus has prepared a place for us in heaven, where there is not only room for all, but space that may surprise us. Thank you for your grace, which continually lifts us to joy in your beloved presence. Thank you for community and family, and for all who look in on us when we are sick. Bless the sick and dying today, O God. Heal those who call out to you and give us hope as we persevere through these troubling times. Thank you for your grace. Amen.

When We All Get To Heaven by Alan Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOs81eYTKeg>

In My Father's House by Elvis Presley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeihHdD3e38>

Mansion Over the Hilltop by Elvis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rbJX7uBkkQ>

Homeward Bound by BYU Vocal Point

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caUIXLxqiPU>

Homeward Bound Peter Hollens and Choir (very beautiful; watch to the end)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=878OTcl6iw8>

Happy Land (Sacred Harp) by Flint Hill Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltwDpK1xJLM>

That Home Far Away by Billy Strings

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AYVZPFNMEg>

That Home Far Away by Ralph Stanley

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5RbiMUS_Ko

When the Roll is Called Up Yonder by Alan Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ze1R4oSvus>

When the Roll is Called Up Yonder (Russian Version) by Simon Khloroskiy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhXpK1d8Usg>

and for you classical fans, *Conquest of Paradise* by Gert van Hoef, organist

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3u-y_2dPCg

St. Paul's In Your Home Devotional for Saturday, August 15, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand BUT by Chaplain Bob Weeks. #146

Slug Theology.

"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in Heaven."
Matthew 5:13-16

I have always liked to observe the world around me, especially the tiny things. I remember looking at marks on a wall that gleamed in the light. I realized that a Terrestrial Gastropod has passed there. That is – a slug had passed there. This led me to the reflection which I will share with you now.

I wonder if my spiritual life will be as clear to others as the marks left by a slug. As Christians, we leave marks of God's love in our life journey. We are called as Christians to walk and reflect that Jesus is our Saviour, showing mercy and love as Jesus taught us.

Jesus told a story about leaving marks:

The parable of the Good Samaritan - There are several sets of marks in this story. There are the marks left by the Levi and the Priest. They were too busy with "Church Work" to stop and take a look at the poor injured man. They were of the community that kept the Temple. Then, there was the Samaritan who would have been called "a dog" by the Temple community. He stopped and helped the poor man and left a wonderful mark

Additionally, St. Paul called for Christian marks when he wrote about Christian love in his letter to the Romans (Romans 12:1-12): He suggested nineteen marks as follows:

1. Love must be sincere.
2. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.
3. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.
4. Honor one another above yourselves.
5. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual passion, serving the Lord.
6. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
7. Share with God's people who are in need.
8. Practice hospitality.
9. Bless those who persecute you: bless and do not curse.
10. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
11. Live in harmony with one another.
12. Do not be proud, but willing to associate with people in low position.
13. Do not be conceited.
14. Do not repay evil for evil.
15. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.
16. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

17. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord
18. On the contrary: if your enemy is hungry feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing so, you will heap burning coals on his head.
19. Do not overcome evil by evil but overcome evil with good.

In a former congregation that I joined, there was a little lady named Mrs. Wilson. Mrs. Wilson would stand at the entrance of the sanctuary every Sunday and welcome people. She especially welcomed visitors. During one of the Sunday School Classes I attended, the teacher asked the class, "Why did you join this church?" Immediately, three of the class members said, "Mrs. Wilson asked us!" Mrs. Wilson left a lot of Christian marks.

Members of St. Paul's are leaving some great marks during this pandemic. The telephone calls by the Contact Committee leave a caring mark. It is great to know that someone is keeping up with you during the pandemic.

The Evangelism Committee's "Joy" messages leave positive marks. They provide welcome messages on our internets. The Pastors and Deacon are doing a great job of keeping us spiritually alive. It takes a lot of time and work to produce their messages. Monday Night Dinners are leaving marks in the community. The Compassion Weeks Videos left marks. Zoom Meetings show love and concern for all.

The thing that I miss the most about not being able to attend worship at St. Paul's is the "Peace Sharing Time" during worship services. I have not been a member of St. Paul's very long, but during those sharing times I have received so many caring marks. Times of great "Slug Theology."

During this pandemic, we need to remember that our lives are like windows for others. Others look at our windows for marks. Will your "Slug Theology" leave a good Christian mark?

Prayer: Dear Lord. Send your Holy Spirit to help us show Christian Marks to those around us during this pandemic. Amen.

Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ by German Choir somewhere (I can't read German)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UeQfizuQz3w>

Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ... a sing along by Robert Hobby

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVj3jBR4RYI>

The Lord Now Sends Us Forth by Wayne Wold

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5JjcYZzE50>

The Servant Song by Mary Preus

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsBCCz3Y7_w

Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service by Sammamish Hills Lutheran Church

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBe_bTjmHjk

The Spirit Sends Us Forth To Serve by Atonement Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHSAcgRmmuc>

Love Consecrates the Humblest Act by Oglethorpe Presbyterian Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JN5ql-vBuJU>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Sunday, August 16, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #148

B.C., D.C., and A.C.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen. 1:1 NIV)

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. (Rev. 22:13 NIV)

Does anybody know today's date? The real date?

The *Ethiopian* Calendar says today is August 14, 2012. (That's right. 2012!)

The *Jewish* Calendar says today is the 24th of AV, 5780.

The *Chinese* Calendar says today is Jun 25, Geng Zi Year, Year of Rat.

The *Islamic* Calendar says today is Dhu'l Hijjah 24 1141 AH

The *Hindu* Calendar says today is Vikram Samvat 2077

The *Coptic* Calendar says today is 5 Misra 1736

The *Persian* Calendar says today is 24 Mordad 1399

So what is today's date? In truth, God only knows. Only God was there at the beginning. Only God knows the beginning and the end. Only God knows what day this is in relation to days past. All other calendars and dates have been determined by humans. Discovering patterns and cycles have helped develop calendars, but assigning a number to the year has been a human endeavor.

Each culture has its own complex calendar origin story. The calendar which calls today August 12, 2020, has origins in Roman, Julian and Gregorian calendars. Eventually the starting points were thought to be close to the time of Christ. Therefore years "before Christ" were designated B.C., and years after were named "A.D.," Latin for Anno Domini ("in the year of our Lord"). In our modern era, the letters B.C. and A.D. have been modified to "B.C.E" and A.C.E. referring to "Before the Common Era" and "After the Common Era."

Due to common usage, we are not likely to change our way of designating dates and calendars, but the events of this year 2020 have caused me to think a lot about our changing world. Before Covid (B.C.) is not yet a distant memory. We still remember going to school, socializing in large groups, dining in favorite restaurants, and hugging our friends at church.

B.C. (Before Covid) was also a time when we were not gripped by fear or the effects economically, politically, physically or spiritually, that Covid 19 is having on us. We sure miss those days.

Currently, we are in the time of "D.C. (During Covid.)" It can be identified not only by active virus spread in our world, but also by our struggle to celebrate the best of who we are as we also experience the worst of who we are. We are deeply divided over what's real and what's

overstated. Can anyone be trusted? Is anyone an expert? Is everything more about politics than actual disease? Do we have nothing to worry about ... or everything to worry about?

These confusing times remind me of the popular TV show "Survivor." That's the show where people compete to be the last Survivor by voting all the other contestants off. The most common survival philosophy in that show is "as long as it's not me." We see this same philosophy during this time of "D.C." "As long as I don't get it," or "as long as I have only a mild case", or "as long as I don't have to give up anything for the safety of someone else", or "as long as it's you and not me".... This time of "D.C." is also fueled by suspicion and anger. There is much mean-spiritedness around us. So much demonizing of people who have opposing views.

As Christians, this is a particularly challenging struggle because suspicion and anger happening outside the church is also happening inside the church, or between churches that otherwise might find common confession that Jesus is Lord. We pray for unity.

We all long for a time of A.C. (After Covid). We look forward to that time when hopefully much of what we have missed can again be part of our lives. This is on our minds daily. When will all this disruption be over? What date that will be?

God only knows. But God also helps us B.C., D.C., and A.C. God who is sovereign Lord of time and space is in every moment ... every breath we take ... every fear we have ... every prayer we utter ... every failure we make ... every gracious act we offer. God abides with us.

This is beautifully expressed in prayer form in one of the church's favorite hymns, "Abide With Me":

*O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guide while troubles last,
And our eternal home!*

God is our help, our hope, our guide, and home, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray:

O God, you are our help in all times, past, present, and future. As we mark time by calendars and dates, keep reminding us that no matter what time or what year we are in, you are in all times, and all places. You are Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. Give us faith to persevere through these times, and in all the years ahead. We pray for good years ahead, a time when this pandemic is distant, but not forgotten. Help us to learn, through this experience, how to model godly, Christ centered behavior as live and serve, in Jesus name. Amen.

O God Our Help In Ages Past SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-hN740J6qA>

O God Our Help Ages Past by Nathan Drake

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuT6a5HRL00>

The Day Thou Gavest Now Is Ended by Abbey School Tewksbury

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pigh8VHr-ZE>

The Day Thou Gavest Now Is Ended by Favorite Hymns

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeC6M_RD3oE

The Day Thou Gavest by Geref Brass Band Groningen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=po7vhOZj7bQ>

Now the Day is Over by Seibert Family

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5_PfYYJLck

Now the Day if Over by Robert Shaw Chorale

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLu0H_5qmkQ

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, August 17, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #149

Laughter and tears are not far from one another.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

2 a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,

3 a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build,

4 a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,

(Eccl. 3:1-4 NIV)

The only place I could find tears and laughter together was in Ecclesiastes, where chapter three begins: Ecclesiastes 3:1 "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven": Verse four speaks of "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance."

Where all this came together for me was during an experience I had while serving as an ecumenical campus minister in Odessa Texas in the early 1980's. The ministry was sponsored by local Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian and Disciples of Christ Churches; about one third of my students were Hispanic Roman Catholics.

There had been a tragedy.

Rueben, the nine-year-old brother of one of our students, was abducted and later found murdered in an oil patch. I was close to his sister Ida so it was appropriate for me to pay a visit to the family. I remember so vividly walking across the yard with Alonzo, another one of my students, (also Hispanic) who explained in Spanish to the men gathered outside that I was a padre, and I was okay.

All the men were outside. All the women were inside in the back bedroom where Ida's mother was laying on the bed sobbing. They were all sobbing. It might let up for a little, and then it would start again. "He was so young, my little boy..." they would go from Spanish to English and back again.

In all my life, I had never been in a room with such sadness. I wanted to get closer to Mrs. Arellano so I could express my condolences; I dropped down on my ankles so I could be next to her.

She spoke some more, and there were more tears... more conversation... and more tears. But as it went on, I started to realize it was getting difficult to stay balanced down. My knees were also getting weak, but I didn't seem right to stand quite yet.

I turned to my right and, seeing the wall, and believed I could lean just a little back for balance and I could probably steady myself to stay down there for a little while longer.

But when I leaned back to catch the wall.... the wall was not where I thought it was, and (“oh, no... oh, no... oh no...”) I went further back, knocking open the bathroom door next to the bed and falling completely back into the bathroom, with the door crashing, and my legs went right up in the air.

CRASH.. BOOM ... and silence. Then it started... first one, (heh) then another (heh heh), and another (heh heh heh), then Ida, then her mom, and in moments everyone was laughing as hard as they could....! “HA HA HA HA HAHAAAAHA HA HA HA HA!”

“I’m so sorry, I said. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, Padre,” they replied, and the hoots continued... and just about when it was about to die down.... it started all over again. On and on and on it went... someone had to tell the men what was going. They weren’t laughing. I guess you had to be right there.

I once heard someone say, *“Laughter and tears are never very far from each other.”* And in that saddest place I had ever been, that was true, and there was grace.

There were tears...and there was laughter. There was mercy, and there was hope.

I was the only *“Anglo”* at the funeral. And there were lots of tears, especially as a trio of teenage girls, in perfect harmony, sang *“For Those Tears I Died.”* But even in the midst of that, when my eye caught Mrs. Arellano’s eye, there was again a smile and a tender mercy shared between us. I ran into her a number of times after that, and each time there was always a smile between us.

Think of it. This was my *“number one all-time most embarrassing and humiliating moment”* ... in all my years in ministry, and nothing comes remotely close to this... and yet ... and yet... God took my stupid slip, and brought grace and a little relief to a room filled with such deep sadness.

What this reminds me, many years later, is never overlook the ways that God may indeed be working in this world to bring comfort and healing.

We are all so human.... so prone to saying stupid things or doing stupid things or falling short of who or what we want to be.

And yet ... and yet... God bless God... we are still loved. With great tenderness, we are still loved. In spite of ourselves, we are still loved. Even when we make fools of ourselves, we are still loved.... and maybe God even ends up, once in a while smiling to himself... (knowing that all will be well) and having a pretty good laugh himself.

I hope so.

Let us pray.

We remember those who grieve loved ones today, and all whose days are marked by many tears. Bless those who mourn. We also pray for grace that can turn tears into laughter, reminding us that in grace you are with us in every circumstance of life. During these times of much uncertainty, draw close to us that we might feel your presence and your healing touch. Amen.

For Those Tears I Died by Gracias Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilBWjgAURBk>

For Those Tears I Died by Marsha Stevens, composer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlrizhT_ckU

For Those Tears I Died by the Isaacs

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMnDSpwOU_E

Hear My Cry O God by Esther Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CRTY1xb0NE>

You Are My Hiding Place by Selah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dROH0tAYT8>

All My Tears Selah and Kim Hill

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UK0X3983wk>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, August 18, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand BUT by Pastor Michael Megahan, Ph.D. #150

Struggling Against the Dark World

Ephesians 6:10-18 (NIV)

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

There is great darkness in the world. It is not just an idea conjured up for graphic novels or Harry Potter movies or Halloween. It is real and it is powerful.

I have experienced the very darkest of darkness in my work and life in Africa. (I have also encountered much in USA, but those stories are for another time.) For now, an African story.

Once when our evangelism team was doing house-to-house visitation in a small, remote village in Tanzania, we came upon a newly built home. The local evangelist said that he hadn't noticed the home before, which was suspicious; nothing is "hidden" in a remote African village; there is seldom privacy. I also found it strange that the house had no windows. I suggested we go and talk to the owner and invite him or her to church. The evangelism team seemed reluctant. I, always eager to do evangelism, pushed ahead and they tagged along behind.

We knocked on the door. I heard, faintly, a small voice, as if from a distance, inviting us to enter. I opened the door. We entered. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness, with only light from the open door, we began noticing strange things hanging from the rafters, goat horns and chicken feet sticking out from the mud walls. A small, very thin man, shirtless and wearing shorts that were more a patchwork of patches than actual clothing was standing in a corner, facing the wall. We had entered a shaman's home.

The evangelism team became so frightened that I had to physically block them from escaping through the door. They stammered, "What can we do?" My only response was, "As we always do. Tell him the Good News. Tell him how Christ loves him. He is only flesh and blood enslaved by the powers of darkness." So, in faltering voices, we began the dialogue.

Soon he turned and was talking with us face-to-face, asking questions, responding to our enquiries. When we finished and were about to leave, he asked if we could pray for his sick daughter. It was then that we noticed a blanket hanging at one side of the house to divide off a small "bedroom." We said, "Yes," and explained that prayer wasn't anything magical, but depended on God's will. He called to someone and a small, perhaps 12- or 13-year-old girl, emaciated and feverish, came out from behind the curtain. We prayed for her and suggested that they go to the clinic to get medicine. (Probably was suffering from malaria.) We invited them to the Jesus film to be shown that evening.

As we were leaving, he said, "I want you know that this is the first time anybody has told me that God loves even me. Thanks."

Weeks later I heard that he and his daughter had accepted Christ and had been baptized.

Whether in Africa, Asia, Europe or North America, the powers of darkness have enslaved many, but we often do not see. We see "enemies" or "weird people," or totally ignore them out of xenophobia, forgetting that they are humans lost in the great night of evil. We tend only to see it in the lives of those so different from us that it cannot be ignored. We become culturally blind to our own evil and faults. We are called to open our eyes and see even here in Wilmington, there are God's lost children wandering in the night of darkness.

The Church is Christ's light sent to free them from the darkness. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. It is against the Evil One and his legions. The light cannot shine in the darkness if it remains hidden in the home or pew. We are called to knock on the doors, to enter into the lives of those who have not yet seen the light and shine with the bright radiance of love until the darkness is dispelled.

The dark powers are strong. They are stronger than our weapons of war. That is why Paul tells us to put on the whole armor of God, from head to toe. We can only overcome evil with the spiritual power of love, mercy, justice and faith. The greatest of these is love.

Prayer: "God, open my eyes to see the darkness surrounding me and how it has so enslaved me and others that we can no longer find joy in life. Help me understand that those whom I often call "enemy" are really your lost children to whom I am to reach out in love to help them through the dark night. Give me the strength to put on the whole armor of your armory and to stand up in

faith against the Evil One and snatch from his clutches those whom you call to new life in Christ. In Jesus' name, let me be light! Amen."

O God of Every Nation by St. Peter's Choir New York

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKYFjsDhP2Q>

Thy Strong Word Did Cleave the Darkness by Concordia University Chicago Wind Symphony

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2bhHosLHmI>

Thy Strong Word by Koine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZ5WtKCdvyo>

Rise Shine You People by St. Olaf Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDS6oj_X4Hk

Rise Shine You People (Sing along)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bnb8I0XLWek>

Lost in the Night Northern Lights Chorale

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxOB18YvU14>

Lost in the Night Concordia Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOunsOLf8dg>

O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth by Eamon Younis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpiKa9ptiKQ>

O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth and Sea by Mac Meador

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQYT1Rawoaw>

O Zion Haste by Ralph Carmichael

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lf3309HgRb4>

O Zion Haste by Prince George Wynah Episcopal Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Otmdb-afNJM>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, August 19, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #151

For this day, Psalm 150.

Praise the LORD. Praise **God** in his **sanctuary**; praise him in his mighty **heavens**.

2 Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing **greatness**.

3 Praise him with the sounding of the **trumpet**, praise him with the **harp** and **lyre**,

4 praise him with **timbrel** and **dancing**, praise him with the **strings** and **pipe**,

5 praise him with the clash of **cymbals**, praise him with resounding cymbals.

6 Let everything that has **breath** praise the LORD. Praise the LORD. (Ps. 150:1-6 NIV)

When I first started writing these devotions one hundred fifty-one devotions ago, I had little idea what would emerge. It began with **“One Day the World Changed.”** We were experiencing something unlike what any of us had ever seen. A global pandemic. We hardly knew what those words meant, much less how our lives would be changed. Our lives are still changing.

When our church first closed, I noticed our popular *“Christ in our Home”* Daily Devotionals were not only unable to be picked up easily, but also essentially *“out of date.”* Timeless messages notwithstanding, these were written before the pandemic, when *“it was all so different before everything changed.”*

It seemed that one thing I could do as pastor during our time of separation, was to offer my own version of *“St. Paul's In Your Home,”* with current reflections like **“The Azalea Festival is cancelled. Azaleas are not.”** (I thought about that one while walking the dogs on during a morning when the azaleas were blooming, and after the festival was cancelled).

Since those first days, I have pondered quite a variety of things, and shared accordingly. In this most unusual time of separation, it was my hope to feel connected to you, even though I had never in my life written this much this often. I am grateful for all your positive feedback.

What I hadn't anticipated in the first month was how important the music portion of these devotions would be. The first devotions had just few links to music. The later ones have had many as I have discovered more and more on YouTube. I also began to believe that even if a certain devotion may or may not have interest to the reader, listening to a good piece of music would always be welcomed. Because people have widely different preferences, it was important to offer a wide variety of pieces.

With all this in mind, today's reflection on **Psalm 150** needs to be mostly about the music, as it is about praising God through singing, dancing, and playing a variety of musical instruments. Enjoy.

Let us pray.

We are grateful, O God for all you do for us, and for creative opportunities on our part to let you know how much it means to us that you are our Lord and God. We praise you, gracious God for all your gifts to us, and your precious love that carries us through all these difficult days. May music continue to lift the spirits of all who seek you, and all who look to you for hope and healing. We continue to ask for your healing power to transform this hurting world. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

P.S. I was looking for music that strongly resonates with Psalm 150. Here are (more than) a few:

*Praise Him in the **Sanctuary*** by We are Called Performers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGa4KItbo2Q>

*Lord, Prepare Me to Be A **Sanctuary*** by Randy Rothwell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AU tvo23aZ7c>

*All **Heaven Declares*** by Martin Ball

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPkZAJA610k>

*Praise to the Lord **String** Quartet* by Sarah Joy

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1h_hqRIA8D0

*Ode to Joy **String** Quartet* by Stringsplace String Quartet

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03XCQCS_w4M

*How **Great Thou Art** on **Lyre*** by Jay n Steph Covers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPXW9V6Qm8>

*Above All (**Harpist** in India)* by Meagan Pandian

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZwzsZhTjW8>

*When the **Trumpet** of the Lord Shall Call* by The Hymn Club

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-jMSs6FqaI>

***Trumpets** Sound Angels Sing* by Second Sunday Jazz Vespers (yes a tenor sax not a trumpet)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o26NbbuW4TM>

*The **Trumpet** Sounds the Angels Sing* by Geneva Presbyterian Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-l-BqZoGfs>

*Lord of the **Dance*** by The Dubliners and Jim McCann

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjPGSFDy8wo>

*Lord of the **Dance*** by Heath Mount School Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YV15StV6TK0>

Earth and All Stars St Olaf and American Boys Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTIH8IAqGAQ>

Earth and All Stars Concordia University (listen for “loud crashing **cymbals**”)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2hP2DrUEIA>

Earth and All Stars by Tim Bode
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgHaEEzUwOA>

London City **Timbrels** Festival of Carols (never knew about the **Timbrels**)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahjS-tujlbY>

Psalm 150 in Original Hebrew by MIQUIDEM and Friends
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqmKsAtFyNc>

Breathe by Michael W. Smith
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEDcKZB7r2A>

Psalm 150 by Mormon Tabernacle Choir (the whole Psalm)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws9kr1k9c6A>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday August 19, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand # 152

The shift from Self to Thou. (Or Me to God.)

^{NIV} **Psalm 77:1** For the director of music. For Jeduthun. Of Asaph. A psalm.

I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.

² When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands, and I would not be comforted.

³ I remembered you, God, and I groaned; I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.

⁴ You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.

⁵ I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;

⁶ I remembered my songs in the night. My heart meditated and my spirit asked:

⁷ "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?"

⁸ Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time?

⁹ Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"

¹⁰ Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.

¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

¹² I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds."

¹³ Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as great as our God?

¹⁴ You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.

¹⁵ With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

¹⁶ The waters saw you, God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed.

¹⁷ The clouds poured down water, the heavens resounded with thunder; your arrows flashed back and forth.

¹⁸ Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked.

¹⁹ Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.

²⁰ You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. (Ps. 77:1-20 NIV)

This is one of the Psalms Walter Bruggeman is pondering in his current book, *"Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty"*. Bruggeman is a preeminent Old Testament scholar among both Christian and Jewish scholars.

In his detailed examination of Psalm 77, he notes how the Psalmist's life becomes reoriented as he moves from a preoccupation with self to a submission and reliance on God. It's a pretty stunning examination, but even without his background we can see a shift that takes place from the beginning of the Psalm to the end.

The beginning is focused on *"me, me, me;"* he inventories all those things related to his own self-concern; his relationship with God is all about himself. Bruggemann's discussion of the Hebrew language underscores this.

The Psalmist further wonders if God is *not* the God he always believed God to be. This may be a variation of “*how can a loving God permit this?*” But through further reflection, his one dimensional faith is challenged as he shifts to what we Christians recognize (from our New Testament perspective) to losing life so we can gain it (Mark 8:35).

The less the Psalmist thinks about himself and the more he thinks about God, the more he recognizes a whole new context for his faith. He can no longer conclude (or wonder if) God does not care (v.6). Instead, his faith submits to God who will be God, and who has already done wondrous things, asking only that we continue to trust him.

This is a very incomplete summary, but what follows is another awesome prayer written by Bruggemann that puts this whole Psalm into perspective. I invite you to pray along:

“You, holy, faithful, merciful God,
have called us into being,
given us names, faces, and vocations, and
we live them out in freedom.

In our freedom, we notice that only sometimes,
that
we cannot cope with all that come at us,
we cannot finally outflank the forces that
address us, and
we cannot by ourselves deal with the grief,
trouble, and anger that well up in us.

After our imagined autonomy,
we gladly turn back to you.
After we have said “I” for a very long time,
we fall back to “Thou”;
we utter the “Thou” who inhabits our
memories,
memories of rescue, healing, and
forgiveness;

we utter the “thou” who occupies or best
hopes,
as we hope for peace, wellbeing, and justice
in the world.

We move back into faithful dialogue with you:
we say “thou” as we thank and praise you
we say “I” as we act out our freedom and
accept our responsibility.

Just now, in the face of the virus, we find our
best “I” without force,
and so we say “thou,”
“thou” in power,
“thou” in mercy,
“thou in faithfulness,
finally “Thou”!

We remember all your wonders, and then, in gladness,
we remember who we are as yours;
we recover our gratitude, our hope,
our resolve, and our confidence. Amen.”

P.S. I found several songs based on Psalm 77 (imagine that), and a few more that resonate with
the theme. Enjoy.

Psalm 77 (I Will Remember) Kenwood Music
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNi28gReLf4>

Our Song in the Night (Psalm 77) by St. Bartholomew’s Nashville
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3xiSNNZNVE>

Psalm 77 by Sons of Korah
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zatMxbhWoi0>

Lament (Psalm 77) by Seth from Fellowship Worship
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yw9Fp6XWq7w>

We Remember by Marty Haugen
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rbpaByg-Gg>

Great God of Wonders by Metropolitan Tabernacle, London
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBx1UoDkLI>

Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken by John Wesley Slider
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_CHF4gRyfl

I Need You Lord by Napakou Youth
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91ntArO4UB8>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, August 21 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #153

The Prophetic Vision of Monty Python (John Cleese, actually)

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:43-45 NIV)

It was nearly forty years ago that humorist John Cleese of comedy troupe Monty Python fame did a "public service" announcement describing the advantages of extremism. It was meant to bring a smile to our faces, but actually was extremely insightful. It reminds us that extremism isn't new, though we have been feeling it a lot again these days.

As with many things, the full clip is on YouTube, and you can link to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLNhPMQnWu4>

Here are a few of Cleese's main insights:

According to John Cleese, "The biggest advantage of extremism is that it makes you feel good because it provides you with enemies. Let me explain: the great thing about having enemies is that you can pretend that all the badness in the whole world is in your enemies and all the goodness in the whole world is in you. Attractive isn't it?"

So, if you have a lot of anger and resentment in you anyway, and you therefore enjoy abusing people, then you can pretend you're only doing it because these enemies of yours are such very bad persons. And if it wasn't for them you'd actually be good-natured, courteous, and rational all the time.

Once you're armed with your super list of enemies, you can be as nasty as you like and feel that your behavior is morally justified. So, you can strut around abusing people and telling them you can eat them for breakfast and still think of yourself as a champion of the truth, a fighter for the greater good and not the rather sad paranoid schizoid that you really are."

In the full clip, like a great prophet of old, (except in a humorous facetious way), Cleese exposes the righteousness (self-righteousness?) of extremism on both left and right.

Are you noticing, like me, that people at extreme ends of the political (and religious) spectrum act as if they are exempted from the very clear words of Jesus about loving enemies? It sure seems true these days that extremism seeks to invent enemies so each side can pretend all the badness in the world is on account of "them," and all the goodness of the world is in "us." It matters not what you say (or even feel) about someone because they are the enemy.

When we see this before elections, we usually dismiss it as just “politics,” which are inherently nasty. But with serious problems in our world these days, such extreme behaviors serve only to demonize each other with the result that harmonious or peaceful pathways forward cannot be accomplished.

In the Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, extreme self-serving behavior is constantly being called out. Jesus was most clear about this, and his vision of the Kingdom of God is one where “enemies” are loved and where mutual forgiveness is asked and received. The sceptics (and perhaps extremists) will argue Jesus lost the battle to his enemies that, if Lord, he should have won. People of faith will see Jesus call to love our enemies as victory, and the only hope for peace we have. Dying on the cross, Jesus demonstrated his commitment to love unconditionally at all costs.

Let us pray.

We confess it is our human nature to behave more as described by John Cleese, and less as described by Jesus. We pray for insights, even lighthearted ones, that deepen our understandings about ourselves and heighten our need for you. We pray for all who are caught up in extremism, and especially when that happens among those who say they want to follow your example. Keep reminding us that we are all your children. Help us better understand each other before we demonize each other. Help us recognize you at the core of our being so we might be centered and focused in bringing peace and reconciliation to all who are estranged. We pray in Jesus love. Amen.

Take My Life by Norton Hall Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2zt7PzHPqk>

Take My Life by Christ Tomlin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0Byp7aK2DA>

Take My Life and Let It Be by Michigan Lutheran Seminary Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrOfhCy6aVg>

Spirit of the Living God by Audrey Assad

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fylslaNsj5o>

Lighten our Darkness by Baylor A Capella Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCnnmggxSuk>

Lighten our Darkness by Sheila Hamil

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbB-G0qCgRo>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday August 24, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #154

Revisiting the "Six Word Stories."

"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." (Matt. 2:18 NRS)

For sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn.

During Lent in 2014 I had a rare opportunity to deliver all five weekly meditations. I had recently read about Ernest Hemingway's famous wager that he could not write a six word story. He won that wager with those six words written above.

Could I do the same I wondered (however imperfectly), and from other six word stories, offer a meditation. Hemingway's six-word story begged for deeper reflection. I began with "For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn" and composed four more. Here they are:

2. **Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.**
3. **Broke Neck. Quality of Life Improved.**
4. **Alzheimer's? I forgot. Does God remember?**
5. **Atheist Dies. Goes to Heaven. Oops.**

Someone recently reminded me of these stories and asked if I might revisit them again. That's what we shall do with this week's devotions. I will offer a little introduction on this main page, along with the prayer and music links, and attach the original Lenten meditation. If you have trouble opening the attachment, send me an email at mopgrand@gmail.com and I will send it another way.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, sometimes with few words much can be conveyed. Other times, we need more to get deeper into each other's stories. Bless all our stories, and especially our sacred stories from scripture that reveal your steadfast love and faithfulness. Bless us in all our reading, pondering, and praying. We look hope and encouragement as we continue to walk with your and each other. Amen.

What a Friend We Have in Jesus Celtic Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pi1-5kmbkyQ>

What a Friend We Have in Jesus by THENBA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLb96KDKjys>

Precious Lord Take My Hand by dsasil

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHBzI_Jb-o4

Precious Lord Take My Hand by Elvis Presley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsiq87InDE8>

There is a Balm in Gilead by Deborah Liv Johnson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BN9JALQRMb0>

There is a Balm in Gilead by Concordia Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BN9JALQRMb0>

My Faith Looks Up to Thee by Vagle Brothers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5g-Att0bmE>

My Faith Looks Up to Thee by Christian Hymns

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9_75YztLT4

My Faith Looks Up to Thee First Plymouth Lincoln NE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d63IZQI8DJ4>

Six Word Stories: Reflecting God's Mercy

Lenten Service Mediation St. Paul's Lutheran Church Wilmington, NC

Wednesday, March 12, 2014

Pastor Mark Opgrand

For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.

It is said that this was Ernest Hemingway's response to a wager that he could not write a story using just six words. I only learned about this story recently... actually before I thought about what we might do this Lent.

I just kept thinking about this story. In some ways, it sounds like it might be just the title of a story, and yet in those six words alone... there is a story. I realize it requires some interpretation, and it leaves itself open to multiple interpretations.

The story could be something simple ... like someone purchased baby shoes that were too small and they were unable to return them to the store. Of course, with Hemingway, it is unlikely that this is really the story.

More likely, the story is about loss... maybe the baby died, or was born without feet... One thing we do know... is that with new parents, especially, those first pair of baby shoes are pretty special. Sometimes they get saved, even bronzed, reminders of the joy of watching the baby grow.

But these shoes were not worn. Something happened. Now my intent here is not to try to be a Literature professor and explore all the possibilities of what might have happened.

Rather..... as someone like you...that is, someone who ... (like you) has experienced loss in deeply personal ways, what I feel ... when I hear those six words.... is grief... grief for the parents whose child will not be wearing those first baby shoes

I think about parents who have lost their infant children. I think about the story in scripture about the mad King Herod murdering all those infants and children because one of them might be a threat to his rule I think of that chilling verse in Matthew which describes the pain of the surviving parents:

¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." (Mat 2:16-18 NRS)

And I remember how we are called as people of faith to model our lives after the one who carries all our grief.... all our sorrows... all our pain. Jesus. By itself, this six word story may not reflect God's mercy.

But it is a story that deeply connects with our own human experience... and our need for hope and consolation. Mercy comes ... when we care for each other in the name of Christ... and when we ... like Jesus ... reach out to those in need and offer Christ-like love.

This coming Sunday we will be lifting up one of our caring ministries here at St. Paul's... Stephen Ministry. It is not the only ministry here at St. Paul's....where caring is expressed...but it is a particularly intentional ministry of caring... and healing...one that looks for those who may be hurting.. or those who have experienced grief and loss ... and then... offers help from those who are trained in a mercy of listening.

You don't need to be trained to show mercy, of course... or to be able to listen. I believe, however, that all our Stephen Leaders and Ministers will acknowledge that their training has helped them be more effective listeners.. and ... be better able to recognize ... when someone is experiencing grief and loss.

For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.

So what, then, can any of us do when we become aware ...that someone has experienced grief and loss? Good listening is very important, and discerning when and how ... to share a comforting word. I say when and how ... because there are times in the grief process when certain words will not be helpful... (for example) in the death and loss of a baby ... it will not be helpful to say to a grieving mother

"Oh, it was God's will."

Or, "Well, you and your husband can just try again."

or.... say "it will be okay" even when (in faith) you believe it will.

Reflecting God's mercy in this circumstance.... simply means being with them in their grief...asking God's help and support through the grief and loss.. and trusting in God's promises.

One of God's good promises is reflected in 1 Thessalonians 4: where Paul writes:

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. (1Th 4:13-14 NRS)

We cling to that hope. We cling to that mercy. And we cling to the grace and mercy reflected in that promise... that is what enables us to hold close... someone... who has experienced grief and loss.

For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.

Not a lot of words need to be said. Especially at first... when it is most important just to be there... and in the name of Jesus Christ... to care.

Trust that God is with you... and will bring forth the right words at the right time. And in the end, just as is promised in Revelation...there will be healing ... healing for all who have suffered... for all who have grieved... for all who have experienced loss.

For in the end, because of Jesus... his death... and his resurrection.. God himself (as it is written) will be with [us]; ⁴ [God] will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.

As we care in the name of Jesus Christ.... there is more to the story.

Maybe another story. A story of grace and mercy... a story not only about loss, but also gain.

It might be this. **For free. Angel's wings. Finally worn. Amen.**

In these weeks ahead, I invite you, using scratch paper or these printed pieces...to think about and write your own six word stories...

You don't have to be a Hemingway, for all our stories belong to God... We'll be tacking them on a cross... reminding us that all our stories, smuggles, hurts, and joys are carried to the cross by Jesus, who shows us love and mercy ... mercy worth reflecting upon.

Peace be with you.

Six Word Stories Revisited. Part 2.

Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.

[Jesus] answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matt. 19:4-6 NRS)

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell-- and great was its fall!" (Matt. 7:24-27 NRS)

We continue our second of five six-word stories. Here's where we are:

1. For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn.
- 2. Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.**
3. Broke Neck. Quality of Life Improved.
4. Alzheimer's? I forgot. Does God remember?
5. Atheist Dies. Goes to Heaven. Oops.

As a pastor who loves doing weddings in many settings, moving to Wilmington has afforded many locations beyond the church sanctuary. Prior to moving here, I remember seeing photos of beach weddings and thinking it sure would be enjoyable to preside in that beautiful setting.

I have since discovered there are multiple risks with beach weddings. I remember one on the Crystal Pier where everyone faced me and I faced a big thunderstorm blowing our way. No one know why I started speaking so fast until we finished with moments to spare before a downpour.

I remember facing such a strong wind that no one could hardly hear a thing beyond about ten feet. Speaking as loud as I could, I was a bit like the bride and groom were being yelled at. Such are the risks, but the photos are precious and usually they work out (but always have a plan B when rain is predicted).

Today's meditation and six-word story is a story about my experience with the emerging popular "sand ceremony" at a beach wedding. This has become a popular alternative to "lighting a unity

candle.” (Just try that with a strong beach or even moderate beach wind.) For reasons I’ll explain, I had a theological problem with that ceremony that I realized could be fixed with a “solid” interpretation of the gospel. Enjoy.

Let us pray.

We remember families today, not just husbands and wives, but children and pets too. We pray for firm foundations upon which families are built. Be that foundation, Lord Jesus, and strengthen us through all storms of life that we may be solid and secure in your promises. Bless those who suffer today, and all who need your strength to persevere and thrive. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Beach Wedding Song by One Word, Solomon Islands (not religious, but sweet and hopeful and “beachy”)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lKtK5OrsDb0>

We are Builders for the Lord by One Word (they do songs of faith, too!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pv7qOULouRo>

Rock of Ages Cleft for Me SE Samonte

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM7gt_cSxiw

Rock of Ages by Norton Hall Band

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKRdhBK_fts

Built on a Rock the Church Doth Stand by Lutheran Quartet

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ah4NDHjVf1M>

Built on a Rock the Church Doth Stand National Lutheran Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wa_0IONyMbM

and remember this?.... *The Wise Man Built His House...*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eu5bBDRpzPM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HVdbULOVHA>

...and of course *On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand* (nice “beachy” version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XBXqL Befg>

The Six Word Story for the Midweek Lenten Worship March 17, 2014 Meditation by Pastor Mark Opgrand

Six Word Stories: Reflecting God’s Mercy

Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.

Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away. I don't know how many years ago unity candles were first added to wedding services. This was not part of ancient wedding liturgies or much of modern-day wedding ceremonies.

But someone came up with the idea (my theory is "candle makers") that a wonderful addition to the exchange of vows and exchange of rings is the "lighting of a unity candle". Two candles representing bride and groom come together to light a third larger candle... a unity candle representing their new life together.

However, it didn't take long to realize that "Unity Candles" weren't going to work if you are having an outdoor wedding... especially one at the beach. I have been unable to determine who first came up with the idea of a "sand ceremony" as part of a beach wedding, but several years ago a couple requested it, and I did it. Actually, I did it for two beach weddings.

If you don't know what I'm talking about in terms of sand ceremony, but here is a description you can find on multiple websites:

UNITY SAND CEREMONY

After the minister reads the statement below, pour two containers of sand into a third, wide-mouthed container simultaneously:

The minister says:

Groom's Name and Bride's name , today you join your separate lives together. The two separate bottles of sand symbolize your separate lives, separate families and separate sets of friends. They represent all that you are and all that you'll ever be as an individual.

They also represent your lives before today. As these two containers of sand are poured into the third container, the individual containers of sand will no longer exist, but will be joined together as one. Just as these grains of sand can never be separated and poured again into the individual containers, so will your marriage be.

End of description. The intent, of course, is to offer a beautiful visual reminder in this wonderful beach setting, before the vast ocean beside us, and surrounded by family and friends, that a real joining has taken place here.

So *Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away...* could be all about a couple in love forever joining themselves to each other and swept away with love... living happily ever after.

Or not.

It was the third time when I was asked to include the sand ceremony that I really began to feel strongly... that something is terribly wrong with this whole image. I “get” the wonderful idea of it... this special joining together this never being the same again ...never being able to go back to the way you were before...

I understand all that... But my goodness... people! Where on earth do you live? This might play in Iowa where there is no ocean... or sand. But have you never experienced a hurricane? or a nor'easter? Have you never heard of beach erosion?

Do you think “Swept Away” only refers to being ... in love? Did you never learn that old Sunday School song? (singing) The wise man built his house upon the rock:

Sing along with me if you remember it (this will be tonight’s bonus hymn...show me the motions)

*The wise man built his house upon the rock:
The wise man built his house upon the rock:
and the rains came a tumblin’ down.*

*And the rains came down and the floods came up...
the rains came down and the floods came up...
the rains came down and the floods came up...
and the house on the rock stood firm.*

... and what was verse two?

*The foolish man built his house upon the sand
the foolish man built his house upon the sand
the foolish man built his house upon the sand
and the rains came a tumbling down.*

*And the rains came down and the floods came up...
the rains came down and the floods came up...
the rains came down and the floods came up...
and the house on the sand went splat.*

Therefore ... if you are a couple getting married on the beach, are you sure you want to build your house... that is, your life together... upon this sand... ceremony?

It's a great dreamy image... as long as nothing bad happens... As long as things are calm... and life is trouble free ... as long as a crisis never blows your way...but things happen... things happen that erode marriages... things happen to cause lives to come apart... and no amount of dreamy recollecting of that beautiful intermingling sand image of our lives forever joined ... blah blah blah ...is going to keep this marriage intact.

And that's why ... having this sand ceremony as part of a Beach wedding (or church wedding) ... was just not working for me.... UNTIL.... and I have to say it was nothing short ... of a revelation ...UNTIL (by the mercy of God) I realized... we have to have a rock at the base of the sand...

The only way this risky image of putting two lives together works...is if... we have a **rock** at the base... reminding this new husband and this new wife... and all the witnesses... that at the base of this marriage... at the heart of the marriage... is the **rock of ages**... Jesus Christ our Lord...

Just as we declare ... as we sing that ancient and yet always powerful hymn.... *"On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand."*

There is mercy in this rock. There is mercy in God's promise to a young couple that God will be with them through whatever storms of life come their way. There is mercy in Jesus being the base.... the foundation... the cornerstone... upon which all our lives are built. And that is forever.... no matter what would sweep us away.

Beach wedding. Sand ceremony. Swept away.

That's a story that may not wash precisely because it surely will wash... away. So maybe there needs to be a sequel.... or maybe another six-word story, still relational.... but with a different twist... more reflecting God's mercy.

Maybe this one:

In our lives, Jesus rocks. Amen.

For as it is written:

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph 2:19-22 NRS)

Amen.

Six Word Stories Revisited, Part 3.

Broken Neck. Quality of Life Improved.

9 Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also.

10 For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

11 I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me.

12 I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel.

13 For I hear the whispering of many-- terror all around!-- as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.

14 But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God."

(Ps. 31:9-14 NRS)

We continue our third of five six word stories. Here's where we are:

1. For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn.
2. Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.
- 3. Broken Neck. Quality of Life Improved.**
4. Alzheimer's? I forgot. Does God remember?
5. Atheist Dies. Goes to Heaven. Oops.

As I said at the beginning of the attached meditation, I don't know if Hemingway had a certain family in mind when he composed "*For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn.*" I had several couples in mind when I composed "*Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.*" Today's meditation is based on my experience with just one person, and it is deeply personal. It is also deeply difficult. But such experiences touch us in ways that make a difference in how we look at faith and life. May God affect you as you read and reflect on "**Broken Neck. Quality of Life Improved.**"

Let us pray.

We pray especially for all those whose lives have been altered through tragic accidents. For those who suffer and their caretakers. Thank you for those moments of grace through tragedy that remind us of your presence and for all your promises of peace at the last. In Jesus Name. Amen.

Let Us Ever Walk With Jesus by First Plymouth Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47SdcUhTQbA>

Psalm 31 (You Are My Strength) by Karl Kohlhasse
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTIPRjK7Wpo>

Father, I Put My Life In Your Hands (Psalm 31) by John Michael Talbot
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw-gZptWvrc>

Lord of all Hopefulness by St. Albans
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8mti7VL3gg>

Lord of All Hopefulness by Peter Anderson
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-D_aT8CXyc

We Walk by Faith by Marty Haugen
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hk_7EUvww8

The Six Word Story for the Midweek Lenten Services:

Six Word Stories: Reflecting God's Mercy

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, March 26, 2014

Pastor Mark Opgrand

Broken Neck. Quality of Life Improved.

This is the third of the six word stories. The first was Hemingway's: **For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn.** The second was mine. **Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.**

I don't know if Hemingway had specific persons in mind when we did his little story. Last week I actually had a specific couple in mind with

Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.

That's because I was about to do a wedding at Wrightsville Beach on Saturday, and it included a sand ceremony. It also had a rock at the base of the container of blended sand because this couple "got it." That is, they understood that their hope was built on Christ: They understood that... *"On Christ, the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand."*

Tonight's story takes us a different direction because it is so linked to a very specific true story. **Broke Neck. Quality of Life Improved.** And here is how I need to tell the rest of the story: More than thirty-three years had passed ... since the last time John Averitt von Oesen, Jr. had been in St. Paul's church.

Most of that had to do with the accident thirty-three years earlier ... falling eight feet off a banister at a home he was visiting and breaking his neck at C-4. That left him paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of his life. In one second, his life was changed forever.

For the rest of his life, John was either in bed or in a wheelchair. He required constant care from his devoted parents or caregivers, and because of that, was able to stay at home for over 25 years.

Because he had slight mobility in one hand... (during many but not all of those years) he was able to use a personal computer and a motorized wheelchair. But in time (and as his parents aged) and was constantly battling health issues due to complications from his injury he needed to have skilled nursing care in a nursing home.

The last time John left the nursing home was to come to St. Paul's for his father's funeral. His father, John Averitt von Oesen, Sr. died of a sudden heart attack at age 85 on January 12 of this year. He was buried January 16. On that day the church was filled. John Averitt Sr. was well known as a leader in this church, in Burgaw where he had been a car dealer for many years; at Rotary Club, where he had perfect attendance for thirty three years...and at the Hanover Seaside Club where he had been Secretary Treasurer or president for over fifty years.

While there was sadness in his sudden death, there was a lot to celebrate in his distinguished life. I delivered the sermon for that funeral ... and we had a lot to say about John Averitt von Oesen's Sr.'s wonderful and blessed life.

But then ... just eleven days later, on a Thursday morning, John Averitt von Oesen, Jr. didn't wake up. But this time ... there would not be a large funeral in the church. The family had just been together, at this big public event and it would have been just too hard for the family. So we had a simple graveside service ... right at the same location in Oakdale Cemetery where we gathered just two weeks earlier.

With John Sr., ... two weeks earlier... there was so much to say... who had such a full distinguished life. So what can you say about someone who for thirty-three years was bed ridden...unable to move ... unable to do any of those things we so regularly take for granted?

I remember so often waking up those mornings after I had visited John the day before... thinking about him... laying in bed without moving ... thinking about what it would be like ... if this was it...if I was unable to move or do anything for myself...and have it be this way day after day after day and year after year after year...

When John, Sr. died, there was so much to say... When John Jr. died, I really didn't know what to say. It was talking to one of his caregivers that changed that. She said something about her relationship with John that made me realize something... and I began the sermon at the graveside service this way:

Here's what I said:

"There is an expression people use when evaluating the life of someone who is chronically or critically ill or maybe just coming to the end of their natural life. That expression is called "quality of life."

It is often measured by comparing what a person is now able to do when compared to what they

had been able to do when they were healthy. By that measure, John's quality of life took a terrible turn when he fell from that banister on May 1, 1980, leaving him severely disabled for the next 33 years.

And one of the things we all have regretted these past 33 years is how terribly difficult John's life has been... I know I don't need to say a lot about this. His was a heartbreakingly difficult life. But I do need to say this: Even while John's quality of life was arguable poor by every earthly standard, our quality of life was vastly improved... because of him."

That's how I began... and I don't know exactly how many people were standing around John's grave with me when I said this, but those who were there knew... I was absolutely speaking the truth when I said this!

Because of John, our quality of life improved. When John broke his neck, our quality of life improved. That's because we who were privileged to know John, or care for him... even in small measure were able to experience someone with such a great mind and a great heart... and we were blessed ... on account of this.

The mercy in all this was the opportunity to learn something about our own ability to care. With John, this wasn't a large circle... that is those whose quality of life improved because of him.

He didn't have his own business...(like his father); he wasn't active in church; he didn't have perfect attendance or any attendance in a rotary club ... he wasn't president or secretary treasurer of anything.

And maybe not that many people really knew how brilliant he was...how he absorbed so much knowledge about so many things... especially world history... and family histories...but those who were blessed to know him... and yes, our quality of life improved.

And for those who had that opportunity, they would be changed ... they would discover an inner compassion like his mother Marilyn, who said, in all humility and honesty... that *"caring for John was not a burden."*

John's sister Anna Jane told me that one thing that because of "Uncle" John, her three children were never afraid of people with disabilities... some people are afraid, you know... afraid even to look at someone who is handicapped.

Now here I don't want anyone to think, as we reflect on this story that I am trying to make John's less tragic than it was... You cannot look at John's life and ever say it was a blessing for him that this happened.

For all these years, everyone who loved John has had to deal with the sadness of what might have been with John's life... if only... He went to college and played soccer. He was active, athletic, intelligent... with a bright future ahead of him.

Instead, it is Psalm 31 that resonates with this story... even though outwardly John never complained... and was always so appreciative of those who cared for him... but still I think of John when I read...

⁹ Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. ¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

But I also think of this part of the Psalm, too... because John remained a person of faith. *¹⁴ But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God." ¹⁵ My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. ¹⁶ Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.*

Likewise I think of the other resonating scripture... about the fragility of life... with that image of clay jars.. and with that faithful expression that we do not lose heart.

So that's our story.

Broken neck. Quality of life improved.

Reflecting on this, it would be extremely difficult to make the case that John's quality of life improved. If you think so, then tomorrow morning when you wake up, keep laying there and don't move a muscle and then try to imagine if this was it... today and tomorrow and next month and next year...

And that's why, in the end, we trust in God and cling to God's ultimate mercy ...a mercy that involves ...after hanging on... letting go...for John, letting go of this constrained poor quality of life... for his promised high quality of eternal life...and for everyone who loved John... to let go as well.

This includes especially those whose own quality of life improved through their love for John. I do not believe there was one person at that funeral... who selfishly wished John would remain on this earth even one more day. This is what it means to be people of faith... to love well... as we have been called...and then... let go... trusting in God's mercy.

It is that same mercy that draws us forward no matter what happens in our own lives... and no matter what happens to those whom we love.

Broken neck. Quality of life improved.

So is there another story here?

I don't know... or maybe this one. **When broken. God heals. Eternally.** Amen.

Six Word Stories Revisited, Part 4.

Alzheimer's? I forgot. Does God Remember?

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Lk. 23:42-43 NRS)

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." 15 Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. (Isa. 49:14-15 NRS)

We continue our fourth of five six word stories. Here's where we are:

1. For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn.
2. Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.
3. Broken Neck. Quality of Life Improved.
4. **Alzheimer's? I forgot. Does God remember?**
5. Atheist Dies. Goes to Heaven. Oops.

In an earlier devotion (#140) I pondered if it were preferable to have a sound mind and failing body or failing mind and sound body. For those who have lived with the ravages of dementia, it will always be preferable to keep your sound mind as long as possible, even with a failing body.

With this story I reflect on this terrible disease from my own personal experience, particularly with my Father-in-law Willard Thysell and my own father Arnold Opgrand. But even though this are my stories, those of us who live with this or through this know so well these are shared stories.

A theological question driving this meditation has been our struggle with someone we love losing themselves. What happens to their relationship with God when they no longer know themselves, much less God? How do we make peace with this kind of devastating loss? Does this story have a happy ending? We look to the mercy of God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

We remember today all those who have lost or are losing loved ones to dementia. And we pray as well, for those suffering from dementia, particularly those in the early stages where they are still aware that things are slipping away. We pray for mercy, O God, and hope in all your promises that even when we forget, you forget us not. Bless all who look to you today for hope and healing, in Jesus name. Amen.

Jesus Loves Me This I Know by Julie Gaulke
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LONkzLLNPmA>

Jesus Loves Me This I know by Vagle Brothers
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD1_CPqJusg

Jesus Remember Me by Taize
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6tVReXsioM>

We Remember How You Loved Us by Marty Haugen
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6_KModMCtg

We Remember by Alvin Ang
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6_KModMCtg

Remember and Rejoice by Sheree Wright
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxLBHmjqux8>

You Will Never Be Forgotten by Jessica Andrews
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9g35fMP8u0>

The Six Word Story for the **Midweek Lenten Series:**

Six Word Stories: Reflecting God's Mercy

April 2, 2014 by Pastor Mark Opgrand

Alzheimer's? I forgot. Does God remember?

Alzheimer's has become a word like *Kleenex* or *Xerox*. There was a time when all tissues were called *Kleenex* and all Photocopiers were called *Xeroxes*. But even though there are many forms of dementia, what is most dreaded about Alzheimer's or any forms of dementia is memory loss.

People change. They don't know who you are... as things advance, they don't know who they are. It is a terrible disease, one in which a person so dies little by little, that by the time they are fully gone, it is only a relief for those who love them... the grieving has already gone on for a long time.

So there are many stories in this story, and everyone has their own true stories about loved ones they have known who have changed this way. I remember my father in law Willard Thysell. When I first moved to Wilmington in 1995 years ago, I came with my wife Carol for her job at UNCW, so I was without call for almost two years.

During that first year I went up to Minnesota to give Dorris, my mother-in-law, some help with Willard. Willard and I did great together (visiting those six weeks was a blessing for us all.

With Alzheimer's, as you know, it never gets better... and some months later, an unusual terrible time happened with Willard. Each day or night for long periods he did not recognize Dorris. "*Where's Dorris?*" he would say over and over. "*What have you done with her? You have to get out of here.*"

The sad part is that he knew so many other people, including his children, but not Dorris. Had he forgotten they were old? Did he not know this older woman? At least in these moments Dorris learned that Willard was completely faithful to her.

One time at night he awakened to find Dorris in his bed, and panicked at this unknown woman. "Oh, no. What are you doing here? You've got to get out of here. What if Dorris finds you here?"

It really wore Dorris out, though, especially when after hours of "*Where's Dorris, where's Dorris?*" it it was like a light switched on. Then Willard *saw* her, *knew* her... and then would say, "*Dorris, where have you been? I've been looking for you all day.*" She had never been out of his sight.

Everyone has their stories. A friend of mine in Indiana told of his mother, who loved photos of her children and grandchildren. She had them lined up in a display case. He started noticing that they began to disappear... little by little... one by one...in progression... starting with the grandbabies, then grandchildren, then children...youngest first. As she forgot them, she started throwing them away. Why did she have photos of people she didn't know?

We all have our stories.

My father died five years ago this month, after maybe seven years after being diagnosed. It was my last two visits I remember so vividly. Six years ago he was finally placed in a memory care unit. My mother tried to prepare me that he might not know me this time.

That's how it goes, you know. He had a doctor's appointment, which happened the day of my arrival, so I went with my mom to pick him up. He was sitting quietly inside near the receptionist's desk when my mom and I entered the building.

My mom went to the receptionist and I went over to my dad. We just looked at each other. Nothing there. But something clicked when he overheard my mom mention to the receptionist, "This is my son."

My dad, who was so frail that he could barely stand up without help, looked at me, saw me, knew me, and he leapt out of that chair saying, "*Sonny?*" He hadn't called me that since I was a little boy... and he put his arms around me ...and we wept.

Later that week, we were walking... my dad in the middle holding him secure, with my mother on one side and me on there. He turned to her and said, "*This is our baby.*" Oh, such tender mercies.

And of course, I remember my dad when he was the head of corporate income taxes at a large corporation... a brilliant accountant... the one who, when groups went out to dinner could divide the checks in his head, calculating taxes and tips...and who now could not add seven and six.

Last year we did a book study of a novel called *Still Alice*, by written by a neuropsychologist with extensive research into patents with Alzheimer's. The book is written first person about a person in her fifties with early onset Alzheimer's.

The value of the story is that it gets us thinking about what the experience might be like from the perspective of one is coming into an awareness of what is going on. In a lot of ways, it is a horror story, especially for any of us who have the family genes that suggest we might be facing this in the years ahead. If or when...that happens, this six-word story will become very real.

Alzheimer's. I forgot. Does God remember?

The nature of the disease is forgetting... first the little things... and then the big things... when it is the big things... it is like we are losing ourselves... There is some awareness at first... and then... I have often wondered if it is like dreaming... but really being awake. You know how in dreams we can be pretty much anywhere... but a lot of times in a dream we are trying so hard to figure out where we are or where we are supposed to go.

I have had a lot of recurring dreams about being back in college, trying to find a dorm room, or being at a conference... or going back to Holden Village except it's not the way it is supposed to be. Sometimes in a dream it is like I am half watching a movie... and half being in it but now knowing who I am. I wonder if dementia is like this.

We just cannot remember. So what happens to us when, in real life we lose ourselves... when we are no longer who we were because the memories that make us who we are... are gone? And even

if we believe in the resurrection, what can we bring of ourselves when we cannot remember who we are... or maybe even... who God is?

I remember struggling with this first... a long time ago... but not before computers. It was actually computer technology that gave me an analogy that helped. I thought about hard drives. How they store information... pictures... letters... documents... and how terrible it is... when they crash... or when they get corrupted... or when data gets lost.

Well, if we were smart before this happens, what did we do? We backed it up to another hard drive... or these days... to a server in the cloud. Why? So we would not lose what we had.

I think if Jesus had been walking around today with his disciples, he would have worked this image into a parable. *"The Parable of the Crashed Hard Drive"* ... with the joy of course in realizing everything is backed up with God. Whoever we are... whatever we have done... all this is "backed up" in God's memory.

The Bible has references God's memory quite often. Especially when the plea is for God not to remember our sins or something that we are not proud of. So here too, how wonderful it is to imagine that God erases our sins from what is backed up, so that when we are all made new it is without the former things for which we were so ashamed.

The other side, of course, is to work hard in this life to build good memories that God can remember... like being faithful in prayer, serving and worshipping God, loving our neighbor as ourselves.. forgiving and being forgiven. and most of all, putting our lives completely in God's hands ...trusting that God will not only remember us... but also that God will be our memory when our memory fails.

I believe there is a lot of support for this trust in the scriptures. Paul expresses it this way: *"⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ"*. (Phi 1:3-6 NRS)

The author of Hebrews expresses it this way:¹⁷ [God] also adds, *"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."* **Hebrews 10:17**

Jesus himself promises to remember the thief on the cross who asks for mercy... So is there another six word story here, reflecting God's mercy? Of course. It could be this.

I remember you. With love. God.

Amen.

Our hymn is offered in memory of my dad, not only because it was his favorite song, but it was the one he remembered to his dying day. On that day, he had been under hospice care and was unresponsive for four days. Not a word. Not a look. Not a squeeze. Nothing.

It was my uncle who suggested we sing “*Jesus Loves Me*,” as we were standing around the bed. As we sang, I looked at my dad’s face... and lo... his lips were moving... in his own way...the best he could... he was singing along with us... trusting in God’s grace and mercy all the way to the end.

Most of us know verse one, and the chorus. But here, too, there is a more to the story. Pay close attention to the lesser-known verses as we sing, verses well worth remembering.

Amen.

Jesus Loves Me!

- 1 Jesus loves me! this I know,
for the Bible tells me so;
little ones to him belong,
they are weak, but he is strong.

Refrain

Yes, Jesus loves me,
yes, Jesus loves me,
yes, Jesus loves me,
the Bible tells me so.

- 2 Jesus loves me! he who died
heaven's gates to open wide;
he will wash away my sin,
let his little child come in. *Refrain*
- 3 Jesus loves me! he will stay
close beside me all the way;
when at last I come to die,
he will take me home on high. *Refrain*

Text: Anna B. Warner, 1820-1915, alt.

Atheist Dies. Goes to Heaven. Oops.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

(1 Thess. 4:13-14 NRS)

We conclude our fifth of five six-word stories. Here's where we are:

1. For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn.
2. Beach Wedding. Sand Ceremony. Swept Away.
3. Broken Neck. Quality of Life Improved.
4. Alzheimer's? I forgot. Does God remember?
5. **Atheist Dies. Goes to Heaven. Oops.**

For many years I have imagined that everyone will believe... eventually. I believe that it shall come to pass that, beyond a shadow of doubt, all will know Jesus is Lord. I look to the strong statement in Philippians 2:10-11 where it is written, *"at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

For some, it may take dying to acknowledge this, which is what prompted the answer to the following question, *"So what is the first thing an atheist says after he dies and he meets Jesus?"*

The answer is.... *"Oops."*

Today's attached meditation reflects on this six word story. **Atheist dies. Goes to Heaven. Oops.**

Let us pray.

Gracious God, you have given us ample opportunity to hear your gospel and trust in your amazing grace. We give thanks for the gift of faith, and for being able live our lives entrusted to you. Help us never take believing for granted. At the same time we pray for your children who do not know you, or believe in you. We pray for those who put their faith in something else. We grieve those who reject the gospel and pray in your mercy that it is never too late for them. We trust you, in this, Lord Jesus, and give thanks thank that you are Lord and not us. Be merciful to us sinners... all of us sinners, that we might experience forgiveness and new life. Bless those who call upon you today, and their loved ones. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Now You Belong to Heaven Mari Olsen
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFjAXHmjxQk>

Heaven's Now My Home by Libby Allen
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdUY_iVmhVI

When I Get Where I'm Going by Dolly Parton and Brad Paisley
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbFz2F_YYzI

Someday We Will Be In Heaven by Free Believers Gospel Songs
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tXmdtIYJ1g>

Amazing Grace (fifty countries virtual singing)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BA7pdABvpnc>

Amazing Grace by Il Divo
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYMLMj-SibU>

Standing on the Promises of God Alan Jackson
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lofNq0U2xk0>

Every Knee Shall Bow by The Wilds
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQUq5rwodVo>

He Is Lord by Divine Hymns
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu5LSVKdGCs>

The Six Word Story for Midweek Lenten Worship

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Wilmington NC

Pastor Mark Opgrand

April 9, 2014

Six word stories: Reflecting God's mercy.

Atheist Dies. Goes to Heaven. Oops.

This is the last of our *Six Word Stories: Reflecting God's Mercy* but certainly not the last of all our own stories reflecting God's mercy.

This was actually the first one I thought of after starting with Hemingway's: *"For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn."* For me the story goes back to the first time I crafted the following question:

"So what is the first thing an atheist says after he dies and he meets Jesus?... Oops!" There was something about that ... that seemed oddly hopeful... for me hopeful that even an unbeliever, upon dying and meeting our Lord would have a moment when the truth was revealed. Jesus is Lord. He lives.

I have always looked for mercy in this. I remember a long time ago now first seeing those *"Evangelism Explosion"* buttons with the big question marks on it. When you ask the person wearing it what it means, that opens the door for conversation beginning with the big question:

"If you were to die tonight, would you know for sure you are going to heaven." The question is a thoughtful one, as it gets you thinking about that important question, though personally it is the *"for sure"* part of it that kind of bothered me.

As a Lutheran, we are always looking to God's grace in this matter, and *"for sure"* raises some uncertainty...for me... anyway. For sure? Do I know for sure? Well, yes, but by God's grace and mercy ... and not by my own merit ... or how good I've been...or what I've done... for sure.

And that really takes us to the mercy part. As Christians we are called to trust what God has done in Jesus Christ for the whole human race. and then share that good news. When we share, and someone believes... especially when it is our children to whom we are passing along the faith... there is cause for much rejoicing.

But all **we** can really do is share this as God calls us... that is, plant the seeds ... and let God's Holy Spirit do the rest. I think there are some churches that certainly do take delight in souls saved...but I also believe sometimes ... that others as well, take delight...in souls lost...

The most extreme but best-known example is Westboro Baptist Church, the one with all those *"God hates"* signs and protests. Their website is really godhatesfags.com. Perhaps you heard that Westboro founder Fred Phelps recently died, and while certainly not a self-described atheist... I

wonder if Reverend Phelps hasn't had his own "oops" moment in meeting Jesus and seeing the extent of God's mercy... (Shh, he thinks he's the only one here)

Well far be it for any of us to be the one to judge any one's faith or unbelief... That will be up to God, but if the Bible has taught us anything... that would be that we should never overlook... the extent of God's mercy...

C. S. Lewis is one who did not believe life was one great "pass/fail test" and when you die, you get scored and either go to heaven or hell. Both in his novel "The Great Divorce" and in "The Chronicles of Narnia" he imagines in death someone having the same option as in life... that is to believe... and enter the kingdom of heaven... or reject it... and really be "left behind."

I don't know what God will do with the unbelievers. But I do imagine many "oops" moments, not unlike the post Easter account in John's gospel of Doubting Thomas... The text doesn't report Thomas actually saying "oops" but it is implied ... with "My Lord and My God." You remember Thomas... always shows up the Sunday after Easter with the story ... "Unless I see...." you know how it went. And he saw. "Oops.

For me, as a Christian... I need to hold out the hope that God really has things worked out... and we can trust God.

God is God. This is God's world. We are God's people. God will be God.

This doesn't change our witness to the truth. But it does invite us to pray and keep praying that all God's children will be saved... whether it be with a "Whoops" or a "Whoopee!"

How far does God's mercy extend as Jesus suffered death on the cross for us... and for our salvation? It better be a long way... or else none of us will be able to stand before God... at all.

For those who live in God's forgiveness here and now and for all their lives, there will be a confidence in letting go. For those who are hard hearted for any reason... resistant... or imagining another religious pathway is preferable... or truer... well, God be merciful on us all... For those not knowing one way or the other...time will tell.

I say that recognizing that some people already believe they know first-hand... I am referring to those who have had "near death" experiences... visits to heaven.... St. Paul talks about one of them in our resonating scriptures. Those who have had those experiences come back so often with a lot of hope.

More than a few books have been written about that. The best-selling book "Heaven is for Real" is now coming out as a movie. Of course, none of these accounts and stories and eyewitness experiences really "prove" anything... except to those who have experienced it... and those who believe them. But again... we should not be too quick to judge.

In my own life, my grandmother Olga Stordahl Opgrand had one of those experiences... long before Elizabeth Kubler Ross's work and long before best-selling books were written by others.

Some people may not have believed what she reported that is, about going to heaven and meeting Jesus and coming back... but no one ever doubted that she believed it ... or that it made her the most confident person of faith...I had ever known... as a child growing up, anyway.

I recently ran across something she wrote about her experience. What I know about her story besides what she said ... that is, because of what other eyewitnesses have shared... is that Olga died of a blood clot the day after her second child was born.

Was she really dead?

She wasn't hooked up to a monitor back in 1920. What I do know ... is that my grandfather and the doctor had called the undertaker ... to come pick up her body.

Here's what she wrote about this in a poem and introduction. Olga writes:

"This poem is a new experience in my life. It happened in May, 1920, after the birth of my second baby May. When I was considered dead from a blood clot.

This experience struck me in such a way that I was unable to speak of it for a year. I had been unable to put it into words until the Lord put upon me an avalanche of poetry writing.. This poem was written 35 years later in 1945.

The poem is called *Down in the Valley*.

Down in the valley
I met my savior
He beckoned me
to his paradise

I felt myself
so supremely happy
as I was rising
up to the sky.

I reached the portals
where all was silence,
where all was serene,
where all was great peace.

There was no pain there.
All was celestial
All was in favor
of the Lord to please.

All of a sudden
I missed my husband
Helen, age two
And May,
just one day.

Oh, I must return
and bring them hither
I could not leave them
down there to stray.

They must be taught
the way of salvation.
The love of our savior
they should know.

On promising this,
the Lord released me.
Downward to earth
I felt myself go.”

...That’s what she wrote.

In meeting Jesus, my grandmother certainly did not have an “oops” experience, but she did have a kind of merciful encounter with the Lord that forever gave her an unshakeable faith and deep and abiding trust in God’s eternal promises. A confident faith... a sure and certain faith... which she passed that along to her six children... and her eleven grandchildren... including me.

At age 99 she died with great confidence for what was ahead... and with great joy that once again ...she would be face to face with the Lord. So here too there is a companion story to:

Atheist dies. Goes to heaven. Oops.

Thinking of that story we hold out hope that God will be merciful and that God will make all things right for all people...

But with another story (like one about my grandmother and many others..) there is no need to “hold out” hope... but rather only celebrate. Because this story always goes like this:

Believer dies. Goes to heaven. Whoopee! (Amen).

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, August 31, 2020 Not by Pastor Mark Opgrand BUT BY
Chaplain Robert M. Weeks #159

THE DASH By Chaplain Robert M. Weeks

When I was in High School, during the Physical Education Period, we were encouraged to take part in what was called a *"Hundred Yard Dash."* This run seemed to take such a short period of time. Now, it occurs to me that life on this earth is like a dash. For those persons infected with the terrible virus of Covid-19, life can become like a dash.

When I was a Navy Chaplain with the Second Marine Aircraft Wing, the Marines had their Fitness Performance tests on the beach at Bogue Field. One of the tests was a *"Dash Run."* The Marines resented running *"The Dash"* on the beach because it was miserable and almost impossible to make any speed running on the sand of the beach. Their timings were downright discouraging. After a few days of this practice; however, the Marines began to develop amazing strength and endurance. The constant fighting and struggling, barefoot, through the soft shifting sand had forced them to become conscious of every step, to quickly ready their footing, to toughen up, and to push on.

During this pandemic, we can become very discouraged and life seems like running in sand, and the care we have to take to avoid the Covid-19 virus seems almost too difficult. Life is tough and people complain, to mention a few: I am afraid to go to the grocery store; I am afraid to go to a medical appointment; I am afraid to go to church; Visiting my family is dangerous; and, I have to wear a mask.

At the same time, during this time, we Christians need to remember what the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 90:10, *"The length of our days is seventy years or eighty, if we have strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away."* The author is really reminding us that life is like a dash. The Psalmist goes on to advise us to have God *"Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."*

Jesus has some important words of wisdom about the *"Christian Dash Life;"* *"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the Gospel will save it."* (Mark 8:35)

In another passage, Jesus speaks of our *"Life Dash"* when he reports: *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."* (John 11:25)

When the “*Dash of Life*” becomes difficult, we can become stronger if we trust God’s wisdom, keep pressing on in life, and run the race with perseverance. St. James considers trials pure joy, because trials help us develop perseverance. The book of James has a lot about God’s wisdom. First, James reports, if any of you lacks wisdom, ask God for wisdom. He gives it generously.

James tells us that there are two kinds of wisdom. Listen to his report: *“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”* (James 3: 13-17)

About the “*Dash of Life*,” the author of Hebrews wrote, “. . . let us run with perseverance the race marked out before us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. . . .” (Hebrews 12:2)

One of my friends, a Navy Chief Warrant Officer now deceased, was always conscience of how short life could be. He passed on to me his version of Linda Ellis’ poem entitled “*The Dash*” which reads:

“I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of a friend.

He referred to the dates on her tombstone from the beginning to the end.

He notes that first came the date of her birth and spoke of the following date with tears, but he said what mattered most of all was the Dash between those dates.

For the Dash represents all the time that she spent alive on earth, and how now only those who loved her know what that time is worth.

For it matters not, how much we own... the cars... the house... the cash. What matters is how we live and love, and how we spend our Dash.

So think about this long and hard: are there things you’d like to change? For you never know how much time is left that can still be rearranged.

--If you could just slow down enough to consider what’s true and real, and always try to understand the way other people feel, and be less quick to anger and show appreciation more, and love the people in our lives like we’ve never loved before.

--If we treat each other with respect and more often wear a smile . . . remembering that this special Dash might only last a little while.

So when your eulogy is being read with your life's action to rehash, would you be proud of the things they say about how you spent your Dash?"

A "Hundred Yard Dash" can take a short time in the sand of the beach if we become conscious of every step. So does "The Dash" of your life in this pandemic.

Prayer: *Dear Lord Jesus, we pray that in the midst of events we cannot understand, like Covid-19, help us to trust in your never failing love. Amen*

The Dash by Kirk Dearman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYlLtTMcnoM>

The Dash by Branch and Dean

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY6JOVeTj9c>

The Dash by Scotty McCreery

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-NDCLgTUwU>

Take My Life and Let It Be by Concordia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FHU2h1000I>

Set Me Like A Seal On Your Heart by Grace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIKOPI1wLqE>

Set Me Like A Seal On Your Heart Carey Landry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKMppY3a8B0>

My Life Flows On by Audrey Assad

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2hddmy63U>

My Life Flows On Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=037E-p5I2BI>

How Can I Keep From Singing by Matthew Culloton Singers

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fih3ln_L7Ak

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, September 1, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #160

Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!

24 So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. 25 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied-- but did not do so again.

26 However, two men, whose names were **Eldad and Medad**, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. 27 A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28 Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "**Moses, my lord, stop them!**" 29 But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Num. 11:24-29 NIV)

This passage makes me smile every time I read it. It may not be real familiar because it only appears twice in our three year Revised Common Lectionary (with one time being optional). Even so, I love this story, and I love the words coming from some surprised Israelites.

"Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!"

This surprised everyone because Eldad and Medad were not among those seventy leaders who received the power of the Lord's spirit that first came upon Moses through the cloud of the Lord. Every indication is that they were not "supposed to." With names like Eldad and Medad, they sound to our ears a bit "*country bumpkinish*," not unlike "*Elroy*" and "*Leroy*," two true country brothers I met in my first rural Texas parish. Elroy and Leroy were "*good ol' boys*," not prophets.

Eldad and Medad also remind me of the unforgettable characters in the old Newhart show. I'm speaking of the three brothers who would enter every scene with, "*Hi. I'm Larry, and this is my brother Darryl, and my other brother Darryl.*" Larry and his brother Darryl (and his other brother Daryl) are prophesying in the camp! (And yes, I know the brothers Daryl never spoke in the TV show until the final episode, but if they had spoken out with an eloquent speech, they would elicit a similar reaction as well.)

Eldad and Medad did prophesy and did proclaim a clear word of the Lord even when young Joshua tried to make Moses stop them. "Moses, they can't do that! They're not qualified!" And once again we have an example of God surprising God's people by using unlikely people to speak for God. Such was the power and prerogative of God's Spirit. Moses response is that we should be very glad for that.

It's always good news whenever God speaks through people, even unlikely spokespersons. Let us not be surprised that God's works in way we cannot predict. Perhaps we can remember that it's not about the gifts each of us brings to proclamation; it's about how God's spirit moves within us as we are called to accomplish his will.

Let us pray.

Thank you, O God, for those stories in scripture that remind us that even the unlikeliest persons can be your servants and witnesses. May these stories be encouragement that each one of us is given gifts for ministry and each one of us, when open to God's awesome Holy Spirit, will, for God, accomplish many things and bring blessings to our communities. Amen.

In case you don't recall Larry and the Daryls, here's a video clip to remind you:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79vMe31CuIQ>

Lord I Life Your Name on High by African Children's Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUNdbfFl_p8

Prophecy Your Promise by Brian and Katie Torwalt

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiuvKo-7Me4>

To God Be the Glory by the NBA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CeBoSQsBR0>

Many Gifts One Spirit by Paduan Suara Gita Swara Jaya, Jakarta Indonesia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2G75ss9Ozo>

Many Gifts One Spirit by Cantamus Dei

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqpWhvUB8DE>

and picking up on visionary lyrics like the spirit is upon them in the wilderness... *Hosanna* by Christofari

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrukH62mxMk>

Is Covid-19 making us more prayerful?

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron, 'Stretch out your hand with your staff over the streams and canals and ponds, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt.'"⁶ So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land.

7 But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts; they also made frogs come up on the land of Egypt. 8 **Pharaoh** summoned Moses and Aaron and **said**, "**Pray to the LORD** to take the frogs away from me and my people, and I will let your people go to offer sacrifices to the LORD." (Exod. 8:5-8 NIV)

28 **Pharaoh said**, "I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the LORD your God in the wilderness, but you must not go very far. **Now pray for me.**" (Exod. 8:28 NIV)

I believe it is accurate to observe that never in the history of the world has it been possible to communicate with more people at the same time... than the present. Social media makes possible for everyone with a Twitter account, Facebook page, Website, YouTube channel, Blog, or email address, to have access to sending out multiple messages.

Someone recently shared an observation that online prayer requests seem to be increasing. I don't have data to quantify that observation, but certainly "*Please pray for _____*" messages and their replies ("*We'll be praying for you.*") are a regular staple of Facebook and Twitter posts. Whenever there is an urgent need for help, it is not uncommon for prayer requests to be made, even among those who otherwise might not be known as praying persons.

In the scripture above, it is interesting to note that when the plague of frogs covered Egypt, Pharaoh did not hesitate to ask Moses and Aaron to pray to the LORD to take the frogs away. That request might have turned a few heads. Pharaoh is asking for prayers? I wonder if the plagues encouraged Pharaoh to be more prayerful, even if it meant asking for help from a God with whom he was not otherwise well acquainted.

If our world's urgent needs are indeed inviting prayer, perhaps we who are more acquainted with the God to whom prayers are requested and to whom we are praying, can not only literally pray, but model the kind of prayer God invites.

Maybe if someone asks for prayer on Facebook, instead of letting it be enough to say "*We'll be praying for you,*" actually write down and post the prayer. "*Gracious God, " _____ " has asked for our prayers with some deep needs and concerns right now. In your mercy, hear our prayers as we ask for healing and encouragement. May this time of stress and hardship be an occasion for us all to draw closer to you, our strength and support...."* Or something like that.

One of the joys experienced by those who meet regularly on Wednesdays for intercessory prayer (now via zoom) is realizing that when we say “*we are praying for you,*” we actually are. The sessions are only recorded by God, but if someone were to hear these prayers, I believe they would be strengthened in their own praying, not only for themselves but in intercession for others.

I’m sure there have been many times in history when hardship has encouraged us to look beyond ourselves to the one who had been made known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “*Pray for me*” followed by “*I will*” is a good start.

Let us pray.

So many people are asking for prayers and looking to you O God for hope and encouragement. We pray especially for those who are having difficulty getting further than just opening the door with a “*Pray for me.*” Bless that open door, we pray, that someone will be able to enter into a life changing experience where in prayer we believe “all will be well.” Help us keep praying for each other and going ever deeper in our devotion to you. Bless our prayers, and the people for whom we pray. In Jesus Name. Amen.

My Prayer for You by Alana Turner

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hj_0pvlGkks

O Lord Hear My Prayer (Taize) by XARA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J73ILBBkpA0>

Pass Me Not O Gentle Savior Hear My Humble Cry by Light Book

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCbQOW4HSio>

I Need Thee Every Hour by Fernando Ortega

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZIMDcgrF-Q>

I Need Thee Every Hour

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTdyD4Q3uHc>

Sweet Hour of Prayer by Radiance Acapella from Zimbabwe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ph43J3pnBDo>

and just for you who pray in Romanian ... *Psalm 121* sung by Romanian Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYXlwTqbNgg>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, September 3, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #162

"Jesus is Lord, not me."

"The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: 9 If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom. 10:8-9 NIV)

Carroll and Mary Hinderlie, (the Directors of Holden Village, the retreat center I worked at in the Washington State), had a beautiful old three story historic Tudor home near Lake of the Isles in Minneapolis, Minnesota. During those times when the Hinderlies were not at Holden, and during times when extended family resided there, the place was abuzz with activity. **"2105,"** as it was affectionately known, was a place where *"Villagers"* regularly hung out. I also "hung out" there many times during the seven winters I spent in the Twin Cities while working or going to seminary.

The place had many beautiful pieces of furniture and artwork and a few unique treasures. One such treasure was a handwritten letter from C.S. Lewis to the Hinderlie children while their family was studying in Norway in the mid-fifties. It was during this time "The Chronicles of Narnia" were being published for the first time. The Hinderlie children were so enamored with the stories that they wrote to C.S. Lewis and asked if they could *"adopt"* him as their *"uncle."* He graciously agreed. That was a wonderful treasure, kept in a special file in the basement for many years.

I remember a certain poster that hung in the dining room. It wasn't a great art piece like so many others, but it had a nice spot where all could see it. It was a large multi-colored hand printed calligraphy poster with these words, ***"Jesus is Lord, not me!"*** A magic marker was next to it, and people were invited to sign it if they wished. Over time many signatures were added by those who passed through and who shared this affirmation of faith.

Carroll Hinderlie was remembered by certain quotes he often repeated, like:

--*"Penniless, we own the world"* (2 Corinthians 6:10)

--*"For all the promises of God find their yes in him."* (2 Corinthians 1:20)

--*"Keep cheerful. I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33)

--*"We are beggars. This is true"* (Martin Luther);

--*"Rejoice, because your names are written in heaven."* Luke 11:20

I remember one other quote, though I cannot remember where it first came from (perhaps Martin Luther). I heard it on several occasions. It was this: ***"Whatever you cannot live without, that is your God."***

Why I remember it so clearly is on account of a pipe bursting on an upper floor in the Hinderlie home in the middle of winter when no one was home. Water poured throughout the house causing a lot of damage.

And while much was ruined and soaked within, one thing remained dry... that poster saying, ***“Jesus is Lord, not me!”*** It also underscored the point Carroll had made, *“Whatever you cannot live without, that is your God.”*

One of the things was destroyed in the flooded basement was C.S. Lewis’s letter to the children. But not the memory. And not the most important lesson reminder all this: ***“Jesus is Lord, not me.”***

I think about all those people whose homes have been destroyed recently through fires, tornadoes, floods, or Hurricane Laura. I pray they have their own version of that poster written on their hearts, reminding them that ***“Jesus is Lord.”*** For *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”* (Matt. 24:35 NIV).

Let us pray..

Remind us always, O God, that Jesus is Lord, not us. When we are tempted to imagine such things we believe we cannot live without, call us back to what we need most, which is you. When things we love are taken away from us, draw us close to that which is most valued, you O God, and you alone. Bless all who call upon you today and grant them strength and support. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Lord of our Life, and God of our Salvation (ELW 766) by York Minster Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zo25-w5fJnU>

Jesus is Lord by Lee Scott

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVs8GFzqawY>

He is Lord by Scott Riggan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBgESXUwKzY>

He is Lord by Times Square Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujznyzGoQ0w>

He is Lord in many languages by unknown international children’s choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-Cv1Ufsal>

Lord I Lift Your Name on High by Maranatha Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVqWEtfpTgo>

Jesus Is Lord of All by the Pearsall Sisters

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_IXE2EPNVA

and just for fun.... *Jesus is Lord... even on Star Trek?*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qN_9AJ53_rY

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, September 4, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand BUT BY Pastor Michael Megahan, Ph.D. #163

Theology of the Cross Part 2: Hiding Behind the Cross

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (NIV) 1 Cor 1:22-25: 22

Recently (Devotion #144) I wrote a little on the hide-and-seek game played by God and humans and the theology of the cross, the foundational theology of Martin Luther. I talked about how it is on the cross we find the hidden God.

In today's meditation, Part 2 of the Theology of the Cross, I want to share with you the salvation we have when we hide ourselves on or behind the cross. Though the cross looks like a foolish place to find God, and though the cross appears to be a foolish refuge from suffering and death for us, it is not foolish at all. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:25, "the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

I will illustrate the safety from evil and death found in the cross by sharing with you an experience of mine. It is not a story I often share. For a long time, it was difficult to even mention the experience to others. But it has become such a meaningful experience of "the cross," that I have learned to tell the story in hopes that others too will find the salvation provided by the cross.

I suffer from Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder. Through counseling, I have learned to "feel safe" when 4th of July fireworks go off suddenly or when I hear a gun shooting or what sounds to me like a gun or witness the mass shootings that too often occur in our society. There are numerous events that have shaped and entrenched the fear, but the one I will share with you now is one of the earlier, more graphic experiences.

It happened on August 1, 1966, when I was a student at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas. I was attending an advanced course in sociology in which we were studying sociology in German (no English spoken in class, and our teacher was German and did not speak English). Suddenly, we heard sirens and screams and realized that there was an active shooter and even bullets aimed at us. We crawled out of the room (2nd floor) and went down to ground floor where we tried to help people enter into the safety of the building.

I still have nightmares of some of the horrific scenarios that I witnessed over the next 50 minutes. But one image stands out, one in which I witnessed what has become to me a metaphor for the cross as a strong refuge of safety for those who remain hidden in it.

On the plaza in front of the tower where the sniper was, are two flagpoles. Behind one of them (to my left, facing the tower), a young woman, expectant with child, was crouched, trying to hide from the sniper. The only thing between her and the gunman was that slender flag-pole and its small base. When there was a lull in the shooting, others would try to run toward us and safety. Several of them shot as they raced towards us and the door that we were holding open. But the young woman, perhaps petrified from fear, remained hidden behind the flag-pole.

When all was finished, several women ran to her and escorted her to an ambulance shaken, but alive.

My experiences in life have often shown me that when there is danger, when we are faced with suffering or chaos or evil, we try to run to where we think there is safety. We leave the cross behind because it looks so foolish, a weak refuge unable to protect us. It appears to us like that thin flag-pole that cannot protect against a sniper. But I always remember that on that day, August 1, 1966, those who ran to what looked like safety were the ones who lost their life. The one who remained hidden behind the flag-pole was saved.

In the game of hide-and-seek between God and humans, God will be found by us hidden on the cross. And the one who finds the hidden God and who remains clinging to the cross where God is, will find peace and salvation in the days of suffering and darkness.

Prayer: God, in the name of Jesus the Christ, I confess that I am often ashamed of the cross. It looks so foolish and so weak in comparison to all of the strong institutions and weapons and addictions society can provide for me to make me feel secure and happy. Help me to see the cross as the banner of your victory. It is where you are hidden, with all of your strength and wisdom that makes a mockery of our lies and boasts. When I am tempted to run to hide in safe looking places, give me the strength to cling to and hide in the cross. Amen.

Cross of Jesus, Cross of Sorrow by Choir of St. John's College, Cambridge
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f877giUZJdA>

Cross of Jesus, Cross of Sorrow by Andrew Remillard
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpGg8RXnoU0>

Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross by Simon Khorolskiy (in Russian)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB7V4usZhVQ>

Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross by Vagle Brothers
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZvYWPVGtFQ>

Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross by MrMusiclifeway
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPtUwVoJsi8>

Beneath the Cross of Jesus Hastings College Choir
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr7_i8HJ-Jo

Beneath the Cross of Jesus by Derek Webb and Sandra McCracken
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MGv4aSRLTY>

Take Up Your Cross by John Michael Talbot
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLlOIhS5nb0>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, September 7, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand BUT by Chaplain Bob Weeks. #164

OUR ANCHOR

By Chaplain Bob Weeks

Scripture: Hebrews 6:19 *"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain where Jesus who went before us, has entered on our behalf."*

Anchors are made in many sizes and shapes, but all of them are made to provide safety. I really never thought of the importance of an anchor aboard ship until the USS WILLIAM S. STANDLEY DLG 32 lost all engine power in the Atlantic Ocean one day.

When ships lose power, all electric power stops. One might think that the first response of the Captain of a ship under these circumstances should be to send a message for help. No so, our Captain immediately ordered one of the ships' anchors to be lowered. The heavy chain roared and finally the huge anchor gripped the bottom of the sea, and the ship stopped steady.

It was on that occasion that I began to understand what the author of the book of Hebrews had written, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." In this passage, the author of Hebrews reminds God's people of the promise that God made to Abraham saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." We know that Abraham waited patiently and received what was promised.

The author of Hebrews tells us that, as confessing Christians, we receive this promise, too. We have this hope that God will bless us. An anchor has always been a symbol of hope. Whereas a ship's anchor goes down to the ocean bed, the Christians' anchor, Jesus, goes into the heavenly sanctuary, where it is moored directly to God himself. Jesus went before us to provide this hope on our behalf. By his death, Jesus secured for us the power to enter, to follow where he has gone before.

On some occasions, I have ministered to persons who have used God as their anchor. Recently, a lady who had an incurable infection in her legs came finally to use God as her anchor. At first, her legs had to be amputated below the knees. Several days later, she was told that there had to be an amputation above the knees. As my wife and I visited her at the last, she would say, "I have turned it all over to God."

God became her anchor as she faced death only a few days later. She came to the conclusion that her death would be a healing. She said, "There will be no more pain!" She proceeded to choose

the scripture and hymns for her funeral. Her husband said, "She died in peace." Faith in God provided her with needed safety. She believed, as the author of Hebrews called his people to believe, that God would bless her. God was her anchor.

If you have been listening to Pastor Jonathan's meditations, you know that he has continually called on us to trust in God during this COVID-19 Pandemic. This is a call to have God as our anchor. To realize the worth of an anchor, we need to feel the storm.

We are in the midst of one of the storms of life but having God as our anchor even though the virus spreads, God will hold us firmly, never wavering, never failing, always loving, and always caring.

So how do we anchor in God?

Jesus gave his disciple the answer, *"I am the way and the truth. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John14:6)

PRAYER: *Dear Lord God, we pray, keep us steadfastly anchored to you during these times. Amen.*

Songs for today:

Will Your Anchor Hold in the Storms of Life by Ely Cathedral Choir, England

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9aLhTHmuTg>

Will Your Anchor Hold? by The Mandate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrjKUUI-V18>

Will Your Anchor Hold by The NBA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQQO8v-0VBo>

We Have An Anchor by Robert Critchley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOmmtka3-i8>

We Have An Anchor by Colin Webster and Phil Moore

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S25xqrF2tg0>

The Anchor Holds by Ray Bolz

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSAc5Z2lprk>

We Have An Anchor by 7th London Boys Brigade

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_TM-6LLv28

Eternal Father Strong To Save

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Vta4ct64go>

Eternal Father Strong To Save by US Navy Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic8zMkYwnq8>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, September 8, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #165

Christmas Day 1998. The day everyone in America saw me (and Mulan) on national TV.

"Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring." (Prov. 27:1 NRS)

This is a Disney World story.

Just before Thanksgiving 1998 I travelled with my late wife Carol to Orlando, Florida. Carol attended a four-day conference of academics in religious studies while I attended a four-day *personal pilgrimage* to Disney World. It was my first visit, and I attended all the parks after religiously studying the *"How to do Everything Disney in Four Days"* book.

The only time I paused in my grand sweep of the *"D-worlds,"* was when learned they were filming a television special to be aired on Christmas day. Many people were gathering around to watch the filming of a live action song from the hit animated movie *"Mulan."* The main star was Donny Osmond, singing *"I'll Make a Man out You."*

Most people were gathering in a way that they would be facing the performance. But as I surveyed the landscape, I wanted to figure out how I might best be positioned to be visibly in the shot. That would afford *boasting rights* that on Christmas Day I was on national TV! Picking my spot carefully, I stood behind where Donny and Mulan were singing and dancing, and observing the cameras, I was quite certain I was in the right place. I made sure I did nothing silly that would get me edited out. For my own documentation I took a few photos discretely with my camera at my waist. (I recently found these). Now I was really looking forward to seeing the special that Christmas... and **ME on national TV!**

I had a wonderful time, and Carol too, though she had been having some abdominal pains which worsened driving back to Wilmington. After seeing several doctors and having many tests, Carol was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The first of two major surgeries happened just before Christmas, and we spent several days, including Christmas Day in the hospital.

I remembered to tape the show, and watching it later, there I was, just a face in the crowd but visibly seen, beaming ear to ear as I anticipated my big *boast*. But little did I know that day how true Proverbs 27:1 would soon be for me: ***"Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring."***

Sometimes when we find old photos, they take us back to the joys of those moments when they were taken. For me now, however, seeing that photo standing behind Donny and Mulan only

reminds me of the last days before Carol and I discovered we were not going to have a long life together.

Even so, the next two and a half years until Carol's death included many blessings, perhaps most of all experiencing the wonderful love of God through our St. Paul's church family. That is something truly worth remembering and boasting about.

Let us pray.

We are thankful, O God for each and every precious day you give us. Teach us to treasure them. In the face of uncertain futures, give us confidence to be secure in all your promises. Bless all this day who face health or medical uncertainties. Support all our health care workers and those who are working tirelessly to bring a safe vaccine to our sick world. We pray for encouragement among those who are troubled by so many things. Bring us hope we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S ... Here are a few songs that come to mind.

I Know Who Holds Tomorrow by Acapella Hymns

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95_dFICHVkM

I Know Who Holds Tomorrow by Alison Kraus and Cox Family

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GKNbmYOAow>

In His Time by Maranatha Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJeNUINY7lw>

It Is Well Her Heart Sings by Sounds Like Reign

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ovnm-gzLfs>

Yonder Come Day by University of Oregon Chamber Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgS5pxmY0hw>

Heal Us Now Hazamir Hasharon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBkC6yxlzOE>

O Tannenbaum by Voces8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12gsCREkln0>

Once In Royal David's City

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cecTb2ufxl>

and... if you are wondering about Donny's song in the special, here's a clip (not from that day, but another time) Donny Osmond sings "I'll Make A Man Out of You" from *Mulan* (clip)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJiscOo3N8>

Grandma's prayers.

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matt. 6:6 NRS)

Have you ever had an experience with someone that completely changed the way you think about them?

My two grandmothers were quite different from each other.

My dad's mother Olga was the one who had a near death experience early in life and promised Jesus that if she could come back, she would raise her children with strong faith. Grandma Olga was always sharing her faith, regularly referring to scripture and teaching her children well about Jesus. She's also the one who regularly told her children upon leaving for school: "Don't forget about the secret weapon!" The secret weapon was Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." When I was in seminary, this grandmother made sure I was learning everything I need to know.

My other grandmother was the quiet one. My mother's mother Hilda regularly took her children to church and always prayed a traditional table prayer, but otherwise was very quiet about her faith. While Olga always endeavored to engage in faith talk, I never remember a conversation with Hilda about anything that had to do with her faith. I never doubted that she believed. We just never talked about it.

One night changed everything. She was living at the time with my parents while I was away at college. One night when home, I was walking down the hall when I heard my grandmother praying. Out loud. Not too loud, but loud enough that I could hear every word if I stood at her cracked open door.

I recognize that I was eavesdropping on someone's private conversation with God, but even as I stood there, I was beginning to realize I was having an experience that was completely changing the way I looked at my grandmother's quiet faith. She was praying the most beautiful prayer that I could ever imagine. She expressed deep gratitude to God for her life and family, for having a place to stay with us, for the beautiful day God had given her.

When she started praying for people, she named many names, describing a great awareness of what each person needed. I heard her pray for me. I even heard her pray for the good bowel movement she had that morning. (I probably didn't need to share that, but that too, was indicative of the intimacy she had with her Lord).

I was absolutely stunned at the depth of her devotion expressed through her praying. I would never look at her the same again. I discovered how much she loved the Lord and how much she loved her family, and how much she loved me, her only grandson. And from that point on, we began to talk of many things. By getting to know this part of her, that opened the door to much love and affection between us.

I can't imagine that would have happened without my eavesdropping. How wonderful that God gave me the opportunity that night to hear what God heard every night.

How many people do we know, especially the quiet people in our lives, who have a rich spirituality far deeper than we imagine?

What might happen if we began to see them as precious children of God who might, given an opportunity be glad to share with us, especially if we entered into conversation with them believing they have a lot to offer us?

Let us pray.

We thank you, O God for all those people who love us and pray for us, even when we are not aware. Whenever possible, give us opportunities to get to know them and discover their rich trust and faith in you. Remind us, too, that good things happen when we remember each other daily in prayer, and look to you for everything we need. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Bedtime Prayer by Twila Paris

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oU_qeWBnCiE

My Bedtime Prayer by Nicole Choque

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHGJT1BZBnI>

Just As I Am by Voice of Eden

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKw7Hq8Go4U>

Just As I Am by Praise and Harmony

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0-RGfm7fKc>

O Lord Hear My Prayer by Reflection

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_MaCkVjsOo

Hear My Prayer O Lord (Purcell) by Vox16

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7lj8n_akMk

Toxic spirituality and anti-inflammatory faith.

My child, pay attention to what I say. Listen carefully to my words.

21 Don't lose sight of them. Let them penetrate deep into your heart,

22 for they bring life to those who find them, and healing to their whole body.

23 Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.

24 Avoid all perverse talk; stay away from corrupt speech.

25 Look straight ahead, and fix your eyes on what lies before you.

26 Mark out a straight path for your feet; stay on the safe path.

27 Don't get sidetracked; keep your feet from following evil. (Prov. 4:20-27 NLT)

Despite how it sometimes seems, people in the medical and science communities agree on quite a lot.

For example, they all recognize that inflammation is the body's natural way that white cells and the things they make protect you from infection from outside invaders like viruses and bacteria.

They also agree that some diseases, like arthritis, cause your body's defense system (your immune system) to trigger inflammation even when there are no invaders to fight off. Even those who are skeptical about science and medicine seem to be in great agreement about the positive and negative roles of inflammation.

There is additionally a great deal of consensus about the value of "anti-inflammatory" agents, even among those who are skeptical of science and medicine. Anti-inflammatory agents, whether in natural foods or herbal supplements or as produced by pharmaceutical companies are important in maintaining good health.

Now before this sounds like a boring essay for a school science project, let me wonder if this might have application to our spiritual health as well.

Might there be a kind of inflammatory faith that triggers us to fight against outside invaders? When those invaders are fear or doubt or despair such a spiritual defense mechanism would be a good thing.

But what if our positive inflammatory faith defense mechanisms get out of control and end up weakening our faith bringing a toxicity to our spirits? That would be harmful.

That might happen when we imagine we are fighting outside enemies such as other people's ideas or beliefs we perceive as threats to our faith. As we lash out at "them" we might not realize that damage is being done internally.

This happens as our faith transforms from being a positive manifestation of God at work in us to something that fights against this good work with a toxicity that does not build up the body (both our bodies and the body of Christ) but rather tears apart and eats away (like arthritis or other inflammatory disease manifestations).

How do we maintain good spiritual health then?

First, it will be important to recognize when our faith is becoming toxic. Look at what we are saying and feeling about other people, especially those with whom we disagree? Are we arguing or fighting without listening? Are we demonizing those with whom we disagree? Are we recognizing when despising others is becoming parts of our everyday feelings? If we are online, are we among those who are making or embracing caustic comments?

If any of this is happening, it can be helpful to recognize that God also gives us God's own version of spiritual anti-inflammatories.

--Pick up your red-letter Bible and focus of Jesus' words.

--Be in prayer regularly, remembering to pray both inwardly and outwardly.

--Listen to music that brings melody to God's word (many Psalms are set to music).

--Feed yourself with support from Christian brothers and sisters who are committed to reconciliation and peacemaking.

--Sing favorite hymns prayerfully even if not tunefully.

--Say grace and remember those things for which you are thankful.

--Look for goodness around you.

--Seek spiritual anti-inflammatories. Close your eyes and think of Jesus.

Let us pray.

In your mercy, Lord, grant what we need for spiritual health. Keep us balanced and faithful, trusting but also open and thoughtful to what we need to be express the love of Jesus to those you call us to be in relationship with. Keep our internal compass always pointing to you. In Jesus name. Amen.

Today's songs are all based on the Psalms and support positive anti-inflammatory meditation. As I listened, I realized this music was good medicine.

Psalm 63:1-5 by Esther Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cn509Nc8Kdo>

Psalm 143 by Songs for the Masses

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryB1oLGmpSc>

You Are There Psalm 139 by Songs for the Masses

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZ4my3VrVlg>

Psalm 85 by Esther Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cfo-toNbaTM>

O God You Search Me Psalm 139 Notre Dame Folk Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JPGY1w-674>

Psalm 42 As the Deer by Shemeroo Eternal Grace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSZWogD0AH4>

As the Deer Psalm 42 by Shane and Shane

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rw4tCCoaP0>

Psalm 42 by Tori Kelly

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGgsmCEgf4w>

Awake My Soul Psalm 57 by Cristi Black

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEOBh8dRFbl>

Shepherd Me O God Psalm 23 by Gross Pointe Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQid6VgHNec>

Both Now and Forevermore Psalm 121 by Songs for the Masses

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpXtAOBqsFo&list=OLAK5uy_nm3v_8q_6RZSkMDeaos6wFfdZmVlyJcfY&index=10&t=0s

Psalm for Life by Annie Moses Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1feBCgEhqxg>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, September 11, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand BUT by Pastor Michael Megahan, Ph.D. #168

Believing Comes from Hearing

John 4:42 (NIV):

They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

The verse from John is the conclusion to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-42). I have taken only the last verse because of the length of the story. In summary, after the woman comes to faith that Jesus is the Messiah, she hurries off to the village (even leaves her water jug behind!) to tell others. They hear her testimony, believe and then go out to see for themselves. Then comes the final verse: they believe not just because of the woman's testimony, but also because they had gone and had seen for themselves. Whenever I read this story, I remember Sarah.

From 1982-1988, my family and I lived in a remote village in Tanzania, on the edge of the Rift Valley (we were over 1 mile high). I taught at a Bible School during the week. On weekends, I descended into the valley to do pastoral duties at a small parish (5 villages with a total of over 2,000 members). The first Sunday of the month, all of the congregations met at the largest village for communion and other events.

In 1987, on the first Sunday in January, we had a very long service: 2 weddings, 625 communicants and 85 baptisms, together with the liturgy and sermon (and 5 choirs, each taking time for two or three songs). We started at 10am and closed at 2pm, without a break. I preached about the work of the Holy Spirit was to bring people to faith.

At the beginning of the service the evangelist was commenting on how sad he was because he had planned 87 baptisms (for 1987), but 2 people had become sick and so there were only going to be 85.

Well, to our surprise, when I finished the 85th baptism, there was still one more young girl waiting to be baptized. The evangelist knew her, but her parents were not members of the church and she had never attended before. In fact, they were the local moonshiners! Upon examining her, we discovered that she had heard the choirs and had come to listen. She heard the sermon and came to believe that Jesus was her savior. She wanted to be baptized. But we knew, or thought, that her parents would not approve. They had to be consulted. After dialogue with the evangelist and elders, it was decided that I would do the baptism and the evangelist would be her Godfather and talk with the parents. She was baptized and chose her new name, Sarah.

A few days later, the evangelist came to my house at the Bible School (a 15-mile hike straight up the escarpment, snakes included). He had exciting news. Sarah had gone home and told her parents about Jesus and her baptism before the evangelist had had a chance to meet with them. And they had believed! They had come to him to ask for teaching and to be baptized! They had even asked help in doing away with the moonshine business and to do farming instead. They believed because of Sarah's testimony.

We are all called to witness to Jesus, even as newly baptized 12-year old children, like Sarah did to her parents. It doesn't take a theological degree or special programs. Simply telling the story to whomever we can, whenever we can. To whom are you going to tell about Jesus? Whom are you inviting to come and see Jesus the Savior of the world?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you came to be with us, to suffer with us, to rejoice with us and to invite each of us to your wedding feast. You gave me and all other believers the privilege to invite anybody to come to that celebration of life. Give me the energy and boldness to go tell others, "I have seen the Savior of the world, Jesus! Come, see for yourself!" Remove all my excuses and fears. Amen

Here are several versions of a favorite hymn, a lesser-known hymn, and a classic. Enjoy the variety.

I Love to Tell the Story by First Methodist Houston TX

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxSjIMVqF8o>

I Love to Tell the Story by Eddy Arnold

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BE_SryWgNY

I Love to Tell the Story by the Chuck Wagon Gang

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xgbsC_zL50

I Love to Tell the Story by the Talleys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-zKIHjxejl>

I Love to Tell the Story by Gold City

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CskOe_yKXWA

I Love to Tell the Story by Chris Rupp

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPTzKT-JLw0>

Spread Oh Spread Almighty Word by Andrew Remillard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtJNMgwzI6w>

Spread Oh Spread Almighty Word by St. John's Detroit

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApnNI-BVaQ8>

Spread Oh Spread Almighty Word Jazz Vespers Christ Lutheran Nashville

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEnc_cOAws0

Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling SE Samonte

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf_glkmbNbQ

Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling by Hugh P and Maria

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8s64Z16ZHlI>

Softly and Tender Jesus is Calling by Alan Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkRTfrLBii0>

Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling by Sounds Like Reign

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUgE0KEfYng>

Amazing Grace by 50 Countries

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BA7pdABvpnc>

Amazing Grace by Peter Hollens and Home Free

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n145-J8eig>

Amazing Grace by Mundharmonka Quartett Austria (pretty amazing instrumental)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UKbyjY1vqk>

Amazing Grace Soweto Gospel Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmMOnbTch5I>

**St. Paul's In Your Home Devotion for Monday, September 14, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand
BUT by Pastor Bob Weeks #169**

TOUCH

By

Chaplain Bob Weeks

While visiting the home where Frederic Chopin and Sands spent some time in Valdemossa on Mallorca, I had an opportunity to view some of the books of Chopin's library. To my surprise, most of the leather-bound books had cracked. It was then that my friend, a dentist, informed me that the books were cracking because they had not been handled by human hands. The oil from human hands would have preserved the leather editions. He said, "If the books are not touched, they will deteriorate."

According to Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkley, a lack of physical touch can affect people in more ways than they might realize. "Touch is the fundamental language of connection," says Keltner. With people having to practice social distancing and self-isolation to curb the further spread of coronavirus, some are starting to feel a lack of human touch.

Whether it is shaking hands or hugging a friend, most people are accustomed to some level of physical touch on a daily basis. Those who are quarantining alone or with people with whom they do not have physical contact, loneliness and social isolation are growing health concerns.

Jesus touched or was touched often. The book of Matthew reports Jesus touching and being touched. Just a few examples follow:

Matthew 8:3 - Jesus reached out his hand and touched a man with leprosy. The man was cured.

Matthew 8:15 - Jesus touched Peter's mother-in law's hand and the fever left her.

Matthew 9:21 - A woman subject to bleeding touched the edge of Jesus' cloak and he healed her.

Matthew 9:25 - Jesus took the sick girl by hand and she got up.

Matthew 9:29 - Two blind men called after Jesus. Jesus touched them and they were able to see.

Matthew 14:36 - At Gennesaret, sick people were brought to Jesus and he touched them and healed them.

Matthew 19:15 - Jesus placed his hands on the little children.

Matthew 20:34 - Jesus had compassion on another two blind men, and touched their eyes and healed them.

Matthew 26:7 - A woman came to Jesus and poured expensive perfume on his head.

Matthew 28:9 – Mary Magdalene and the other Mary clasped the feet of Jesus.

Now days, the CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) has instructed us to keep a distance of six feet, and so hugging and touching physically are not in vogue; however, the noun “touch” can mean communication like “keep in touch.”

Christians can keep in touch in many ways. The staff and members of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church have proved this by their internet messages, telephone calls, The Good Shepherds, and the Drive Through Holy Communion. In addition, our congregation reaches out to touch persons in the community in many ways. Granted the services are sometimes virtual; however, they prove that our congregation is “keeping in touch” with members and all sorts of people during this pandemic.

I recently telephoned a friend who is living in an Assisted Care facility in New Bern, North Carolina. She told me, “I can’t drive my car anymore. I just sit here.” Her last words to me were, “Thanks for keeping in touch and remembering me.” One feels touched when one receives an Evangelism Team Call. When the Pastors and the Deacon call, touching has taken place.

Touch is a fundamental language of connection. Without being touched, humans can deteriorate. Hopefully, the Holy Spirit will motivate you to touch someone! Think about this and touch someone today somehow. Maybe a telephone call, an internet message, a personal letter – and do not forget that prayer is a great way to touch.

Prayer: O God, during this pandemic when hearts are fearful and physical touching is restricted, grant hope and courage for us to use other ways to touch one another. In the Name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Hymns:

Precious Lord, Take My Hand by Jennifer Holliday at John Lewis Funeral

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3z8S2P4kf8>

Precious Lord, Take My Hand/ Just a Closer Walk With Thee by Selah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsOtd8NfQpo>

O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go by Celebration Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nt69WDtYNLo>

O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go by Chris Rice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRVP3Q4tR0k>

O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go by Heart Cry Music

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmk9sfX_QPY

Psalm 91 On Eagle's Wings (Instrumental violin)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scDRvuAGHGE>

On Eagle's Wings by Covenant Christian Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6Ms2wqg39Q>

Nearer My God to Thee Worldwide Virtual Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1trWhBvZTs>

Sing Gently Virtual Choir Eric Whitacre (impressive 17,572 singers from 129 countries. Wow!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InULYfJHKI0>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, September 15, 2020 by Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, with Foreword and Afterword (and musical selections) by Pastor Mark Opgrand #170

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. (Ps. 46:1 NRS)

From "One Day the World Changed" to "Uncertain Times."

Foreword by Pastor Mark:

I discovered this piece last week in a paper copy of The Living Lutheran Magazine. It is written by Elizabeth Eaton, the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (our church). Because it was well written and prompted thoughtful reflection, I thought it might be good to share it through these devotions. I also wanted, along with it, to offer a brief foreword and afterword.

This is Devotion #170, and with each passing week I amaze myself that when I wrote the first one on March 19 entitled "*One Day the World Changed*" that 170 devotions later, I'd still be sharing. And let me give special thanks to Pastors Bob Weeks and Michael Megahan for their contributions).

"*My One Day the World Changed*" first devotion really resonates these months later with Eaton's own title, "Uncertain Times." Let's go ahead and read it and talk about it a little more at the end.

Uncertain Times

by Elizabeth A Eaton, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Between 1527 and 1529, Martin Luther wrote and composed his famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." He based the text of this hymn on Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (verse 1).

Luther knew about trouble. He had been excommunicated by the church and declared an outlaw by the emperor. The bubonic plague had returned to Wittenberg, Germany. His 7-month-old daughter, Elisabeth, had died. Western Europe was under attack by the Ottoman Empire. Civil unrest resulted in the Peasants War, which was brutally crushed by the nobility.

Luther lived in uncertain times. It's unlikely that Luther could see with certainty in 1527 how his work would turn out. The Reformation wasn't a glorious march of unbroken progress. It was messy. The "Reformers" argued with each other. It was violent. It had its share of hateful and

divisive rhetoric. Anathemas were levied by all sides against each other. Even at the end of his life, Luther wondered if he had been right, if he had been faithful to the word.

If it wasn't apparent to Luther and others what was happening, it was clear that something was happening. The world was changing. Political and religious turmoil wasn't going on in a vacuum. This was a time of new technology—the printing press— and scientific discovery—Copernicus kicking Earth out of the center of the solar system (Luther wasn't impressed).

What new world was emerging? What new thing was God calling into being? How was the Spirit calling and shaping the church to be a clear witness? Five hundred years later we find ourselves in uncertain times.

We are in the middle of a pandemic. We have been sheltering in place for months. Thousands have been newly awakened to racial inequity in our society and are marching for change. Education has been disrupted. Worship has taken on new forms. Our homes have become our offices and classrooms.

The world is changing and the rate of change in the past five months is unprecedented. Ours is also a time of new technology and scientific discovery. We are wired and plugged in. Communication is instantaneous. Our cellphones can be used to keep us connected and informed. They can also be used to divide and deceive.

Something new is emerging. The world is changing. We will not be able to return to the world of the pre-COVID days. Change brings loss. Loss brings grief. Yes, we believe in the Resurrection, that God brings life out of death, something new out of the old. But it can be painful, especially when we're in the middle of it and can't see clearly how it will all turn out.

Psalm 46 captures the turmoil of Luther's day and of ours: "The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter" (6). It describes a changing earth, shaking mountains and roaring waters. But Psalm 46 is also a song of faith—God's and ours.

God is faithful to God's promises and to God's people. God is a mighty fortress who fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit. Luther ends the hymn by declaring: "Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The kingdom's ours forever!" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 504).

I believe we are on the brink of this new thing that God is bringing about. We don't need to see how it will all unfold. We just need to be ready and willing to answer God's call and be shaped by the Spirit. Secure in God who is our refuge and strength, we can be bold in our witness.

God is activating each of us to invite more people into the way of Jesus—the way of grace and mercy, the way of justice and peace, the way of life.

Afterword by Pastor Mark:

Sometimes we may be aware of past history, but it doesn't strike us until we are at a certain place and time in our own current history. A few things stood out in this article. Luther's medieval world had some strong similarities to ours, chiefly with its own pandemic and all the divisiveness and messy violent rhetoric on account reformation issue. The newly invented printing press was their social media, and it brought a lot of changes. There were also intense controversies over science.

In many ways, Luther's world was very torn apart. It may be helpful to recall this, especially as we look back and recognize God getting them through their difficulties as we trust God to help us get through ours.

Let us pray.

God, keep reminding us that you are our refuge and strength and that no matter what we are living through, you promised to support us. Help us find peaceful ways to engage each other in conversation and growth in living as you have called us. We pray for all who wish to serve you that they will model behavior consistent with people your beloved children. We as for help with all who are serving as medical workers, relief workers, first responders, firefighters, and researchers. We pray each day for glimpses of goodness and hope. In Jesus' name. Amen.

O God Our Help In Ages Past Ocean Grove Choir Festival

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKn21C_JWnE

O God Our Help In Ages Past Mennonite Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-hN740J6qA>

O God our Help In Ages Past Maranatha Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Lq5mh6vvt8>

A Mighty Fortress by Roger Wagner Chorale

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADamVJaXZMg>

A Mighty Fortress by Matt Boswell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNeP7bGaggg>

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God by HiFI Hymnbook

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6k8DFb8fWs>

A Mighty Fortress (alternate words) by Christy Nockel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UUpelmcnqA>

Psalm 46, "A Mighty Fortress in the Storm" Scottish Psalter 1650

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGzuUfQD-G4>

King's College Cambridge *Psalm 46 God is our hope and strength* Martin Luther

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zks9bCgclGw>

Psalm 46 Shane and Shane

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2emelR7lGmw>

Is your eye evil because God is good?

"Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" (Matt. 20:15 NKJ)

"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matt. 20:15 NRS)

"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (Matt. 20:15 ESV)

"Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matt. 20:15 NIV)

" [ἢ] οὐκ ἔξεστίν μοι ὃ θέλω ποιῆσαι ἐν τοῖς ἐμοῖς; ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρός ἐστίν ὅτι ἐγὼ ἀγαθός εἰμι;" (Matt. 20:15 BGT)

Coming up this Sunday is Matthew 20's *Parable of the Vineyard Workers*. It's one of the classic parables that always invites a vigorous response on the part of the hearer/reader. Here's how it goes: Early in the morning, the owner of the Vineyard hires some people to work. When he sees some workers idle at 9am, he hires them too. Same with idle workers at noon and 3pm.

At the end of the day, the owner pays the last group what he promised the first, prompting the first group to be thinking "*bonus!*" But all get paid exactly what the owner promised, which meant all the same. What a disappointment to those who imagined the fair thing was for them to get more. (I wonder if they would have been happier if others received less?)

The "*punch line*" of the parable is this verse 15, where the owner challenges those who grumbled to consider the owners prerogative to do with his money and property whatever he wishes.

When I read this using a parallel version app it was interesting to see how each translation had a little difference in wording that could affect some of what we take away from the parable.

The owner begins by asserting his prerogative. Is it not "*lawful*" or "*allowed*" or do I not have the "*right*" with "*my own things*," or "*what belongs to me*" or "*with my own money*?" The answer would certainly be yes!

But it's the next part of the sentence where there is some variation. "*Are you envious because I am generous?*" could suggest that the worker might wish to be like the owner and be generous. Or is he envious just because the owner has means and power?

"*Do you begrudge my generosity?*" could suggest the issue is one of fairness or entitlement. I don't like it one bit that the owner was generous (unless he is generous to me).

It is interesting that the New King James Version is the one that translates this verse most literally. "Or is your eye evil because I am good?" My Greek is woefully lacking, but Bible translator and Greek fluent friend Dr. Michael Megahan is just an email away and he verified this translation. If you were in a fraternity or sorority you might be able to make out the Greek "*opthalmos*" in there... aha like "*opthamologist*" – my eye doctor.

And "*ponayras*" simply says evil, like in Matthew 12:35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the "*evil*" (*ponayras*) person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. (Matt. 12:35 ESV).

So what we have here is something like the owner saying, "*Are you giving me the evil eye because I am good?*"

I like that, just as I am drawn to the literal translation in Luke 9:51 where Jesus "*set his face toward Jerusalem*" (NRS) rather than "*was determined to go.*" (NAU). There's something compelling about these literal images.

Of course, it may be that "*evil eye*" doesn't quite convey the meaning of resenting the owner for being good with his generosity. May I suggest, however, that "*evil eye*" certainly does convey contempt or resentment. Have you ever gotten the "*evil eye*" from someone? That easily conveys disgust. If you don't care for the word "*evil*" but want to keep "*eye*", maybe "*side eye*" will do.

According to common usage today (and Websters), "*side eye*" is defined as "*a sidelong glance expressing disapproval or contempt.*" Looks to me that those resentful workers gave considerable "*side eye*" to the owner.

This Sunday, this gospel lesson is paired with that part of Jonah's story where he gives God the "*evil (side) eye*" for being good and generous in his mercy with the people of Nineveh, whom Jonah wanted destroyed so Jonah's prophecy (and warning from God) would be fulfilled. Jonah was even more disapproving with his mouth than his eye. (See Chapter 4 or attend church this Sunday.)

Important lessons are to be learned here. God can do what God wants to do. You can resent it all you want, but if ever you are on the side of needing mercy, or a generous helping hand, or grace beyond what you deserve, you may well be glad God is this way.

Let us pray.

Give us good eyes to see your love and mercy, O God. When we experience your grace and generosity, grant us thankful hearts. When we witness your grace and generosity to others, help us not to be envious or resentful. Draw our "side eyes" to focus on your goodness so that we might imitate you with our own acts of goodness and generosity. Help us to see the world through the eyes of Jesus. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Now Thank We All Our God by Fort Street Presbyterian

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9j4_3uJJ6w

Now Thank We All Our God by Virgil Fox

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JY7J--8YdMA>

Now Thank We All Our God St. Peter's In Loop, Chicago

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPEnF6SJQ4g>

We Labor Unto Glory by Porter's Gate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRuPZCXShg4>

Christ Has No Body Now But Yours by Josh Garrels

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7ymxW3rndk>

Your Labor is Not In Vain by Wendell Kimbrough

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPj3Kf7Dorw>

Generous Giver by Vintage Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-5JowPZH-w>

Our God's Generous by Nick and Becky Drake

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tECGsxQRq8>

God Is Good All The Time by Don Moen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-Q9YD2PD0o>

God Is Good by Cross Culture Norway

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt6TslAHlgs>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, September 17, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #172

The St. Paul's "candy men".

My child, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. 14 Know that wisdom is such to your soul; if you find it, you will find a future, and your hope will not be cut off. (Prov. 24:13-14 NRS)

As you enter by the front door of St. Paul's, you will notice on a small table a bowl filled with candy. In front of the bowl is an engraved nameplate. It says *"In Memory of Billy Last Mason "The Candy Man," January 5, 1927-December 15, 2013."* For many years until his death in 2013, it was the *"ministry"* of Billy L. Mason to hand out pieces of hard candy to children (and some adults) after the services. He and his wife Anne worshipped at 11:00 am, but Billy came early so he could *"catch"* children after the 9:00 am service as well.

Billy was St. Paul's *"Candy Man,"* and at least a couple of generations of children enjoyed his generosity and joy in bringing smiles to their faces. Many a child at St. Paul's made a *"bee-line"* for the *"Candy Man"* when services were finished. He offered a variety of hard candies, but particularly enjoyed asking his patrons if they would *"like a beer?"* That would be a *"Root Beer Barrell."* Billy also had sugar free candy available.

As *"Candy Man"* and engaging servant of God, Billy had his unique ministry, and thanks to Tammi Gates, the memory of this ministry continues with the bowl regularly being filled. Billy Mason served St. Paul's in many other ways as well, but for many now grown children, he will always be remembered as the *"Candy Man."*

Most people do not know there was another *"Candy Man"* at St. Paul's.

His name was Harry Brannen, and he was one of the ushers at the old 8:30 am service that was in place when I began my work here in 1997. Back then, we didn't have a rotating usher team. It was Harry and one other. One of the ways Harry welcomed me was letting me know that when the sermon was good, there would always be a two pieces of peppermint candy in the offering plate. He must have liked the sermons, because each Sunday there were always two pieces of candy in the plate, one for each pastor.

When we sang the offertory, I would receive the plates, lift them up, place them back on the altar, take my candy, put it in my pocket, and put the plates on the shelf. Maybe you can see where this is going. I wish someone had mentioned this right away, but by taking that piece of candy and putting it in my pocket, it looked like I was helping myself to some of the offering! Yikes! This is not how we pay the pastor. Once I realized these *"optics,"* looked pretty bad, I made sure the candy was always taken from the plate after the service.

When I remember our candy men, I think of how it is that sometimes those little things make for such fond memories of attending church and being part of our church family. So many people serve in such a variety of roles here, not only as worship assistants, but as teachers, kitchen workers, quilters, council members, groundskeepers, caregivers, and bearers of God's love and redeeming word taken from St. Paul's out to that world beyond our walls.

There has been so much joy in serving, and I know much of this has been sorely missed as we have had to adjust to this once in a hundred years pandemic. But I also know as we hear from people about appreciating our online services, and how our first outdoor service, that our life together has neither been lost nor postponed.

I'm sure there will be many stories to tell someday when these hard days of separation become distant memories. Until then, we will keep remembering who we are, and that we have a wonderful God who continues to be active in our lives. Sweet!

Let us pray.

We thank you, O God, for all the servants of St. Paul's who have made our lives sweeter by their ministry. Help us remember there are many ways to show the love of God to those within and outside our communities of faith. Bless all those who work hard to make our world a better, safer place. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. Harry Brannen and his wife Iris moved to be closer to children nearly 20 years ago. When Billy Mason died in 2013, his funeral was a wonderful celebration of life, where long time family friends Pastor Bill Millholland and Pastor Richard Graf shared a tribute and sermon to a packed sanctuary. I was granted the opportunity to put together the graveside service for family and closest friends before the larger service. Since we are remembering Billy, I will attach what I shared at the graveside service. It's been nice to remember Billy and his celebration of life, and how I was particularly honored that I could also pay tribute to the "Candy Man" ... who was also so much more.

Ye Servants Of God, Your Master Proclaim

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvnlQ15og3M>

Ye Servants Of God by Voice of Eden

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fawNNvEyQIQ>

by Mkariobangi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hINoxoOocZs>

The Servant Song by Bukas Pulad Music Minstry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FejoxTNwbiY>

Heart of a Servant by Shahhah Generation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAuSBQEn8U4>

We Are Called, We Are Chosen by Notre Dame Folk Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgomtlc1_yc

The Spirit Sends Us Forth To Serve by MFIUMC Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teAWtA_kwXw

The Spirit Sends Us Forth Serve by Sammamish Lutheran ELW 551

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp7Qp4RE98A>

Love Consecrates the Humblest Act by Oglethorpe Presbyterian Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JN5ql-vBuJU>

Graveside Service
Billy Last Mason
January 5, 1927- December 15, 2013
Oleander Memorial Gardens
December 19, 2013
Pastor Mark Opgrand, presiding

GREETING

Join with me.... (singing and directing with hands)

Joy to the world! The Lord is come
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven, and heaven and nature sin!

I had this notion that I should start out this way, and I tell you why (if you haven't already figured it out. It is because of the JOY of the joy I always saw on Billy's face as he regularly "directed" the choir in the narthex as they processed into worship.

So it is with "joy to the world the Lord is come" that we gather in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

All who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. In his baptism Billy was clothed with Christ. In the day of Christ's coming, he shall be clothed with glory.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, you gave Billy a new birth in baptism and entrusted him to us to know and to love. As we thank you for the life we shared, help us now to release him to your mighty keeping. Bring us all to that day when we shall stand in your presence with all your saints in light eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Hear now these promises of God:

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. 3 For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. Isaiah 43:1-3 NRS

From Romans 14

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:7-8)

From John 3:

KJV John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

I have one more verse from scripture. It is one I have never shared at a graveside service, because it is not a common funeral scripture. But since Billy was no common man, I believe it is fitting.

The scripture is about Jesus, but what the gospel writer says about Jesus in these verses could easily be applied to Billy, ... and I believe Billy would smile at this selection.

This is how John concludes his gospel. 25 But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:25 NRS)

As I said, this refers to things Jesus did, but I cannot help but think of Billy when it comes time to think about the things Billy also did in his lifetime. And honestly, I cannot name anyone I have known personally who might have more stories told about him.

Indeed, if we started telling them now, I suppose we could see our babies graduate from college... before we heard the last of them. And that's why I'm not going to start telling Billy stories now. I will leave that for the other pastors later.

But I do want to say in this quiet intimate space (before the crowds gather and all the story telling begins...(or continues...)) is that I really cannot think anyone I have known who has brought a smile to someone's face more quickly or easily than Billy Mason.

The stories are all a witness to this. I cannot tell you how many times I have run into someone and identified myself as a pastor at St. Paul's when that person only has to say these two words in order to invite a mutual smile.

“Billy Mason.”

That’s how it was. He was something. He was loved. By God. By you, his family, and by all those men, women, children (as beloved “Candy Man”), teachers, students, church friends, fellow athletes, golf buddies, Lion’s club members, all.... whose lives were touched by him.

In Billy Mason, God truly gave the world... a wonderful gift. So while there aren’t enough books or time for all the stories that could be written or memories that will be recalled ... about Billy, I do want ...(in this moment) to express a huge thank you to God... for Billy.

And I also want to thank God for those many wonderful moments where.... even through all the jokes and quips and uniquely “Billy banter”, his wonderful heart was exposed to us all. You know those moments... with the look, the smile, that little pause between the next smile producing one liner...where his generous heart and love for God and you ... was revealed.

That was revealed most of all you, to you, Anne, his beloved right hand... but to all of you who are gathered here this morning.

And I know it also needs to be expressed... that for us who gather here, Billy’s death is a big loss. But that is because... his life... was such a very big gain... a very big gain for all of us ... who were so blessed to have Billy in our lives.

For that... we give God thanks. And that’s why we will continue smiling as we speak Billy’s name and keep telling those stories...and as we continue smiling... now imagining (with resurrection promises) Billy’s new heavenly home ...where Jesus himself is smiling ... as he welcomes this child of God. ... where Jesus himself is smiling.... because all Jesus has to do... is just say his name:

“Billy Mason.”

Amen.

COMMENDATION

Let us commend Billy to the mercy of God, our maker and redeemer. Into your hands, holy God, we commend our brother Billy. In this life, through the waters of baptism, you embraced him with your tender love; now bid him to enter eternal rest.

Welcome Billy into your paradise, where he will share with all the faithful the endless joy and peace won through the glorious resurrection of Christ our Lord; where there will be no more sorrow, no weeping or pain, but where he will enjoy the fullness of peace and joy in your presence, forever and ever.

Amen.

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commit his body to its final resting place, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him. The Lord's face shine on him with grace and mercy. The Lord look upon him with favor and give her + peace.

Nunc Dimittis

Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

P Lord, remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

C Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in

heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen

BLESSING AND DISMISSAL

The God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, make you complete in everything good so that you may do God's will, working among you that which is well-pleasing in God's sight; through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, September 18, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #173

The time I saw a piece of the true cross of Christ. (And yes, it was very cool).

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. 18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:17-18 NRS)

Another true story.

In my second year of service here at St. Paul's I received a gift of being able to tour the Holy Land with a group of about sixty-five clergy persons from many denominations and who came from all over the United States. Most of what we saw was what everyone sees when they tour the Holy Land... biblical locations, sacred places, beautiful churches, and places where Jesus and the disciples walked.

One of the most famous destinations in Jerusalem is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. There is a long rich history about this, but its beginnings date back to 327 A.C.E. when Emperor Constantine's wife Helena during a religious pilgrimage, unearthed a grotto believed to contain the cross of Christ. Over many centuries this church has evolved into a vast and beautiful complex managed Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Armenian Churches. It is believed by many to be the original site of Christ's crucifixion.

It would be hard to imagine any Christian making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem not spending time in this magnificent church. What happened to me the day I visited, however, was not on the tour. Our group was given about an hour of free to wander through the church, and I happened to be walking with five other ministers, including two priests in the Greek Orthodox tradition.

As we were walking along a vast corridor, the Orthodox priests stopped at a plain unmarked door and knocked. The man who opened the door was obviously a friend of the older Orthodox priest, and not only were the two priests invited in, but the rest of us as well. We were in the private apartment of the Patriarch of Jerusalem! I had no idea how big this moment was until what happened a several minutes later.

The Patriarch asked, (knowing the answer, of course), if his friends wanted to see "the room." What he meant was the most special room, essentially a large bank-style walk-in vault which housed many sacred relics, including some bones and skulls of certain saints.... and a framed handmade cross which included fragments of that cross found by St. Helena seventeen centuries earlier.

Now I know we're Lutheran (and all that), not given much toward the adoration of Holy Relics, but I must tell you there was something very powerful in seeing something believed by many to be that holy and sacred. It was also very special for us all to kneel before the Patriarch of Jerusalem as he laid his hands on each of our heads for a blessing.

I thought about this as I read Pastor Bob Weeks thoughtful devotion about **Touch** posted earlier this week. I also read recently an article describing how during this time of pandemic, many faithful Christians have been drawn to sacred shrines which house relics.

According to Rev. James Orr, who co-directs the largest number of relics outside the Vatican at Pittsburgh's St. Anthony Chapel, during the pandemic people are craving physical signs of faith. Relics do this. "Like the sacraments," Orr says, "relics have a way of making faith tangible. It's about Christ touching people. The sacraments all involve touch. That's what made the whole quarantine thing such a very real trial for our people, because we were out of touch."

He goes on to say, "Like sacraments, relics convene deeply personal encounters, wherein adherents touch Jesus and one another and connect to saints who lived many centuries ago. You can't do that through "Zoom". You can talk to someone on "Zoom", but you can't touch them

This is not a new insight. For centuries, relics have inspired and comforted in dire times. That's particularly true of the Shroud of Turin, which became a beloved relic during the Black Death. The medieval history of relics has a lot to say to the socially distant craving human contact.

So there I was, in the middle of a holy "bank-like vault, staring into a box whose open top exposed a skull of a saint, whose identity was not known to me, as I was not Orthodox or Roman Catholic.

But oh boy did it feel like I was in the presence of something holy. And then, seeing that cross, made from a piece of the "true cross." Oh my! "True" or not, this was a tangible expression of faith that had been carefully cared for seventeen hundred years!

As I mentioned above, we Lutherans have not been as enamored as others by the holy relics. At the same time, for us here at St. Paul's, being part of an historic church means we also feel something very special about the brick and mortar, stained glass, organ pipes, and ornate hand carved wood.

When I kneel at the altar where many have knelt, not for centuries, but (still) for many years, I feel a powerful connection to those who have gone before and who have become our "St. Paul's saints." I bet you do too.

Let us pray.

We give thanks, O God, for the tangible things that connect us with each other and to those who have gone before us in faith. We bless you for the saints, those named by the church, and those named by us in our own families. Help us feel your holy touch especially during this time of absence. Bless those to look to you for hope and healing today. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Our Songs include some Orthodox chants and more familiar to Lutheran hymns.

Paschal Hymns at Church of Holy Sepulchre

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kedxohHuVdU>

Agni Parthene by Valaam Monastery

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYRy9Lv9jPs&t=37s>

Kabarnos Prayer of Healing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcEQU772AY>

Holy Fire Jerusalem 2020

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iM7LB57MhCg>

Jerusalem My Happy Home by St. Clement's Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ngW_dibtWU

Jerusalem, The Anthem

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKRHWT6xdEU>

The Holy City by Stanford Olsen (No, not Bill Remele's Birmingham... the other one)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PAc3krFyQA>

The Holy City by Charlotte Church live in Jerusalem

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LP6oqVw8xIM>

In the Cross of Christ I Glory by Lutheran Warbler

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otIMODtZTCc>

Beneath the Cross of Jesus by Maranatha Promise Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKWMu1rT4z4>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, September 21, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand BUT by Chaplain Bob Weeks. #174

Salt life

By

Chaplain Robert Weeks, U.S. Navy (Retired)

The term "Salt Life" is frequently seen on the windows of automobiles and clothing, such as T-shirts, in Wilmington. This term was originally created in 2003 by men who were more than friends. These men were avid watermen from Jacksonville Beach, Florida. Whether it's surfing, fishing, diving, or simply enjoying a day at the beach, those who live and breathe the "Salt Life" have one thing in common. They are connected with the ocean, and the term, "Salt Life," represents their style of life.

Over 2000 years ago, after Jesus Christ had chosen his disciples, he preached an "Ordination Sermon" to them on a mountain and called them to be "the salt of the earth." (Matthew 5:13) Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." The disciples of Jesus were called to live a "Salt Life."

Along with this call for the disciples to be the salt of the earth came a warning: "But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled down."

Jesus knew that according to the Old Testament:

All animal sacrifices were required to be salted. (Ezekiel 43:24)

Eating salt with a person bound a covenant. (II Chronicles 13:5)

Newborn babies were rubbed with salt to purify them. (Ezekiel 16:4)

Jesus had something different in mind when he told his followers, "You are the salt of the earth," he meant that to be salt was to be a believer in him. Jesus was calling them to be connected to his mission of salvation.

Christian "Salt Life Connects."

Once I attended the Annual Purple Heart Dinner here in Wilmington. That night, I found another use for salt. The Purple Heart Metal has a ribbon that holds it in place, and then the Purple Heart Medal hangs on the ribbon. The center table for the dinner held a giant ice carving of a Purple Heart. I noticed that one of the waiters kept sprinkling salt about the area where the ribbon and the Purple Medal were to be attached. Why? To keep the parts connected because the ice was melting. The salt was keeping the two parts of the sculptor together.

In his sermon on the mountain, Jesus called his newly chosen disciples to be the salt of the earth. In other words, they were being called to “Salt Life.” The disciples were to be the connecting and reconciling power among people, who have forgotten or have never known the love of God.

St. Paul wrote about this job of connecting, “Therefore if anyone (believers) is in Christ, he (or she) is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come. All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation . . .” We are called as believing Christians to “Salt Life.” At the conclusion of the book of Matthew, the disciples were told to “. . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19) If we have been baptized, we are to live a “Salt Life” in Christ.

HOW IS THIS “SALT LIFE” TO BE USED? The verses that follow the salt verses in the sermon by Jesus, the disciples are told that they are also the light of the world. Jesus reminds the disciples that a lamp placed under a bowl is no good. The disciples are to let their light (belief) shine to the world. Otherwise, they are salt that loses its saltiness.

During this pandemic, living a “Salt Life” for the Christian is to live a connecting life. It is accurate to observe that never in the history of the world has it been possible to communicate with more people at the same time, than the present. Social media makes it possible for everyone with a Twitter account, Facebook page, Website, YouTube channel, Blog, or email address, to have access to sending out and connecting with all sorts of people.

During these days of the pandemic, the Christian Church has developed many new ways to connect the Gospel with people in all parts of the world. In many and new ways the Christian Church is living a “Salt Life.” This is happening through the ministry of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church. The Pastors, Deacon, choirs, and musicians are living a “Salt Life” when they produce services for members to be continually connected to Christ even if they cannot attend church in person. Drive-By Holy Communion connects us with Christ and calls us to live a “Salt Life.” The light of Christ is still shining at St. Paul’s.

Our offerings go, in part, to sponsor the ELCA Outreach. It so happens that we have an outreach center in Kenosha, Wisconsin. These past days when terror has stricken that city, our Lutheran Outreach Center has provided a clothing closet, personal care, prescription assistance, and legal assistance in that area. Hopefully, the members of our congregation will continue to send in their offerings, since this money is used to connect the Gospel of Christ here in Wilmington and other places. These offerings are answering, in part, the call of Jesus for us to live a “Salt Life.”

When you see the term “Salt Life” on the windows of automobiles and clothing in Wilmington, remember that you, as a believer in Christ, have been told that you are the salt of the earth and have been called to live a special “Salt Life” for Christ.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, you have called us to be the salt of the earth. Grant us the power of Your Holy Spirit as we endeavor to live a “Salt Life” for Christ during these uncertain days. Amen.*

From Pastor Mark: I had fun searching for “Salt Life” themed songs and hymns. I had no idea I would find so many that I had never heard. Hope you enjoy listening.

You Are the Salt of the Earth by Wes King

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtvELnqKcHo>

Salt and Light by Lauren Daigle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFyavoFYOxg>

You Are Salt for the Earth by St. David’s Edmonton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqgsgEluc5w>

Bring Forth (You Are Salt for the Earth) by Marty Haugen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G88rhg1W4xw>

Salt of the Earth original song by Katy O’Reilly

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZOBfVdGHF4>

Salt of the Earth (another original by harpist Ani Williams)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwYfKqCe1Ps>

You Are the Salt of the Earth by Halfway Home, live Bluegrass Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVxOFZ-28w0>

You Are the Salt of the Earth Immanuel Lutheran Youth, Silverton, OR

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0pp8q7li8c>

Salt of the Earth by Jason Thompson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiL183WIMIU>

Light of the Word from Godspell (featuring Salt of the Earth lyric)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chTouFbmrRk>

We Are the Salt of the Earth by Orchard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6R6Z1tEKiVY>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, September 22,2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #175

Is it time to remove confession from our liturgy? Or at least be *less* honest about it?

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn. 1:8-9 NRS)

The above verse has been, for many years, part of our liturgy's "*Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness*". Following the invitation to confess, come words of confession. In the old red "*Service Book and Hymnal*" from 1958 the words that followed began like this:

*"Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer,
we poor sinners confess unto thee,
that we are by nature sinful and unclean,
and that we have sinned against thee
by through, word, and deed.
Wherefore we flee for refuge to think infinite mercy,
seeking and imploring thy grace,
for the sake of Jesus Christ."*

The green "Lutheran Book of Worship" from 1978 had these words:

*"Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin
and cannot free ourselves.
We have sinned against you
by thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.
Forgive us, renew us, and lead us,
so that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your holy name. Amen."*

"*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*" (the new ELW red hymnal) has multiple options, including seasonal confessions available through a resource called "*Sundays and Seasons*." The most recent confession for this summer has been:

*“Reconciling God, we confess that we do not trust your abundance,
and we deny your presence in our lives.
We place our hope in ourselves
and rely on our own efforts.
We fail to believe that you provide enough for all.
We abuse your good creation
for our own benefit.
We fear difference
and do not welcome others
as you have welcomed us.
We sin in thought, word, and deed.
By your grace, forgive us;
through your love, renew us;
and in your Spirit, lead us;
so that we may live and serve you in newness of life. Amen.”*

I believe each of these “*confessions*” convey an honest assessment of ourselves and our need for God’s grace. They also run completely contrary to the very public culture wars we are engaged in these days.

If that’s hard to recognize, let me quote from perhaps the rawest confession in our hymnal, that from our Ash Wednesday liturgy. Warning, it is jarring, and will be at odds with nearly every person in public life, especially those seeking public office.

*“Most holy and merciful God,
we confess to you and to one another,
and before the whole company of heaven,
that we have sinned by our fault,
by our own fault,
by our own most grievous fault,
in thought word and deed,
by what we have done and by what we have left undone....”*

It continues with a lot more detail, but it is the use of the word “*fault*” that really stops me dead in my tracks. Our culture, the world we live in, is one where no one accepts fault for anything. Whenever things are not going as we wish, or whenever we are experience serious problems, it is always someone else’s fault. Someone ... or some thing...else... is always to blame!

It is no wonder that our political parties cannot govern and people on left and right cannot find common ground from which to work for reconciliation and healing. *“It’s not my fault. It’s your fault. It’s your most grievous fault. “I’m not to blame. You’re to blame!”*

As long as both sides blame the other and take no personal responsibility, or even admit to mistakes, there isn't a lot of hope for things to get better. And I would certainly understand why no one in elected office would ever admit sinning... *"by our fault, by our own fault, by our own most grievous fault."* To admit this is to give to the other side a confessional club, *"See. I told you. It is their fault, their own fault, their own most grievous fault. Not our fault."*

Someone recently shared with me a thoughtful lesson learned from Sam Rushworth, an indigenous elder of Cherokee descent, who described the difference between a Western settler mindset of *"I have rights"* and an indigenous mindset of *"I have obligations."*

Taking this to heart, the writer said, *"Instead of thinking that I am born with rights, I choose to think that I am born with obligations to serve past, present, and future generations, and the planet herself."*

Thinking about *"obligations"* rather than *"rights"* puts us squarely into the heart of the gospel, and from that place we can and must confessionally be honest about ourselves. It is deeply regrettable that such powerful and honest words of hope for forgiveness and reconciliation dare to be spoken (by many) *only* in the privacy of worship.

Being less honest about ourselves has also been embraced by some highly visible churches who readily *"call out"* the sins of others, including others who also identify themselves as Christians. I don't *"fault"* them, actually, because I imagine they sincerely believe it's *"not their fault."* And like every elected leader who wishes to be re-elected, I wouldn't suppose them ever admitting their fault, their own fault, or their own most grievous fault.

But when taken seriously, confession is a wonderful and hopeful way for us all to come clean and hear even more powerful words of hope and forgiveness. I recognize that culture warriors have no need of this, as others will always be the ones to blame, but as a holy catholic church... a universal church of Christ, we should be able do better than this.

But first, we need to be honest. Each of us. All of us.

.... *"wherefore we flee for refuge, to Thine infinite mercy..."*

Let us pray.

Oh God, it is so contrary to our nature to take responsibility and recognize obligations as well as rights. It is hard to admit fault, and easy to assign blame. Thank you for a worship tradition that reminds us who we are, not to try to beat ourselves up, or "throw ourselves under the bus," but to lift us up with faith, hope, healing, and reconciliation.

Give us encouragement to do what is right in your eyes, for your sake and for the sake of the world. We pray especially for our elected leaders and those seeking public office, recognizing that it is not easy to win by being honest.

We pray for those who have not given into greed and power, and pray for those who have, especially those whose perceived electability depends on blaming their opponents rather than finding common ground for the good of all. Help us all be open to you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Songs:

Prayer of Confession Glenn Packiam

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKOkkS_myjA

We Confess Glen Packiam

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Z4i6b5uibA>

If We Confess Our Sins Harrow Family

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wm1lpm3ksxQ>

We Confess by Josh Moyer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1MF0wgGVPE>

Hear My Prayer O Lord by Maranatha Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YwT71HcWKQ>

When Pain of the World Surrounds Us Mt. Olive Lutheran

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8u5WzozH4k

Forgive Us Lord Vaalam Chant

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qlaax3RyguM>

Confession: Forgive Us Lord by Wendy Ferguson

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTfT_Uw98Jc

I Repent by Steve Green

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HO5nWZD8TtO>

**St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, September 23, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #176
(something shorter, for a change)**

Happy Birthday. So how old are you?

Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off. (Prov. 23:18 NRS)

My father would never say his current age. On every birthday, whenever asked how old he was, my father declared he was always “goin’ on” the next year. If he was forty-seven, he was “goin’ on forty-eight.” If he was seventy-six, he was “goin’ on” seventy-seven. This went on for as long as I remember.

My mother believed he did this to get a rise out of her. And yes, it did. “ARNOLD!!” she’d respond. I’d say, “Dad, how old are you now?” He’d say, “Goin’ on’ the (next year.)” And every single time, my mother, in consternation, would give exclaim “ARNOLD!” Every time.

While there might be some truth to getting a rise out of my mother, I believe it went deeper than that. My father was one of those (now very rare) “eternal optimists.” His mother was the same way, always looking toward a positive future. I believe “goin’ on” was a part of that optimism. There was always something good drawing him toward the future.

Jeremiah 29 speaks of future hope for Israel using words that many have also come to embrace devotionally in their own lives:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. 12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, 14 I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (Jer. 29:11-14 NRS)

For many people throughout the world, the year 2020 has been the most difficult year they have ever experienced.

With that in mind, perhaps this is the year we shouldn’t call it “2020,” but instead “goin’ on 2021.”

And if things are not better by the next Happy New Year, maybe “2021” can be “goin’ on 2022.”

We all hope and pray for a positive future.

Let us pray.

We would love for today, O Lord, to be filled with positive signs of healing in our broken world. We pray for plans for our welfare and not harm so that we might be drawn forward to a future with hope. Help us stand firm against the many forces at work to spiral us downward into hopelessness. We pray for all who fear the future, and ask for your presence to be powerfully expressed that they might have confidence that all will be well. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Songs of hope are featured in our "song box" today.

Bring Us, O Lord by Voces8

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skwx_n8DNXc

The Road Home by Voces8

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_Vk67p2ls

Hope Changes Everything by New Song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jQiuZdOvbM>

There's Hope in Front of Me by Danny Gokey

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KIhYZQ_ovw

My Hope is in You O Lord by Aaron Shust

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RRZgr7wNDs>

Future and Hope by Torhild Log and Robert Balaz

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyZcCjTf1Q4>

All Earth Is Hopeful by Morningstar Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhT2KVbLlaj>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, September 24, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand BUT by Deacon Susan Jackson #177

Who is your special person in God's cloud of witnesses?

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:18)

Who is the person that has always believed in you? No matter the path you choose, this person has been there for you: rooting, encouraging, and equipping you. Perhaps this person is still living. Perhaps this person is now with all the Saints, continuing to teach you daily lessons through memory and experience.

Throughout my childhood and young adult years, this person was my grandfather, Everett Jackson. A man, who despite living through trials of being born in the middle of WWI, growing up in the Great Depression, served in the Central Europe Campaign of WWII, still stood firm in resiliency, strength, and faith.

These characteristics represented the way he lived life as he faithfully followed God, loved his family, and taught compassion/ kindness to others. As a car dealership owner/salesman, he used to joke that he sold cars to two-thirds of Wicomico County, MD. We would often run into people that knew him by name and could relay the stories of their family members' interactions with him.

My sister lives in our hometown and still runs into people who remember him, now 11 years after his death. He embodied so many qualities that came from the way that he was taught to live life: Faith in God is at the core of your being, be respectful and honor others, and make decisions wisely.

There are many lessons from those people who shape and form us that we cannot count them all. Yet, these memories, lessons, and experiences shape who we are and who we will become in the future.

One of the greatest things I remember from my relationship with my grandfather is that no matter what I decided, he was there for me. After choosing to attend Lenoir-Rhyne College, he helped make it a reality. After deciding to change my major, he told me that he just wanted to see me happy.

After I decided to change denominational affiliations from the United Methodist Church to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, he told me that as long as I continued to believe in God and grow in my faith, it didn't matter how or where I worshipped. He supported me as I made the journey to England for Young Adults in Global Mission, reminding me that God was with me and that he was proud of me.

He was intensely proud of me after I decided to attend the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary for my Masters of Christian Education. I remember returning home throughout those years to hear stories of how he often bragged about me to his friends and neighbors.

His death was in the middle of my seminary career and I realize that I made it through those rough months because of what he taught me: strength, resiliency, compassion, and love. He taught me that, no matter the choices made in life, that God is always present with us.

He taught me that honoring people means being faithful to who you are and where God is leading you while respecting their stories and traditions. He taught me that part of life means compromise- so that all feel valued and love. He also taught me to stand ground for what I believe in, not letting others change my self-worth.

My grandfather also valued friendship and community. He always pushed me toward opportunities in which I could make new friends, have new experiences, and see the world. He is one of the reasons that I love to travel and learn about various cultures- because not only did he tell us stories of the people he met during the War, he also told us the good parts- the kindness of strangers, the caring of the communities in a foreign country, and the strength of the community at home in the midst of trials and joys.

True community- the community that pushes you to be your best, that believes in you, encourages you, equips you for the hard work of what God is calling you to do is hard to find.

Yet, I do believe that God places people in our lives who do exactly this. When it is time for those people to go, their legacy and lessons withstand and are carried out in ways we do not realize until much later, if at all.

Since my grandfather's death, and even well before, I have met many other people who still embody those characteristics that he upheld. September 22nd his birthday and I found myself thinking about people who currently journey alongside me.

These are the people that God has joyously brought into my life to continue to remind me to keep faith at my core, to have strength, to make wise decisions, and that community is important.

As we continue to forge ahead and figure out new ways of being in community together, I encourage you to reflect upon your own lives and the people within it.

--Who are the people that have shaped and formed you?

--Who are the people that currently give you strength?

--Who are the people that are with you no matter what happens?

Give thanks for these people, for God has placed them in your life as a blessing. Give thanks for these people because they are your family, your community, your tribe.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, thank you for the great gifts that people have taught us throughout our journey, especially those people who keep us focused and grounded in your love. Let us learn from the great cloud of witnesses that surround us so that we can continue to be faithful disciples of Christ. Amen.

P.S. from Pastor Mark. Special thanks today for Deacon Susan's contribution today to *"St. Paul's In Your Home."* Listening and watching her videos prompted me to ask if she might be moved to write a daily devotion. I'm happy she did. I'm also glad after 177 devotions where I have searched for more than 800 songs to attach, that Deacon Susan found these I had never heard. I especially enjoyed spotting the beloved grandfather at the family gatherings in *"The Heart."* Enjoy.

"The Heart" by Needtobreathe

<https://youtu.be/Z5Yo99VjE2o>

"Home" by Philip Phillips

<https://youtu.be/HoRkntoHkIE>

"Luv is a Verb" by DC Talk

<https://youtu.be/WRfFuhrdGKM>

"Love, Liberty, Disco" by Newsboys

<https://youtu.be/2lfrALJSAVA>

St. Paul's In Your Home Daily for Friday, September 25, by Pastor Mark Opgrand #178

When Prayer Meets Pigskin

When the Arameans came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, and said, "Strike this people, please, with blindness." So he struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked. (2 Ki. 6:18 NRS)

On June 19, 2000 the Supreme Court ruled against permitting public prayer before football games. Nearly 20 years before that, I participated in what lead up to that ruling.

Because of my experience, I was invited to do my one and only "op-ed" for the Wilmington Star News. If I had not written that piece, it might have ended up as one of these daily devotions under the category "I can't believe I did what I did at that football game." I think you'll have some fun musing over this with me. From May, 2000 in the Star News:

The news about the Supreme Court reviewing the "football prayer" in Texas brings to mind memories of my first call as a Lutheran pastor in the small town of Caldwell, Texas.

Caldwell is in the heart of football country in Texas (20 miles from Texas A & M University, where businesses regularly sported "Beat the hell out of Texas", or "Beat the hell out of Oklahoma" or "Beat the hell out of Baylor" exhortations on their marquees).

It was while serving in Caldwell that I first encountered the hallowed tradition of public prayer before the local high school football games.

Growing up and attending high school in Oregon (*the "Bible Un-belt"*) such pregame prayers were unheard of. Therefore, I felt some discomfort when it was my turn in the local ministerial alliance rotation to offer a public prayer in this arena where "worship" was less about God and more about the almighty pigskin and gridiron glory. *"Don't worry about it," my youth group declared. "No one listens to the prayer anyway."*

So how should a minister, or any one for that matter, pray before a football game? Should it be done at all? What does the constitution permit? How should freedom of religion permit or restrict a public football prayer? The Supreme Court will soon offer an opinion.

As a young pastor in foreign territory, I did not have an opinion that night when I sat in the press box and was passed a microphone linked to a dozen tinny-sounding fan-shaped bull horns all around the field.

All I could think about how odd it was for people not at a worship service (or was it?) to be asked by an announcer to stand and bow their heads for the prayer. Then it was my turn. I still have this handwritten prayer in my possession.

“Let us pray. O God, you will no doubt hear mixed cries coming from this crowd tonight – cries such as ‘get ‘em or ‘kill ‘em’ or ‘beat ‘em to a pulp.’ Lord, please accept that such cries only reflect the spirit of the game. We don’t really want anyone hurt.

If anyone would have the hell beaten out of them, let it be done by the gospel, and not by some cheap shot on the field. So give us a good game, good sportsmanship on and off the field, and the grace to accept both the winner and the loser. For winning is not everything... and losing is not forever. Amen.”

Almost immediately I could see dozens of people below turning around and looking up at me with *“What the hell was that?”* expressions. The following Sunday a man came to church and informed me that that he hadn’t been in church in twenty-five years and hadn’t missed a football game in twenty-five years. He said he had to find out what kind of preacher would pray a prayer like that.

I have always believed in prayer at church, home, work, and school. But at work or in school and especially at football games I now prefer heartfelt private prayer to the loudspeaker type. I argue for this not constitutionally, but devotionally. Anything but the most generic public prayer in a non-worship setting can only have the effect of disrespecting the variety of deep religious faiths of those in attendance.

Likewise, a generic prayer (to anyone or anything who may be up there, out there, or in there....) disrespects committed personal faith in a particular deity or idea. Of course, some will argue that a little prayer before football can never hurt (knock on wood).

I believe now the better place for prayer is when two or three are gathered not under the Friday night lights, but rather in the true light and the spirit of the One in whose name they gather to pray. We’ll see what the Supreme Court says.

Afterword 2020: That prayer ended up making me a bit infamous among my colleagues, especially during reunions with old classmates. *“Hey Opgrand, do that ‘Football Prayer,’ again.” They especially loved the line, “If anyone would have the hell beaten out of them, let it be done by the gospel and not some cheap shot on the field.”*

One thing is for certain. When my youth said, *“No one listens to those prayers anyway,”* that might have been true about the local high rhetoric Baptist preachers, but I was still too young and too fresh out of seminary to know better. And you know what? I was even invited back the following

year. That prayer began with, “O God, you will be hearing your name spoken aloud and in vain many times tonight...”

Let us pray.

We thank you, O God, for the privilege and joy of being able to pray to you in all times and places. Teach us not to waste time on unimportant things or trivialize this great gift by turning it into our own exclusively focused wish list. We pray for each other and ask you to grant us what we need for this day and for the days ahead. Remind us that we are not alone in prayer but are joined by brothers and sisters in faith and the whole heavenly host. We pray for those who are sick and needing your healing and encouragement. Bless all the caregivers and front line workers. In Jesus Name. Amen.

P.S. I have intentionally selected songs today that offer either enthusiasm or a fighting spirit. The inclusion of “Dixie” is not meant as an endorsement of what “Dixie” represents to many, though it does qualify as a “Fight Song”.

Onward Christian Soldiers by Christian Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWJ1Z2qCEpA>

Stand Up Stand Up for Jesus by Anglican Hymns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56YekOBqV50>

Stand Up Stand Up for Jesus by Fontainebleau Academy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79FT7kJpZ1g>

Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory by Beauty of the Bagpipes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yd_72OjDO4

Battle Hymn of the Republic by Sejong Wind Orchestra

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-Cd5ekPK54>

Dixie’s Land by Carolina String Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpSR0oI5zy8>

Dixie by Bob Dylan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFp2prFwT8g>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, September 28, 2020 Not by Pastor Mark Opgrand But By Chaplain Bob Weeks #179

LISTENING IS IMPORTANT

By

Chaplain Robert M. Weeks

Scripture James 1:19 – “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”

Listening is important!

An older friend of mine used to close his eyes as soon as the pastor began his sermon. I asked him why he closed his eyes, and he said, “Robert, I need to listen carefully, and I do not want to be distracted by the pastor’s gestures. Listening is important to me.”

Listening has always been important for God’s People.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament had their origin in what is called “Oral Witness.” This means that persons carefully listened to the messages of God’s servants and wrote them down.

Getting people to listen properly is an old problem. God had trouble getting people to listen.

A few examples will prove that point:

Adam and Eve did not do a good job of listening. They disobeyed God. (Genesis 3:6)

Moses did not listen to God. He took matters in his own hands.

Instead of speaking to the rock for water, he struck the rock. That action caused him not to enter the Promised Land. (Numbers 20:8)

Elijah ran from Jezebel by hiding in a cave. He stayed in the cave listening for an answer from God. Winds came, and an earthquake – but no word from God. Then, a small voice came, “What are you doing in the cave? Come out and go back and face the enemy.” (I Kings 19:9)

Listening is an important call to the disciples in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. Peter, James, and John were with Jesus when he was transfigured. When that event

happened, Peter becomes so frightened that he started talking instead of listening. Then a voice came from the cloud, "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him." (Matthew 17:1-5).

During his ministry, Jesus had problems getting his disciples to listen at times. Peter had a problem listening when Jesus told the disciples that he (Jesus) would have to go to Jerusalem, suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the Chief Priests, and teachers of the law, that he must be killed, and, on the third day, be raised to life. (Matthew 16:21-22)

Thomas had problems listening to Jesus when Jesus told the disciples he was going to prepare a place for them. (John 14:5-6)

Out of all the friends of Jesus, Mary was a good listener. While Martha was preparing a meal for Jesus, Mary was at the feet of Jesus listening. Martha complained, but Jesus told her, Martha, Martha, Mary has chosen the best thing to do! She is listening to me!" (Luke 10:38-42).

My dad sometimes had a problem getting his confirmation classes to listen to him when he was teaching them about God. He would often quote verse 10 of Martin Luther's favorite psalm: "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." (Psalm 46:10) Then, he would say, "There is no way I can teach unless you are still and listen. It is important to listen."

Americans have problems listening in the 21st Century, especially during this pandemic. Many Americans have not listened to the advice of the Director of National Institution of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the Director of the Center for Disease Control, and other scientists, when they suggest that wearing a mask will help prevent the spread of Covid -19.

One news commentator reported a story about a young lady who did not listen. She became infected with the virus. On her death bed she said. "I guess I made a mistake." She had not listened to the warnings about the virus and became infected. Listening can become a matter of life or death.

According to the author of the book of Proverbs, the book was written to give "prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young." (1:4), and to make wise men wiser," (1:5). 21st Century people would do well to listen to the words of Proverbs 19:20, "Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise."

God has provided us with wise scientists and other qualified servants who offer hope for survival in this pandemic, if we listen.

Listening is important!

Prayer: *Dear Lord, during this Covid-19 pandemic, grant us the ability and willingness to listen to your servants as they lead us to safety with sound advice for our lives. Amen*

Listen, Listen God is Calling (Swahili and English)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMFFj_4WR1I

Listen God is Calling Peace Lutheran Alexandria

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y7I7BzID7Y>

Listen, Listen God is Calling Lockedwing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PACR8IenUqk>

Listen to my Prayer O Lord by Elvyre Bright

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lycNoY0WYCo>

O Lord, Hear My Prayer Taize

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-2WZFF_uAc

Hear My Prayer O Lord Voces8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74Q33UL7ugc>

God is Listening Twila Paris

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUnk1td2sQU>

God Hears Our Prayers by Mandy Lining

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjgBCjz22qE>

Go Forth And Listen Now To God's Word by David Haas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cO4He0LU5Us>

His Word Will Stand

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ia2VId7XJI>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday September 29, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #180

When baptismal promises are like money in the bank you never use ... because you never heard about it.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Rom. 6:3-5 NRS)

In the life of the church, one of Christianity's most hotly debated topics has been "infant baptism." If ever we wish one of St. Paul's congregations in the early church had asked for clarity about this, it might be about this baptismal practice. "Paul, please clear this up for us. Should we baptize our babies or wait for them to be old enough to decide for themselves?"

The practice is debatable. For churches who look to Biblical accounts where "whole households were baptized" (Acts 16:15), it suggests that includes babies. Some traditions disagree and believe the decision to be baptized must be made when the candidate is old enough to make the decision himself/herself.

This decision depends on whether we see baptism as God's act on behalf of us, or something we decide as a response to God. Lutherans favor the action beginning with God as God's gift for us.

Whenever I debate baptism with someone who prefers the "believers' response" option, I regularly hear this: "How can a baby make that decision if they are too young to understand what it's about? What if no one even tells them they were baptized?"

I won't claim this is a perfect analogy, but sometimes I have responded in this way:

Imagine when you were born you had a rich uncle who, out of love and concern for your future, put a million dollars in the bank for you. Now imagine no one ever told you that you have the money in the bank. Does the money exist? Does it fail to exist because you don't know about it? Is it only yours when you decide it's yours?

If we can agree that the money exists, then we can proceed to the importance of letting that child not only know about the money, but also show what it might mean when used wisely.

I believe God's baptismal promises are like this. They declare what we say in our liturgy of baptism,

In baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; by water and the Holy Spirit we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ. Living with Christ and in the communion of saints, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.

After this statement, parents and sponsor make promises to share with the child that he or she has been baptized, and it means what Luther teaches in the Small Catechism. Remember this?

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM

What is baptism?

Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead, it is water used according to God's command and connected with God's word.

What then is this word of God?

Where our Lord Christ says in Matthew 28, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

What gifts or benefits does baptism grant?

It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare.

When God makes these promises, it's like that rich uncle creating a million-dollar bank account for his little niece or nephew... or our Heavenly Father creating a trust fund for this adopted son or daughter. Whether or not the child learns about it, it is there. It may have less practical value if the child never knows. But believing or not, *"the money is in the bank."* The promises are there forever and shall never be broken.

I suppose many might think it downright foolish for a child to have a million dollars in the bank and never be told about it. I would hope parents who bring their children to receive God's baptismal promises feel the same way.

Let us pray. *Thank you, O God, for the gift of baptism and for those promises that begin with your grace. We pray for parents and sponsors who have heard and believe these promises, that they will faithfully teach their children all the ways they have been richly blessed by God. Support us all in reminding each other that we are rich in all God's promises. Amen.*

Baptized in Water by Michael Seward

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6arW9XKmRHk>

I Was There To Hear Your Boring Cry by Rolly Meeks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lj2KCIYMD2w>

Boring Cry by Rick Carlson (cute story about its creation too)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSIjlpkVrk0>

In Christ Called to Baptize by First Plymouth Lincoln NE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKfoYNbSa-M>

Go My Children With My Blessing by Chapel of the Cross

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjM18fEzD60>

Go Make of All Disciples by St. Frances de Sales Church Ajax Ontario

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrHmgGJrMI8>

Baptized and Set Free by Wade Meyers (ELW 453)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDbgMk71L28>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, September 30,2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #181

Lo. I tell you a mystery. But is it "Mystery" or "Magic" or "Illusion?" (Magic part 1)

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, (1 Cor. 15:51 RSV)

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: [Christ] was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:16 NRS)

Do you enjoy "magic shows?" Are you drawn to the wonder of people disappearing, or perhaps being cut in half, or maybe having cards appear out of nowhere? Are you among those who love performers like David Copperfield, David Blaine, or Shin Lin? Do you watch the popular TV (and YouTube) show called Fool Us, hosted by illusionists Penn and Teller, where they observe "magicians" perform their tricks, and then determine if they, (as "professional illusionists,") have been fooled ... or not?

I'm curious. Are you among those who want to know how these tricks are performed? Or are you rather among those who believes the mystery will be ruined if you knew how?

When I served as a campus minister at Odessa College in the 1980's, I took a class in "Magic," through their continuing education program. What I took away from this experience was a little knowledge about "how they do it," but a greater appreciation of the hundreds of thousands of hours it takes to be good enough to actually do these tricks well enough to fool people. Learning how did not ruin the trick for me. It actually made me appreciate it even more.

Nowadays, because information is available about just about everything, anyone can find out how the illusionists do it. (Check out "FactoFusion" or "Jason Parker" on YouTube if you really want to know).

Some people regard the "mystery of our religion," as Paul describes to Timothy, as nothing more than an "illusion," a "trick". But we all wonder how God did it ... how God managed to perform those miracles through Jesus; how Jesus fed the 5,000 with just five loaves and two fishes; how Jesus made people well with just a touch; how he managed to be executed in front of everyone, be sealed in a tomb, and yet re-appear three days later.

It's not *magic*. In faith, we believe this "mystery" is also not an "illusion". It is a "sacred mystery" that cannot be figured out, though it may be revealed after our own resurrection. For many, this can be a stumbling block to faith. But so might every single aspect of life itself. How life happened. How the universe became what it is. How there are so many varieties of species and wonders in nature. Why things work the way the work.

There are so many mysteries.

Have you ever heard it said “When I get to heaven, I’ll have a few questions for God?” Often these are regarding the difficult things in life that we cannot figure out, though it might include any number of “How did you do it, God?” questions.

Regardless of our questions, when, by God’s grace, we are resurrected to life everlasting, I believe none of those things will matter.

--Maybe the questions won’t matter because these mysteries are now revealed.

--Maybe the questions won’t matter because there are so many dazzling new things to experience.

--Maybe the questions won’t matter because we will be so happy to be basking in the everlasting love of God.

When there is no more sickness or pain or suffering, and when we are reunited with loved ones we have lost, I suspect that nothing will matter but the eternal joy we feel in that now and evermore. What was the question again? Never mind.

Let us pray. *With so many things in this world we don’t understand, we are so grateful, O God, for what is revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. You showed us your love and your most amazing grace. We pray that shall carry us through all these times when we are confounded by the hard questions of life, or just things we want to know. We ask for your healing mercies today, O God. We pray for the sick, the suffering, those who ask hard questions, those looking for answers that can bring healing to our sick and broken world. Help us trust you as we awaken to each new day. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

Behold I Tell You A Mystery with Philip Sly (from Handel’s Messiah)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13DpmWPV9IU>

The Trumpet Shall Sound with Alastair Miles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYTQ6gpcuYA>

Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery by Shane and Shane

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bak3JSuSg3Y>

Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery by Matt Papa and Mat Boswell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVJJEfjLhqU>

There is a Great Mystery A Wonderful Story by Rladbsi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trR-b4WqmmI>

There is a Great Mystery A Wonderful Story by The Naked Soul

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YV-jQi1dMzk>

O What a Miracle My Lord by Living Streams Hymns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCcZPmaq4wg>

Magic 8 Ball Theology (Magic, part 2)

Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. ¹⁰ All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." ¹¹ And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹² But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place. (Acts 8:9-13 NRS)

Remember the Magic 8 Ball? For 75 years this "Fortune-telling Novelty Toy with Floating Answers" has been a Mattel Toy Company staple. And yes, you can even order one this very day from Amazon for just \$8.88, and it will be at your doorstep in two days.

With the "Magic 8 Ball", you ask a "yes" or "no" question, shake it, and wait for a mysterious little answer to emerge in the inky blue liquid window. It was all very mysterious and "magical." As I have since discovered, the answers are printed on an icosahedron, a twenty-sided figure which rotates as you shake it. Do you remember the answers? Here they are, all twenty:

1. As I see it, yes.
2. Ask again later.
3. Better not tell you now.
4. Cannot predict now.
5. Concentrate and ask again.
6. Don't count on it.
7. It is certain.
8. It is decidedly so.
9. Most likely.
10. My reply is no.
11. My sources say no.
12. Outlook not so good.
13. Outlook good.
14. Reply hazy, try again.
15. Signs point to yes.
16. Very doubtful.
17. Without a doubt.
18. Yes.
19. Yes – definitely.
20. You may rely on it.

As you can see, ten are positive, five are neutral, and five are negative. If you don't like a certain answer, you can always ask again. Sometimes the ball will even tell instruct that.

I imagine most people approach the Magic 8 Ball, as just a fun little novelty, but someone most certainly could let their lives be ruled by the Magic 8 Ball.

Should I go to work today? *"My sources say no."*

Should I ask my girlfriend to marry me? *"As I see it. Yes."*

Will she say yes? *"Don't count on it."*

Will she ever say yes? *"Outlook not so good."*

What if we brought our theological questions to the Magic 8 Ball? These could be answers:

Is there a God? *"It is decidedly so."*

Does Jesus love me? *"Very doubtful."*

Was it something I did? *"Signs point to yes."*

Can I be forgiven? *"Ask again later."*

Can I be forgiven? *"Really hazy. Try again."*

Should I trust your answers? *"Yes-definitely."*

It is not likely that the Simon in our scripture had a Magic 8 Ball, but he had enough tricks up his sleeve to gain quite a following. The people were amazed. Given his openness to the gospel, I suspect he knew what he was peddling was about as real as Magic 8 Ball answers. When he encountered preaching of Phillip, he realized the gospel was the real thing he was missing in his life. Here were the answers from scripture that Simon could count on:

Is God real? *"It is decidedly so."*

Are Jesus' miracles real? *"Signs point to yes."*

Does Jesus love me? *"It is certain."*

Should I be baptized? *"without a doubt."*

Let us pray.

We thank you, O God, for the Holy Scriptures that direct our lives by your Word. Thank you for the witness of Simon the Magician who let go of tricks and illusions to experience the certainty of faith amid the great mystery of life. If ever we are persuaded that it is "Lucky Stars" that direct our lives, expose that misdirection so that we might be open to your revealed word through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

P.S. I wasn't sure if I should break tradition and link some "magic themed" songs, even if not Christian faith based. Therefore I asked my Magic 8 Ball and it said, *"As I see it, yes."*

You Can Do Magic by America

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7ONp-GC7vM>

Do You Believe In Magic by the Lovin' Spoonful (on Ed Sullivan)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8qZ4qzDICg>

This Magic Moment by Jay and the Americans

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKfASw6goag>

I've Got the Magic In Me from Pitch Perfect

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRFatzi_5do

P.P.P.S. It's no accident that I was unable to find songs of faith with the word "magic" in them. Faith is about trusting in God. Nothing magical about that. God make known what we need to know. Here are some songs of faith, not magic.

I Know That My Redeemer Lives by Christian Hymns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tMgpruzpv0>

He Came Down by Concordia College Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPjdFi4wz24>

Blessed Assurance by SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UePXtov0zC0>

This Is My Story, This is My Song by Watoto Children's Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nPAPfHNrvq>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, October 2, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #183

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:23-26 NRS)

"It's just a bunch of hocus pocus." (Magic part 3)

This was written on a bumper sticker on the car in front of me: *"It's all a bunch of hocus pocus."* At the stoplight I could see more clearly that the words were superimposed on the traditional Celtic symbol of the Holy Trinity, the one with an interlocking circle and triangle. The sticker was right next to the North Carolina license plate which said, *"In God We Trust."* I would have thought *"First In Flight"* a better choice, thereby avoiding the suggestion that *"In Hocus Pocus We Trust."*



The meaning and origin of *"hocus pocus"* is an interesting one. Its common definition is *"meaningless talk or activity, often used to draw attention away from and disguise what is actually happening"*. It was originally used by magicians as part of their act. *"Hocus Pocus"* was a magical incantation like *"Abracadabra"* or *"Shazaam."*

Where the phrase *"Hocus Pocus"* came from is interesting. In 1694, John Tillotson, the Archbishop of Canterbury claimed it was a parody of words used in consecrating the Lord's Supper during the Latin Mass. The Latin phrase was *"Hoc est corpus meum,"... "this is my body."* We can imagine how, consecrating bread and wine to become the body and blood of Jesus could seem like magic to the average parishioner.

It might make more sense to superimpose *"It's just hocus pocus"* on picture of a chalice of wine and loaf of bread than a visual symbol of Trinity. Even so, to the driver of the car, it might seem that all matters of divine mystery are nonsensical... hence *"just a bunch of hocus pocus."*

When I read expressions (and sentiments) like this, I am even more amazed at how believing itself is such a gift. It's easy to disbelieve or be skeptical or look at Christian claims as nonsense, hocus pocus, or a skillfully pulled off illusion. Just another magic trick. Consequently, how one shifts from unbeliever to believer is also a great mystery.

In the end, it comes down to God's work through the Holy Spirit. It is like Martin Luther described in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles Creed (about the Holy Spirit):

"I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith..."

So how does God do it? How does God create faith in us? How does God make believing the "difficult to believe" possible? How does God create church out of nowhere (or at least from twelve disciples and those whom Jesus touched in his life and through his death and resurrection?)

Was it through "Hocus Pocus?"

No, it is rather through "*Hoc est corpus meum*,"... "*this is my body given for you... this is my blood shed ... for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins*". Of course it required more than Jesus just saying these words at a Passover Supper followed by his terrible sacrifice on the cross and then a resurrection which admittedly will always be hard to figure out (How DID he do it?)

The Holy Spirit makes faith possible. I wish and pray that all people would hear the good news of the gospel and believe. But that's not for me to make happen, and I will trust the Holy Spirit to do what God says the Holy Spirit does... in God's own time and in God's own way.

Meanwhile I give thanks every day for this wonderful hopeful faith we share that continues to lift us up through times of pandemic, uncertainty, political and social strife, as forces of evil which try to drive us to despair (often quite successfully, to be honest), and as we see through all this, that wonderful joy that comes in sharing both the mystery of faith, and all those moments of God's love revealed.

Let us pray.

We thank you, O God for your Holy Spirit who makes it possible for us to believe. When we hear someone imagine it's all hocus pocus, draw us deeper into your divine mystery so we can be in awe of how, in your great love for us through Jesus, you came to be with us, for us, and in us. In every generation faith is tested, and we know these times are no exception, but we most earnestly pray that, in the face of stress, fear, and uncertainty, you will create in us sure and certain faith. We pray for all who suffer today, for those struggling to survive, and those who are angry, fearful, or just plain tired. Bless our health care workers, our teachers and administrators, all those in service

to their country, and for all who wake up each day with a determination to live as you have called us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Chant of the Mystics: Pange Lingua - Divine Gregorian Chant - Eucharistic Hymn -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPQLUwUAetQ>

What Miracle What Mystery by Living Stream Ministry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJqWq16OxCw>

Holy Holy Holy by First Plymouth

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SHDNs7Dt5M>

Holy Holy Holy by Hymns Project

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwuDSw-9cUQ>

Holy God We Praise Thy Name by Singing Nuns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC4pQJs6gmc>

Ubi Caritas by Audrey Assad

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_Pp0jKn1zQ

This is My Body by Esther Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkxpr3qNAac>

and a seven year old violinist just because I am stunned at her performance (how did she do that?)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YipD8Npugvg>

St. Paul's In Your Home Devotion for Monday, October 5, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand but
BY Chaplain Bob Weeks #184

NO SMALL EFFORTS

By

Chaplain Robert M. Weeks, U.S. Navy (Retired)

Scripture: John 6:9: *"Here is a boy with five barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"*

Don't fall into the trap of comparing yourself and your actions to the actions of other people.

For example, when you think of the importance of the life and work of Mother Teresa, you might feel very small. After all, she taught in India and dedicated herself to helping the poor and sick. Great accomplishments, she established a Hospice Center for the blind and the aged. She also established a leper colony. All of this won her the Nobel Peace Award for humanitarian work.

Mother Teresa's efforts were big; however, let me tell you about a mother who performed a small act that turned out big, too. If you read Chapter 6 of John (John 6:1-13), you will learn that Jesus was confronted with a great crowd of people after he crossed the Sea of Galilee. The people had seen and heard of the miraculous signs Jesus had performed on the sick.

It so happened that the Jewish Passover Feast was near this time. When Jesus looked up and saw the great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Now, Jesus asked the question to test Philip, since he already had something in mind to do. Philip was overwhelmed and answered, "Eight months wages would not buy enough bread for each one of them to have a bit."

Then Andrew spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will that go among so many?" Jesus listened and said, "Have the people sit down." The place was grassy, and there were about 5,000 people in the crowd. Then, Jesus took the five loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

The author of John reports that everyone had enough to eat, and that the pieces left over would fill twelve baskets. What a miracle story. This story showed the power of Jesus. Reading the story, you must think the little boy was great to offer his meal, but I want to call to your attention the mother who made the meal in the first place.

It takes experience and talent to bake bread. Imagine what this mother had to go through to bake the bread for the little boy's lunch. It was no small effort. She probably had to grind the

barley in a traditional way (mortar and pestle). Then, she would go to a well and obtain some water. Next, she would build a fire on a piece of flat rock. When the fire had heated the rock, she would scrape away the ashes and place her bread patty on the hot rock to bake.

In addition, the fish that was in the little boy's lunch and packed in his basket was probably Tilapia. Tilapia is very often caught in the area waters. The mother had most likely previously pickled the fish so it would be edible. Remember, she had no refrigerator. She put the fish in the little boy's lunch basket to add flavor to his lunch.

To the little boy's mother, her work to make him lunch, must have seemed a small effort for him. How could she have anticipated that the meal she had packed for her little boy would have such eternal significance? How could she have guessed that Jesus would use the meal to feed 5,000 people and have leftovers?

Taking a look at this mother's action reminds me of the many ways God can take our small efforts and use them to feed people physically, emotionally, and spiritually. So when you feel you should be doing something bigger in your life to help someone, stop and remind yourself of the story of the loaves and fishes. God's task is to use your effort. During this pandemic, God is using the many efforts of our congregation. Congregational members daily make calls to members and ask if help is needed. Our pastors daily send us devotions and scripture lessons. The Evangelism Committee sends out messages of Joy. During this pandemic time, the Drive Through Communion Services are no small effort. To develop and present worship services for the internet is no small effort.

These efforts are helping our congregation to withstand the pandemic. They are no small efforts!

Don't compare yourself and your efforts to the actions of other people. I have just finished installing a battery in a Jitterbug Telephone owned by a handicapped widow who lives at Brightmore Independent Living. I considered that a small effort; however, every time she sees me, she thanks me. Look around, there are probably many small efforts you could accomplish for people.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to trust you to use our efforts for your purpose. Amen

Little Things With Great Love by Porter's Neck

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pm5VQAxDMrc>

Establish the Work of Our Hands by Porter's Neck

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5V2_cs8gTlw

Loaves and Fishes by Jacqueline Hegerty

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUnoDfDdYhQ>

The Loaves and Fishes by Abigail Miller

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zma4WYdYiBA>

5 Loaves and 2 Fishes by Corinne May

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfmuGguNnYI>

Bread of Heaven by Morrison Orpheus Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfmuGguNnYI>

Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer at massive English gathering

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ofp6rdAgRrY>

A little girl gives a coin to a street musician and gets a surprise (*Ode To Joy*)... you'll like this!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceX5jJ5fggs>

The end of conflict according the Star Trek.

"Let That Be Your Last Battlefield"

Their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction are in their highways. 8 The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace. 9 Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. (Isaiah 59:7-9 NRS)

With "streaming video options" now available, old television shows are now able to be seen "on demand." That's how I was able to follow up on an old memory of a Star Trek episode first aired over fifty years ago. I found it on Amazon Prime.

The episode was entitled "*Let That Be Your Last Battlefield.*" In this episode the "*Enterprise*" starship encountered a member of one alien species in pursuit of another, as they had been for an eye popping 50,000 years. Humanoid in appearance, one of them is ink black on the left side of his body, and chalk white on the other. The other is identical, except that the colors are reversed.

As each alien tried to gain sympathy from the crew, they are shocked that the ships officers had not acknowledged the clear difference (in their minds) between the two of them. What the crew does recognize is the clear hatred they have for each other. Telling their story and pleading their cases, we hear of their intense conflict and historical hatred where one group, former slaves, rebelled while the other claimed their lawless actions made peace impossible.

The officers cannot take sides choose to refer this to the Federation, but before they can seek a star base, the aliens escape to their home planet, which upon detection has no living signs. Unable to resolve their differences, the two races have completely destroyed each other. The only remaining living beings are these final two, now on their empty planet in one final battle to the death.

In our time, living on "planet earth," it feels like we regularly resemble these two aliens, with two opposite and opposing sides locked in a perpetual battle from which there is no hope for resolution or peace. For the sake of power, whatever it takes to "win" is unleashed. Each side claims righteousness; each side claims the other is wrong, misguided, or evil.

Now before I go further.... I know. I spend way too much time falling down those internet rabbit holes seeking truth and trying to make sense of a madness from which there seems no resolution. I should probably stick with old Star Trek episodes.

But dang... "*Let This Be Your Last Battlefield*" imagines where we could be heading if we, (that is, those who affirm a God determined to break down barriers and draw us together through Jesus), cannot lay aside the rightness of our causes for the sake of peace.

Let us pray.

We pray for peace and reconciliation between those in conflict with each other. Help us to recognize peace as a positive result of committing to your cause, Lord Jesus. For the sake of the world you so love, O God, turn our hearts toward you, and help us lay aside that which divides us. When we experience love and goodness, let that encourage us to seek even more intently your ways. We pray for hope not only broadly speaking but hope narrowly speaking in every corner of the world we inhabit... in our families, homes, workplaces, churches and communities. As we move away from destructive extreme behaviors, bring us safely to a center space of grace. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Make Me a Channel of your Peace by Angelina

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zl1Gst7pEqc>

Heal Us Now by Zamir Choral Foundation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBkC6yxlzOE>

I've Got Peace Like a River by Lynda Randle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmpTt0pkeX8>

Peace Be Still by Hope Darst

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsIpGiz3SfQ>

Peace is Flowing Like a River by Steve Politte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1NzTyYKn5Q>

Let There Be Peace on Earth by Vince Gill

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_DxNpW1kHQ

Love Your Enemies by Kyle Sigmon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnVjNaBfQL0>

...and just for fun... the final scene of Star Trek's "*Let this be your Last Battlefield.*"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ev10K4hgRtQ>

Rethinking wisdom and foolishness.

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell-- and great was its fall!" (Matt. 7:24-27 NRS)

Do you agree ... or disagree with the following statement? "The man who builds his house on sand knowing what might happen is wiser than the man who builds his house on rock believing it will last forever."

The parable in Matthew and that old Vacation Bible School song ("The Wise Man Built His House...") have always indicated that it's pretty obvious. The wise man who builds his house on the rock is the smart one. The foolish man is forever more foolish than the wise man because he has forgotten what happens "when the rains come down and the floods come up."

As children we love the motions of the song, especially when it comes to "and the house on the sand went SMASH."

I pondered this scripture and song in an earlier devotion (#154) and shared why, when couples plan their wedding and request (as alternative to *Unity Candle*) a co-mingling of sand in a "*Sand Ceremony*," symbolizing their unity in marriage, that I always have insisted on putting a *rock* in the bottom of the new container. This is to remind them that "*On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.*"

This seemed like a simple, but clear acknowledgement of what is wise and what is foolish. But considering this further, we also admit there are more than rains and floods and beach erosion to wreck our dreams of the perfect home or a perfect life.

Growing up in southern Oregon, I always imagined my home there was among the safest places in the country to live. We never had anything like I have since experienced other places. We did not have tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, and severe winter storms. Southern Oregon, I have always imagined, is a very *wise* place to live.

Medford also had a fair amount of yearly rainfall, though never enough to cause flooding. I suppose that's why, in thinking about that wise place to live, I completely forgot about fires. This

past month I followed the Almeda Fire, which devastated Phoenix, Oregon and came within four miles of my childhood home. Whole neighborhoods were completely flattened by fire.

So ... to answer the statement posed at the beginning of this devotion: I would now observe that the person who builds his or her house on sand knowing what might happen may indeed be wiser than the one who builds his or her home on rock believing it will last forever. To illustrate this, I'm sure there are YouTube videos showing houses built on rock that have come tumbling down in a landslide.

Scriptures teach us a lot about wisdom, not just in this parable of Jesus, but through what, in the Bible, is called "*Wisdom Literature*." That includes the book of *Job*, some *Psalms*, *Proverbs*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Ecclesiastes*. Much of the advice in these books is so practical that even people who do not regard themselves as spiritual find much with which to agree.

Apart from putting our faith and trust in God through Jesus Christ, there are many points of agreement in respect to wisdom. If you try to drive your car through floodwaters, you may be swept away. If you do not evacuate your home when a raging fire is coming your way, you may be burned.

Of course, nothing is ever fool-proof. And sometimes we make foolish mistakes.

Therefore it is very good news that God loves us even when we are foolish, even though indication scripture indicates that God desires us to live as God's wise children and wise stewards of God's creation.

That should be encouragement during this time of division, deep conflict, misinformation, and the disregarding of smart pandemic practices to practice, in Jesus' name, compassion for our neighbor as we make intelligent choices regarding public health safety. That's not political. Just biblical.

Let us pray for wisdom.

We pray for biblical wisdom, O God, that we can make good choices that reduce the risk catching and transmitting the deadly coronavirus that continues to plague the world's people. We continue to remember in prayer all who continue to suffer from the effects of this serious pandemic. We pray that those who suffer minor symptoms will show compassion for those who are at risk of becoming gravely ill. Give wisdom to those whose daily decisions affect the lives of others. We pray for our health care workers and those who risk their lives to help the sick get well. We also pray for all the scientists and researchers and policy makers to make wise decisions for the health and safety of all. Bless us all we pray. Amen.

The Wise Man Built His House on the Rock by Young Praise

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkNOcr5iHP4>

Wisdom Song by Laura Woodley Osman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMnIVe4-QUY>

Perfect Wisdom of God by Keith and Krystyn Getty

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSszYnOe6kl>

Wisdom Song by Scampton Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgKivhRnCkU>

The Wisdom of God/I Will Rise by Chris Hamlin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uTIqu8G-34>

Give Me Wisdom by Micah Blake

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ULMpmK8m9c>

Psalms 36 ... A Wisdom Psalm by Exodus Road Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AH5utZnYw5o>

Psalms 49 (another Wisdom Psalm) by Steve Bradley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKTmMzWAZHI>

Praise And Thanksgiving (from ELW topical index on "Wisdom")

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8Oo-K6glBA>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, October 8, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #187

Another Pastor Mark *classic* sermon (What? On Stewardship? A Fable? Seriously?)

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. (Mal. 3:10 NRS)

During a recent zoom meeting with North Carolina Bishop Tim Smith and rostered leaders, the subject was stewardship and how we shall approach our annual stewardship campaigns during this most unusual year.

The first thing I thought about was how grateful I have been during this most challenging year that people have generously continued to show their love for the Lord and St. Paul's church. Since we had never had these circumstances before, I didn't know what to expect. Would closing our doors for a time (now a long time) and developing alternative forms of worship and programs mean people would stop supporting their church? I didn't know.

What I know now is that we are a community that is sticking together and doing our best to support ongoing and new approaches to ministry. Of course, we long for that time when we can enjoy unrestricted in-person fellowship, but meanwhile, your expressions of love and support continue to be shown. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Some have found it has not been difficult to continue giving. I spoke with an out of state friend who had been having some financial trouble and he remarked that he was doing quite well now. He never realized how much he was spending going out to eat all the time until the restaurants were closed. I am sure some of you are realizing you have a bit more available income for giving just because some expenses have been reduced.

I confident now planning for 2021, that we're going to be all right. We're on the right track, doing what we can to be safe, embracing the new ways the Holy Spirit is moving among us, and trusting in God who will support us all the way. The invitation to keep giving will, of course, continue to be made, but always with grateful and confident hearts.

Now about this crazy sermon. It falls into the category of what I call my imaginative "Twilight Zone" sermons. First delivered on a stewardship Sunday in 2007, and revised in 2016, it's a fantasy (and cautionary tale) developed from something I have heard spoken many times in church, "If only we had the money. Think of what we could do."

What I had not previously shared in 2007 and 2016 is that the fable was not only based on the quote, but also on a true story. When I was in Odessa, Texas in the early 1980's, a downtown

church about the size of St. Paul's received an \$8,000,000 estate gift from a member who died. In today's dollars, that would be \$25,000,000. As one of the old members told me, "This is the worst thing that has ever happened to us." There was so much fighting, politicking, and division over what do to with this gift that it nearly ruined the church. It ended up going into an endowment fund that was used for general expenses. Therefore, they had all the money they ever needed... and no one really needed to give any more. But they had a nice paid choir. And a large paid staff. And a building where nothing leaked. After I left Odessa, I lost track of what has happened to them, but their experience informed my "Cautionary Tale."

Having such a windfall is not likely to be a problem for us, though we will always be tempted to imagine, like those who buy lottery tickets to "Just think of what we could do..."

It is important to affirm here, that we don't need an estate gift or lottery win to do ministry as God calls us. All we need are grateful hearts, mission and ministry as God calls us, and the will to say "Thank you, God, for all you have done and will continue to do for us.

Let us pray

We do give Thee but thine own, O God, and we pray you will encourage the development of generous hearts within us, committed to you and your ministry. We thank you for each day given to us in love, and we ask we will use each day wisely and according to your will for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We Give Thee But Thine Own by URC Psalmody

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISoPbyXjQjg>

We Give Thee But Thine Own by Andrew Remillard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISoPbyXjQjg>

Come Ye Thankful People Come by Scottish Festival Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2viMo1jxkw>

All Good Gifts by Dawn's Early Light

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBkl1r1cOuM>

We Plow the Fields and Scatter by

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccVEjKFkAV4>

We see the Fruitful Harvest by Sam Hargreaves

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMpM65Ez2hc>

Let us Talents and Tongues Employ by Joe Guerin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03opc7O-yVs>

Take My Life by Norton Hall Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2zt7PzHPqk>

**An Attitude of Gratitude:
A Cautionary Fable
Stewardship Sunday
October 14, 2007
St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Wilmington NC
Mark Opgrand, Preacher
Luke 17:11-19**

Once upon a time there was a little church that wanted to be a big church. They wanted to be a big church like the one down the street that had lots and lots of people and lots and lots of programs.

For many years they tried to grow, but they always came up with the same conclusion/observation. If they wanted to grow, they needed money. "If we only had the money," the council president said, think of what we could do." But alas, they were a poor church... or so they thought.

In reality, God had blessed each member with a great deal, but whenever they were invited to give out of gratitude each one held back because each one thought every other member should do more. So it was that every year when it was time for the annual stewardship drive, they repeated their annual lament, "If only we had the money, think of what we could do."

That lament turned into an annual prayer. "Dear Lord, thank for all you have done for us. If it be Thy will, please give us the money we need so we can be the church we have always wanted to be."

God surveyed the way he had blessed this little church Giving them a grand creation to enjoy, ...the forgiveness of their sins through their Lord Jesus Christ, ..and the wonderful power of the Holy Spirit so eager to direct their days and deeds in God's peace.

And God was saddened that relatively few seemed to develop what God called "An Attitude of Gratitude." Like with Jesus, when he healed the 10 lepers, God was confounded when only one made a point to return thanks for this great gift.

Furthermore God was bothered that "The Great Commission" had become The "Not So Good Commission." So year after year God continued to hear all these prayers about how if the church only had the money, think of what they could do." So God thought to himself, "I've tried just about everything I can think of.

I've blessed them with homes, shelter, jobs, technology, places to go on vacation, professional sports, entertainment, food and drink. I've given them good minds and health and dreams and relationships and most of all JESUS....

I've hoped they would respond with An Attitude of Gratitude. What else can I do? Then God thought a little more. "I know. They've been saying "if only we had the money....

Well, I'll give it to them. I'll give that poor little church the most productive oil well on the planet.... right on their property. The royalties will provide all the money they need to do everything they have ever dreamed of doing."

Well, you can imagine the joy of the pastor, church council and parishioners when they discovered they were now... essentially... rich. At last they could do whatever they wanted. They were delirious with joy.

First they drew plans for the new worship center... and the new activity center, and the education wing and the multi level parking lot and the baseball and soccer fields. Their new auditorium could even show IMAX movies... to attract more youth, of course.

They hired dynamic new pastors and associates, the best music directors money could buy. When the old choir members couldn't perform to the new level, they hired professional singers, then professional contemporary musicians, then youth ministers for every grade level.

The money flowed; things went well, and they did grow.... A little... but still not enough to satisfy their dreams. It turned out the paid staff did most of the work, and it was still hard to get commitments from volunteers.

Even when they eliminated the offering in order to attract more people to worship, they still didn't grow like they hoped. So the council said, "Look, we've got the money. Why don't we just start paying people to come to church? Of course, we'll need extra honorariums for ourselves because it wouldn't be fair to pay them and not us, especially when we've already given so much of our time and talent."

So they set up a payment structure, placed time clocks at each church door, and the people began to roll in. Likewise each Sunday School classroom had a time clock, as did the library, kitchen, gardens...even bathrooms.

And every Sunday, the people picked up their checks during what used to be the Offering. You've never seen such a happy church. It didn't take time for this church to be the envy of the community. The singing and gospel entertainment was great every Sunday. The organ, the band, the music, the state of the art 100 inch plasma TVs... and each year everything got bigger and better.... well bigger, anyway.

People showed up in droves for every planned activity; in fact, the only time there was any dissention at all was during the annual meeting; that's they discussed at length what the participation payment schedule should be going to be for the coming year. But they always worked it out because they always had the money. And how did God feel about all this?

Well, God enjoyed the level of participation, and felt joy in giving them what they always wanted. It was nice to see a full church every Sunday for a change. But still, something was missing. There was something about their attitude. There was **no Attitude... of Gratitude.**

What they had developed instead was **An Expectation of Entitlement**. For the members, the church became just another job with no real purpose other than to show up, and even though the job wasn't that hard, they wanted more money for themselves; the average parishioners began unionizing so they could get more of what they called "their fair share."

For a long time, God was very patient with all this, but finally God wondered if this grand experiment was **less** than completely successful. With all this generosity, had God created grateful, faithful stewards and disciples? Or just members with privileges and an expectation of entitlement?

God feared the answer. So God said, to himself. "Well, there's only one way to find out. I'll dry up the well." And lo, it was so. For the people, this was a disaster! Without the money, they couldn't do the ministry. They couldn't do what they always dreamed of doing. And soon they had to **start** **making....cuts**.

The first to go was paying for Sunday worship attendance. "They can come and start paying us for a change," the council argued. But in no time worship attendance became spotty, even with the services' high remaining production values.

Then came staff cuts...the youth leaders were first. The youth had already quit coming because there were no more "Serve Me Trips." Next came the musicians, then the pastors, finally the custodians and office staff.

After a few short months, only the president and eight council members remained. Just enough for a quorum for the final meeting.

It was that night they voted reluctantly (but unanimously) to close the church. They each took a cut of the last remaining petty cash... and said farewell. The last words to be spoken came from the council president.

He sighed when he spoke, "It's such a shame;" he said, "if we only had the money, think of what we could do."

The end.

Epilogue.... a final thought.

I know this story seems more like a Twilight Zone episode than a stewardship sermon, and there is another story to be told about another little church that got it right...and that's for another time....

In the mean time, consider this: If we only had an attitude of gratitude, think of what God could do through us. When we have an attitude of gratitude, think of what God **will** do through us. Amen. -
-Pastor Mark Opgrand

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, October 9, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #188

The time my faith clashed with my religion. (And God cried, "Foul!")

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. (Ps. 51:1-4 NRS)

I found Christian faith as a child growing up in the Lutheran church. I found religion when I became a convert to Purdue University Basketball in 1985. That's when I was offered a chance to share season tickets with the chair of our Purdue Lutheran Campus Ministry board of directors.

North Carolina basketball fans will understand an opportunity (even if *only* Big Ten basketball) to join 14,123 screaming fans at regularly sold out Mackey Arena. You can't just *buy* those tickets. They get held and passed down to family or close friends. My friend Chris first shared two tickets with his buddy, who upon moving away willed his to Chris who in turn offered it to me. I only paid for the tickets, not the extra money to the John Purdue Club for the privilege of sitting in our particular prized section. Chris and I also had tickets for the women's team as they were also entering elite status.

For ten years I was a diehard Boilermaker basketball fan. I made sure we programmed our campus ministry around the games; I was as faithful to game attendance as committed church members are to every Sunday worship. Religiously I attended the games, and it was not until one fateful Ash Wednesday that I realized just how committed I was to the "*religion*" of Purdue Basketball.

I was blessed to be at the game when Indiana University Coach Bobby Knight famously was ejected for throwing a chair across the court (I believe that was the night 14,123 people experienced hearing loss because it was so loud). I was there to watch All American forward Glen Robinson almost led Purdue to victory over Michigan's Fab Five. I was there when now head coach Matt Painter played as an undergrad.

And I was there that fateful Ash Wednesday when the Boilermakers had a home game scheduled the same time as our service. That's when I realized how my faith was in conflict with my religion.

It wasn't *just* a game, of course. They never were. It was shared community, common purpose. We had our special rituals; we had our special clothing; fight songs were our hymns; cheers were our liturgy; Coach Gene Keady's perpetually screaming scowling face was Martin Luther's accusing voice of the Law personified. We could be rich or poor, black or white, men or women, left or right

but we were all united against the common enemy of the week (and even more when it was IU). United in prayer for victory, we were Boilermakers, and we were proud!

Ash Wednesday, therefore, presented a huge conflict between my *faith* and my *religion*. I imagined my faith might have forgiven me had I just skipped out, but while regular church members could get away with missing (it's NOT *Christmas* or *Easter*, after all), we clergy are held to a higher standard. So with a bad attitude I dressed, not for the game, but for the service.

Have you ever really been convicted of your sins? I sure was that night, beginning with the confession exposing my devotion to my *religion* and later calling me to reality as ashes were pressed on my head with these words: *"Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."* It was not *"Remember you are a Boilermaker, and there will be another game next week."*

I wish I could say the gospel came through so clearly that I continued my penitence throughout the evening by just going home and contemplating how faith was far more important than the religion of Boilermaker Basketball. But alas, when the service ended, I saw I could still make the second half. I pulled the tab from my clergy shirt, threw on my Purdue sweatshirt, wiped the ashes off my forehead, and ran to the arena (the church was nearby). Sigh...

Years later I don't remember who the Boilermakers played that Ash Wednesday, or even if we won or lost. I do, however, understand far more clearly, through my own experience, how devotion to sports and our favorite teams can affect us. I have seen how sports rivalries can cause tension and division in families and communities.

We have seen how higher education has become dependent on religious level devotion and support of members fans. In some circumstances, we have seen student athletes exploited for the sake of the revenue they bring to the game.

At the same time, I thoroughly "get" our "religious devotion" to our favorite teams. Therefore, I will not stand in judgement, even though I also stand convicted of not always being able to remember the distinction between "Christian faith" and "secular religion." I see it in sports, though it will apply to other areas of personal devotion as well.

The good news is that God always has a way of calling us back home, to an arena of shared faith with those united through Jesus Christ our Lord. In this arena, where the only important victory is the one Jesus has secured for us, we hear words of forgiveness, hope, and reconciliation that remind us that despite how we suit up or how we cheer, (or how often we foul), we're all on the same team.

Let us pray.

As seasons come and seasons go, and as our teams win and lose, help us celebrate O God the unity we have as one people, called and chosen by you to bear your love and redeeming word for all the world. Keep us from the kind of tribalism and competition that defeats your purpose for our lives. Help us celebrate the joy of play and competition, but always remembering who we are and that we all belong to you. Amen.

Hail Hail to Old Purdue in Mackey Arena

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DGrfZaKBNI>

Purdue Basketball Paint Crew

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcPqve7yvk4>

Bobby Knight Throws Chair (see me?)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= jc2ESr43PY>

Sorry for the above videos... Just too tempting... Here's a beautiful Ash Wednesday song we sing every year... and a few others.

We Rise Again From Ashes by Tom Conry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPi9j0yuPUM>

We Will Rise Again by David Haas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOJhui8RvuU>

Psalm 51 Create a Clean Heart by Graham Kendrick

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IRQTaSo9Nc>

Psalm 51 another Create In Me A Clean Heart O God by Jason Silver

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjsG6IHEUUE>

Change My Heart O God by Maranatha Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IISmG- eJTU>

Psalm 85 Restore Us O God of our Salvation by Esther Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cfo-toNbaTM>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, October 12, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Ogrand But by Chaplain Bob Weeks #189

MEETING NEEDS

By

Chaplain Bob Weeks

Philippians 4:19 (NIV) *"And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."*

This passage of scripture is one of at least 169 verses in the Bible that refer to ways God provides for us. In this passage from Philippians, Paul is thanking the congregation for sending him gifts, and he is reminding the congregation that God will meet all of their needs as well.

Many passages about God's provision relate to our need for food and clothing. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus asks us not to worry about our life, what we eat or drink. Life is more important than food and the body more important than clothes (Matthew 6:25-34). Others passages refer to the needs of our soul and spirit.

For example, God provides us with *peace* (John 14:27), *comfort* (2Corinthians 1:4), and a *spirit of power, love and self-discipline* (2 Timothy 1:7). Paul always had his needs met, and, in fact, teaches us that in whatever physical state we find ourselves, we can be *content in the Lord* (Philippians 4:12). Remember, Paul was in prison when he wrote to the congregation in Philippi.

Learning about the names by which God has been called in the Bible can teach us much about Him and how our needs are provided. The name "*Jehovah Jireh*" in Hebrew means "*The lord Will Provide*" (Genesis 22:14 {NIV}) It is God's character to be faithful and provide. Another name by which God is called in the Bible is "*Adonai*," which means "*Lord of all the earth*" (Joshua 3: 13 {NIV}). This word tells us that he owns each one of us and supplies us with what is needed. As believers, we are to trust and obey God and keep our focus on Him for our needs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some markets have remained open and needs have been met. For example, daily, people come to Farmers' Markets in Wilmington to buy meats, eggs, fruit, preserves, vegetables and other items. These shoppers look in the market for different things according to their needs for that day. Needs are being met.

Shoppers at local markets are much like people who attend our Outdoor Church Services at St. Paul's or listen to the Sunday YouTube messages. Those attending the Outdoor Church Services come for the special fellowship after having been away from their friends during the pandemic. Some come to sing, to pray together, and greet each other.

During the Sunday You Tube Worship Services, some like to listen to the music by our choirs and sing along with the choirs as the music is played. Some, especially the children, like the Children's Sermons. Some look forward to hearing the scriptures read. Some listen intently to the sermons. Even though the Service is on You Tube, some enjoy confessing their faith and praying the Lord's Prayer out loud as the pastor leads them. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to ask for provision, and our dependence on God is affirmed each time we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

In the General Prayer, our pastors pray for our needs and that God will meet them. A real need is met for some who attend the Drive- By Holy Communion Service and receive the body and blood of Jesus. A need is met when congregational members send in their pledge money. It is amazing how God has provided for our congregational needs during the pandemic.

Our congregation is a diverse group, but, no matter, our needs are being met by God and God's people during these Services. No one knows the answer to the needs of our members during this pandemic, but we know that God does. Our job during these times is to take advantage of that which is offered, as well as, to invite others to join us and have their needs met.

These services are providing important needs for us during this virus. **OUR NEEDS ARE BEING MET!**

Since our needs have been met in worship, we as Lutherans need to remember what happens during our Liturgical Services. We come to worship in the Name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We confess our sins and receive forgiveness of our sins (our needs being met).

We listen to the scriptures while they are being read (always calling us back to God). We sing hymns that are really the history of the faith of the Christian Church. The Pastors and Deacon proclaim The Word of God as they have had it revealed to them. The General Prayer asks God's blessing for our needs and the needs of others.

THEN, AS WE LEAVE, WE ARE TOLD: GO IN PEACE, SERVE THE LORD!

Now, since our needs have been met, we are called upon to be servants of God and meet the needs of the broken hearted, the grieving, the poor, the unemployed, the oppressed, our enemies, the depressed, and all persons with whom we will encounter during this pandemic
WILL YOU ANSWER: THANKS BE TO GOD!

Prayer: *Dear God, please send your Holy Spirit to make us aware that our daily needs are being met in many ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amen.*

My Shepherd Will Supply My Every Need by Mississippi College Singers
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9XUSlzeRQ8>

My Shepherd Will Supply My Every Need by Eclipse 6
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip-m1XGqdh8>

I Need Thee Every Hour by Anthem Lights
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTdyD4Q3uHc>

I Need Thee Every Hour by Sam Robson
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3wSbLa2uGg>

I Need Thee Every Hour by Metropolitan Temple, London
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDZl6tXZ7YE>

He Will Supply Your Needs by Trinity Temple Full Gospel Mass Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xry8A8oEGKg>

Jesus Will Supply Every Need by Friends
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsVuOXBA3Xo>

When In The Hour Of Deepest Need by St. Paul Lutheran, Austin, TX
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8ikxQkkytI>

The Lord Will Supply Your Every Need by Don Ogletree
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZ554mLr34I>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, October 13, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #190

Never had nuthin.' I worked hard all my life and never had nuthin.'

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? (Eccl. 1:2-3 NRS)

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me¹⁹ -- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. (Eccl. 2:18-19 NRS)

The teacher in Ecclesiastes was pretty discouraged. His opening remarks are full of "Woe is me" or "What's the use?" or "What's life gonna get 'cha?" or "It's all the same in the end" or "Nothing every changes," or "You can't figure it out, so you might as well give up."

Whenever I read the "teacher" (sometimes translated the "preacher") in Ecclesiastes, I cannot help but recall the tale of my Great-Great Uncle Bill Carson, my mother's great-uncle and Grandmother Hilda's uncle. Until his death in the late 1960's, Bill lived in Portland, Oregon, as a retired longshoreman.

Born in rural Minnesota in 1882, Bill worked on the family farm until, in 1910, he became fed up. He moved out, went west, and changed his name from Carlson to Carson. Because he was such a big and strong man, he was able to get work on the Portland docks unloading ships. He worked the docks for over forty years.

When my parents and I moved to Portland in 1962, we made regular visits to Uncle Bill and his wife Frieda. I remember sitting on a davenport that was covered in heavy plastic to reduce (eliminate?) fabric wear. Besides being big and husky, what I always remembered about Uncle Bill was talking about his life with this oft repeated refrain:

"I never had nuthin.' I worked hard all my life and never had nuthin.'

In some ways, this was true. Bill had a house, but never owned a car, never went on a vacation, never had a checking account. He never smoked or drank; he had a wife, but no children. And every time we visited, we'd hear the same refrain. "I worked hard all my life, and never had nuthin..."

To be sure, for many years longshoring was a rough job, but as unions got stronger, things became better for longshoremen. My father found out how much better things got one year when Bill became ill and had to go to the hospital. Because of Bill's poor health, he asked my honest and

trustworthy accountant father if my dad would take care of his finances. That's how my father became Bill's Power of Attorney.

Because of Bill's poor health, and because my dad was now aware of Bill's savings account, dad became convinced that Bill needed to have a will drawn up, and for this, of course, they needed an attorney. But when my dad brought this up in the hospital, the conversation went like this:

"Bill, I think you should have a will prepared, so we should see about getting an attorney,"

"Can't do that," Bill replied.

"Why not?" my dad asked.

"Cost too much," said Bill.

"But Bill," my dad says, *"You've got \$90,000 in your savings account. What are you saving it for?"*

"EMERGENCIES!" Bill exclaims, looking my dad squarely in the eyes.

Emergencies! My dad loved telling this story. My father did manage to get the estate plan together for Bill and Frieda, and after they both had passed away there was, in today's dollars, about \$600,000 that all went to about a dozen charities of Bill's choosing. My dad took nothing, and made sure the greedy long lost second cousins who came out of the woodwork after Bill's estate also got nothing.

What I regret for Bill was that he was unable to enjoy the fruits of his labors. He was just a sad unhappy fellow who carried a lot of resentment around with him. I'm really proud that my parents took such an interest in Bill and Frieda's care. We were the only family they really had. Because Bill also quit the church back in Minnesota, he missed out on the joy of being part of a faith family. I am, however, thankful that with my father's encouragement, Bill was able to be generous in death. In the end, his giving went way beyond the Biblical tithe of 10%.

I have often wondered what might have happened if Great-Great Uncle Bill had not become alienated from his family, or perhaps found a welcoming church community, or was able to let go and enjoy more of God's good creation. If any of that had happened, I wonder if during our visits, we might we have heard, instead of never having nothing to something more like this:

"You know, I've worked hard all my life, and I've been blessed. I've had everything I needed, and much more. I am so thankful that I have come to know the love of Jesus and have discovered how all of life is a precious gift. I'm so glad I have what I have so with a grateful heart I can say thank you, God."

That, of course, would be putting words in Bill's mouth, and should not be for me to do. But I see no good reason that I should not pray that God would put such words in our mouths as we have been blessed. What do you think?

Let us pray.

Give us thankful hearts, O God for all your wonderful gifts to us. Teach us to be wise stewards, generous in our giving, but also taking time to enjoy the fruits of our labors. In Jesus name. Amen.

Come Ye Disconsolate by Acapeldredge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06q9am18p9k>

Come Ye Disconsolate by Cairn University Chorus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fT8rm9t22rl>

Come, Ye Disconsolate by Gracias Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mn7r8KzKrs>

We Give Thee But Thine Own by Joe Guerin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpTayoOkIX0>

We Give Thee But Thine Own by Koine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PB24dBXgZHI>

We Give Thee But Thine Own (instrumental guitar)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7thTdZH0XAA>

Come Ye Thankful People Come by Scottish Festival Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FqdCskC0QE>

Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow by Anthem Lights and Selah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQUTvMtUhw4>

Doxology by Maverick City Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLamGZjeISU>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, October 14, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #191

Here they come! Where'd they go?

"A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. 6 Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. 7 Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. 8 Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold." As he said this, he called out, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Lk. 8:5-8 NRS)

I begin by sharing a ***"Moment of Joy from the Evangelism Team"*** reprinted from a recent Epistle.

Moment of Joy from the Evangelism Team

This week's "Joy" is a real-life reminder of the beauty and magic that is all around us in God's creation.

One of St. Paul's members, Cris Dixon, has been posting photos of her backyard caterpillars as they go through their larva (caterpillar) and pupa stages to emerging as gorgeous Monarch butterflies. In just 9 to 14 days the transformation is complete.

To see the very ordinary looking caterpillar eating all the milkweed leaves in sight, then turning into a slick greenish pod attached to a pot or stick by just a thread, and then becoming a strikingly stunning Monarch is just amazing.

We thank Cris for using the new slower pace of the past six months to open our eyes to this often overlooked "joy" that occurs year after year. And thanks be to God for this beautiful example of rebirth. We await our own transformation with joy!

--Linda Evans

I loved this story, perhaps even more so because it had a much happier ending than my recent caterpillar story. My story began recently after my wife Rebecca had earlier planted some butterfly attracting plants and also some parsley in a large planter.

The parsley thrived, and to my great surprise one day I discovered the parsley foliage was filled with fifteen beautiful growing caterpillars. They were bright green, yellow and black. Researching them, I learned they were Black Swallowtail caterpillars, who, unlike Monarchs, are attracted to parsley. For several days they devoured the parsley and grew very large and plump.

Then they disappeared. Overnight ten were gone. A few days later three more disappeared. Then the final two. There were no signs of caterpillars anywhere. Perhaps they slipped away for their

next stage of life. Maybe predators got them. I have no idea. What I do know is that I missed out on the joy Cris had in watching her Monarchs go through their whole cycle. And that made me sad.

When the caterpillars first showed up, I imagined writing a devotion more on the order of Cris and Linda's "Joy Moment." ... saying ... "and then beautiful swallowtails emerged..." But after the caterpillars disappeared, the only thing left was a very stripped-down stalks of parsley. What could I write about that?

I have still seen no signs of Swallowtails. But I have seen something else. After several days, from the roots of that stripped-down parsley, little tiny leaves started sprouting. Those leaves grew and branched out. The plant became fuller and fuller. Now it looks bigger, better, and brighter than it was when the first swallowtail eggs began to hatch.

So perhaps the story here is not about caterpillars or butterflies. Maybe it is about a plant that had good soil and ample rain, and despite being chewed by its own "predator" to almost nothing, still came back better than ever.

And that is a rather joyful message to ponder as we think about the wonderful and surprising ways God works in our lives.

Let us pray.

We thank you for the joys that come as we enjoy your creation, O God. Thank for creatures great and small that point to the wonder and mystery of how you have made all things. Give us an appreciation for your mysteries, even those things we wonder about or do not understand. We continue in our prayers to remember those who are feeling little joy today, those overwhelmed by setbacks, uncertainties, and ill health. Bless our health care workers and researchers as well, that the mystery of the coronavirus can be solved so a cure can happen. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The Butterfly Song by Little Stars of Jesus (remember this joyful song from VBS?)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2dAKab3Wgw>

Hungry Caterpillars Song by Seasonal Songs in Motion

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gs8_VUSnMQ

The Very Hungry Caterpillar Song by Mister Teach

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbFkxdZWLQk>

It's A Beautiful Day by Greg and Steve

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DztYR5bl_g

When I Look by New Spring Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iW9MN7vMpQ>

All Creatures of Our God and King by SE Samonte

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CS-oOC_AAY

All Creatures of Our God and King by John Rutter

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0_8JnaOjSo

All Creatures of Our God and King by Anthem Lights

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPwmV_ATYAw

All Creatures of Our God and King by Awaken Generation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rg5mSyn4RFw>

This is My Father's World by NCrew

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63r2UzN4VMc>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, October 15, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #192

What? A Potato God Moment?

Dr. Gerhard Frost, one of my favorite seminary professors, has been dead now for over 30 years. I recently ran across a tribute to him where a former seminary president said this: "Frost was a great teacher ... and a gifted poet, whose teaching reflected his profound insights. He had a great ability in seeing profound truths in commonplace things and in incidents in his own life, and he could take the common and ordinary and clothe them in truth and beauty."

That well described Dr. Frost. He brought to the classroom encouragement to look beyond "Christian Education," to what we now call "Faith Development," and recognize the lessons of God at work in our ordinary, everyday lives. His life was one of continuing "Joy Moments."

Continuing to think about joy moments, for today's devotion I would like to share a meditation written in a book (now out of print) called, *"Homing in the Presence: Meditations for daily living."* This meditation was called *"The Magic Moment."*

The Magic Moment

I was in the Palmer House in Chicago—one of fifteen hundred teachers attending a convention. It was the Wednesday evening before Thanksgiving Day, and time for the closing celebration. As we entered the auditorium, we were given surprising instruction; *"Don't forget to pick up your potato."*

And there they were, piled along the back wall in that elegant auditorium, bushels and bushels of potatoes! We did as we'd been told, and then received another surprising instruction: *"And now we'll give you exactly two minutes of silence with your potato."*

Silence in the auditorium. We sat, wondering what to do next. Then I began to think, touch, feel, smell. I remembered things I'd learned about the potato long ago and since almost forgotten. Cut it skillfully, making sure there's an eye on each piece, and you'll have as many new plants as there are pieces. The green spot is where the sun has scorched it—it leaves a bitter taste. This rough spot is where it will begin to decay.

That plain, brown potato took on new life and new meaning in my hand. I thought of how many millions of people this simple root has kept alive in good times and bad.

Those two minutes reminded me that common experiences often introduce us to the uncommon. We owe a debt of awe and wonder to one another and to every living thing on earth. When we're able to sense the uniqueness of each passing moment, even the most ordinary of events can carry deep meaning.

The ceremony in the Palmer House changes me, making me more sensitive to gifts, more ready to give thanks. Any growing things might have been used achieve the same purpose – an acorn, a string bean, a strawberry. Every living thing praises the God of life simply by the fact of its existence.

What do you see around you? The sun shining, a green leaf uncurling on a branch, a squirrel foraging for its dinner? All things, no matter how small or common, can offer glimpses of our oneness with God and creation.

Afterword by Pastor Mark:

During these days, when so much seems so uncertain and so stressful, and with so much anger and tension around us in the media, we could use a few more potato God moments. Such moments are where God meets us in the ordinary and reminds us that everything is in God's care. In faith, we trust that God will bless through crises... whether physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual crises. Sometimes God's presence will be more evident than others, but like a potato God moment, we might just see something we have overlooked.

Let us pray:

Help us recognize your power and presence O God, in all things and in the uniqueness of each passing moment. Remind us that you continue to work in and through your creation and in and through us. In Jesus Christ, you have entered your creation to make possible your divine connection with us. Keep us close, gracious God, so that we can find encouragement along the way as we stand with you and all those whom you love, in Jesus' name. Amen.

All Things Bright and Beautiful by John Rutter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qY9G00WWUVI>

For the Beauty of the Earth by St. John's Private School

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFz3uQblmnw>

For The Beauty of the Earth by NCrew

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QR7XGDep5mk>

In the Garden by Tabernacle Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcRCa7SDhxA>

From All the Dwell Beneath the Skies by UNT Women's Chorus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDEfAP3XOvg>

From All That Dwell Below the Skies by Orchard Enterprises

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDqeOOx9o_U&list=RDQMR1RNASm6Q4Q&start_radio=1

From All That Dwell Below the Skies by Isaac Watts

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcvRIFB5Hs8>

Bless the Beasts and the Children by Karen Carpenter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ5VpfzoW0>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, October 16, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #193

When answered prayers surpass all comprehension. (How I went to seminary the first time).

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:6-7 NAS)

I wonder how many people have read *"let your requests be made known to God"* as encouragement to transform prayers into long wish lists? Should such lists include things like finding a parking space on a crowded street, or winning the lottery, or passing a final exam? What shall we conclude when a parking space is found, or lottery won, or test passed? Do these become concrete examples of answered prayer?

Should we be quick to see *"cause and effect,"* concluding that *"God answered my prayers,"* or rather should we be cautious with connecting wishes to perceived answers? St. Paul clearly invites us to make requests, but we should not overlook praying *"with thanksgiving."* Before every request, Paul says it is important to enter prayer with a thankful heart. He doesn't say to expect the answer we ask for, but the *"the peace of God which surpasses all understanding."*

I don't believe this means we should not look for specific answers to prayer. Rather we should pray for whatever we wish, and then let it go. Peace follows as we wait and see *"what's next?"* The words *"surpasses all comprehension"* draws us to peace in the mystery of how all this works.

I have tended to be cautious about declaring how I believe God answers prayer in specific ways. And that may well be why God, at least one time in my life, answered my prayers in a specific undeniable way. I wonder what you might make of this:

When I finished college, I had a degree in education but discovered while student teaching that I had not learned enough to be a good teacher. I had learned enough, however, as a cook in the Holden Village to go return for a second summer. My Holden term was for three months. During that time, I assure you that, without having any idea what I should do next, I prayed daily for direction and guidance. That's how the *"Holden Prayer"* became such a mantra for me.

"O Lord God, who has called Thy servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet unchosen and through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing whither we go, but only that Thy hand is leading us and Thy love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

That summed it up. Then on the Thursday before the Saturday I was scheduled to depart, I was doing some afternoon prep in the kitchen when a man came for a cup of coffee. We chatted. He asked me where I was from and where I was going. I shared a little about myself and said that I didn't know where I was going next, but I was scheduled to leave Holden in two days.

Out of the blue he asked if I ever considered going to seminary. My reply was a bit casual. I told him *"Of course, all of us who work in the kitchen think about going to seminary because we talk theology all day while we are working."* Then he shared that he was President of the Trustees at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California.

He had just learned that they had a couple of last-minute cancelations. He asked if I was interested, and we'd talk later. We did. How could I not say "yes?" I left Holden the next day and I enrolled the following Monday. My parents were happy but stunned. Also stunned was a Holden staffer enrolled at this very same seminary who had left Holden the previous week. "What are you doing here?!!" she exclaimed.

That was the cup of coffee that changed my life. I had prayed all summer for guidance and direction and then met a pastor one afternoon who, with a phone call, got me into a seminary that had not accepted two guys in my dorm who both had higher GPA's than I. To this day, I never imagined my prayer would be answered this way. Had I tried to enroll the "normal" way, I would have been rejected.

What this has left me with is a very keen awareness to be open to the God who moves, not only in mysterious ways, but sometimes in very specific ways. I won't know about divine intervention in respect to hunting for a parking place and finding it, but certainly we are heading in the right spiritual direction whenever in prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, we are making our requests to God, and then trusting in God's "peace which surpasses all comprehension."

Let us pray.

You are Holy O God, inviting us to turn to you in all circumstances and pray without ceasing. Thank you for hearing our prayers and for the wonder and mystery of however you are answering them. Shape us to be free from anxiety in our praying as we turn everything over to you. For all who wonder what to do with their lives, or what's next, we pray that doors shall be opened, and peace be experienced in the process. For all who face fear and uncertainty, grant your peace In Jesus' name. Amen.

You Are Holy by National Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYwqyyR4y14>

Dur A Helig by Stiffsgarten Rattsvik

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2CcYWwNRll>

Du Ar Helig by Anne Hildig

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4YuwJH83ao>

You Are Holy by Chorus Magnus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwtxjbuWo58>

If You But Trust in God to Guide You by National Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m-L5QcWePA>

If Thou But In Trust in God to God Thee by Calvin College Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFfYKN6Jw1o>

If You But Trust in God to Guide You by Fountainview Academy

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFPe_G-Lqcc

The Summons by Robert Kochis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0aAkOe87mo>

The Summons by Jereme Asunto

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiXnbOORTAU>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, October 19, 2020, not by Pastor Mark Opgrand but by Chaplain Bob Weeks #194

A SPIRITUAL PLUMB

By

Chaplain Bob Weeks

Amos 7:7-8 (NIV): *"This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built with a true plumb line in his hand. And the Lord asked me, 'What do you see, Amos?' 'A plumb line, 'I replied."*

When my home was being built in New Bern, North Carolina, following my retirement from the Navy, I was fascinated with the way the bricklayers used a plumb and level. The plumb is a type of pendulum, and a level is a kind of ruler with a reservoir filled with liquid. The plumb was used to make sure the brick wall was aligned vertically, and the level was used to make sure the wall was aligned horizontally. A brick wall must be aligned correctly, both vertically and horizontally, in order to remain standing for a long time.

Amos of Tekoa, which is about 6 miles from Bethel and 11 miles from Jerusalem, was called to think about God's relationship to Israel in similar terms. Amos was not a man of the court like Isaiah, or a priest like Jeremiah. He earned his living from flocks and taking care of the sycamore fig groves. Though his home was in Judah, he was called to announce God's judgement on the northern kingdom (Israel). His dominant theme is clearly stated in Amos 5:24, *"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream."*

Amos was a vigorous preacher of God's justice and righteousness. Despite God's choice of Israel and his kindness to her during the exodus and conquest, and in the days of David and Solomon, his people were continually failing to honor and obey him. It was a time of idolatry, extravagant indulgence in luxurious living, immorality, corruption of judicial procedures, and oppression of the poor. The shrines at Bethel and other places of worship were often pagan, and God's people were worshipping them. As a result, God soon brought about the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom (722-721 BC).

When God was setting a plumb line among His people, He was declaring an end to their attempts to justify their crooked ways. God was setting the standard, and God does not negotiate His laws. God does not change with the whims of culture (Numbers 23:19-20). Just as the bricklayer's plumb line is not subject to the opinions of the worker, so God's moral standards are not subject to the opinions of mankind. Wise people are those who line up their lives according to God's plumb line, rather than trying to move it to satisfy their own goals.

Is there anything still to be learned from Amos in 2020? Does God holding a plumb line before Amos, one of justice and righteousness, do anything for us today? Dr. Martin Luther King years ago suggested (in his letter from the Birmingham Jail) that the church can be a “*thermostat*” rather than a “*thermometer*,” a challenge to the status quo rather than its mere indicator. A thermostat senses and performs actions so that the system is maintained near a desired point.

American believers need to be involved with actions that maintain equal justice. The plumb line stands as an upright measure, marking that which must be torn down and rebuilt from scratch. This happens to be the need of our times. Our relationship with God shapes the kind of relationships we have with others. As American Christians, we need a spiritual plumb and level to help us have the right relationship with God and others during these conflicting, distrusting, systematic racism, and pandemic times. Justice must be maintained both vertically and horizontally in all cases of our legal systems and among fellow Americans.

Amos was sent to Israel to call God’s people back to righteousness. The work of our pastors and deacon, as well as the many volunteers of our congregation at St. Paul’s, can serve as a “*thermostat*” and a “*Spiritual Plumb and Spiritual Level*” needed at this time. They are calling our attention to the word of God, prayer, and remaining in communion with Christ through these frustrating times. As the author of Galatians instructs Christians (Galatians 5; 25), *if we live by the spirit, let us also walk in line with the Spirit*, and that is our Spiritual Plumb Line.

Prayer: Holy and righteous God, grant us grace to contend fearlessly against evil and to make no peace with oppression. Help us to work for justice among all people and nations, to the glory of your name, through Jesus Christ. Amen

Let Streams of Living Justice ELW 710 by Sammamish Lutheran Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehWSO4PVhU&list=TLPQMTgxMDIwMjCn7jc7RfdOSQ&index=2>

Streams of Living Justice by Christ Lutheran Visalia California

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MezbG6HCj0s>

The Plumbline by Carrie Newcomer (I used to go to her concerts in Indiana; she’s a faithful Christian)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzcHxZmpaUc>

Let Justice Roll by Sojourn Music

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOj_jLHPd2E

Grace Like Rain by a group called PLUMBLINE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaOi5x7y3q8>

*Plumblin*e by Jamie Lipe

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5_edNEyqSc

*Plumblin*e by Kelly Joe Phelps

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEPgs1s4dm4>

Let Justice Roll by Awaken Worship Collective

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoLwanbjoc8>

Let Justice Flow Like a River by CYF Cite de la Paix

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcliyOvscpU>

Was Jesus an Originalist?

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. (Matt. 5:17-18 NRS)

Until current discussions about filling Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's seat on the Supreme Court, the word "originalist" was not in my personal vocabulary. Judge Amy Coney Barrett, like her mentor, the late Justice Antonin Scalia, describes herself as an "originalist." Many people have been talking about lately.

According to Websters, originalism is *"a legal philosophy that the words in documents and especially the U.S. Constitution should be interpreted as they were understood at the time they were written Some judges believe the best way to interpret the Constitution ... lies in an approach called originalism.*

The judges who follow this approach look to history to discover what those who wrote the Constitution most likely thought about the content and scope of a constitutional phrase, and they interpret the phrase accordingly."— Justice Stephen Breyer. "The main point of originalism, which has driven conservative legal theory for a generation, is that the Constitution does not evolve."

As a clergyperson, this conversation has prompted me to reflect on "Law" in the Bible, and how Jesus himself interpreted the Law. In the Bible, observing the Law was fundamental to one's relationship with God. The Law was given by God, not only reflected in the Ten Commandments, but also in over 600 Old Testament Laws. Students of constitutional law have a seen a connection between constitutional law and torah (Old Testament Law).

Matthew chapter 5 suggests Jesus could be an originalist, especially when it says Jesus did not come to abolish the law. But Jesus is most clearly an originalist if the goal of an originalist is to determine the intent of the writer of the law, namely God Almighty. Who else would know God's intent about the law better than the Son of God and Word made flesh?

There are dissenters of course, namely the Pharisees, who see themselves as true originalists! From their perspective, the Pharisees always disputed Jesus' interpretation of the law. But every time we read, "You have heard it said...." followed by "but I say to you" Jesus is interpreting the law, and it is always DIFFERENT from the Pharisees.

Some examples:

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; (Matt. 5:21-22 NRS)

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:27-28 NRS)

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; (Matt. 5:38-39 NRS)

Looking at these examples, Jesus appears to make the law even more demanding than originally written. It is so demanding, in fact, that no one is fully able to observe it.

When Martin Luther pondered this, he came up with a helpful insight. He identified the Law as having two primary uses: The first use of the Law (Latin term "*usus civilis*"..meaning *civil*) is to maintain order and discipline so that our sinful impulses are kept in check, order is maintained, and human community can be possible.

This fits with recognizing how law and order is fundamental for a society to function. Sometimes this has been compared to traffic laws. They maintain order and make it possible for people to drive safely.

The second use of the Law speaks particularly to how Jesus raises the demands of the Law. This is called "*usus pedagogicus*" "*pedagogical use*". What this does is expose our sin and show us and teach us that we always fall short of keeping the law (especially as Christ pushed it), It shows we are sinners, and that we need someone to save us from sin and its consequences. I remember how in seminary our professors would say "*The Law drives us to Christ and the gospel!*" That in turn leads us to salvation and the forgiveness of our sins.

Lutheran pastors especially always worry that when we talk about "*the uses of law*" we are about to invite people into the "*snooze zone*", but Luther's understanding can actually be helpful. Law is important because it maintains order; it also shows we can never be perfect. Law exposes how we fall short and how much we need the grace of God.

By contrast, the Pharisees believed the Law was a perfect system that could be followed perfectly. Therefore, there was no need for grace or mercy. Just follow the law and look for as many loopholes as you can. Committing adultery, for example, would be a clear-cut issue. Did you violate this law or not? But Jesus takes this further and exposes how even thinking about it is also sin.

What matters to Jesus is what's in the human heart, where all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. Jesus will not let us off the hook of the law.

As we take this to heart, we see Law, then, as helpful and necessary, even though following it is impossible and it cannot save us. Only Jesus can.

As an “*originalist*”, Jesus reveals God’s intent to give us Law that creates order but can never be followed righteously. As we fail, the law drives us to the gospel, where we discover God’s original intention is to save us all by grace, despite the Pharisees dissenting viewpoints.

Let us pray.

Thank you for the gift of creation, O God, and for commandments and laws that make it possible to live in harmony. As humanity fell short, thank you for Jesus who came to save and to forgive. Thank you for showing us who we are, good and bad, and always needing your love, grace and forgiveness. Amen.

O How I Love Thy Law by Laodicean Church of God

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fudJ6NhOTow>

How I Love Thy Law O God by Andrew Remillard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvcgOo9naBw>

How I Love Thy Law O God by Luke and Meghan Hansen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVIEFD7PYDY>

How I Love Thy Law O God by Bruce Moss

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBOB7xL1Sv8>

How I Love Thy Law by UCG Atlanta

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhuKI5zmG1g>

Blessed Are You O Lord, Teach Me Your Statues (Eastern Orthodox Chant)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQ-I-VQsvko>

Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation by Cambridge Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzTfefXux8A>

Christ Our Cornerstone by Koine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJVBxk5kmYs>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, October 21, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #196

"He's Bob Dylan's Grandson" (Word for Word vs. Dynamic Equivalence, Part 1)

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." (Mk. 8:27-29 NRS)

I am the bread of life. (Jn. 6:48 NRS)

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, (Jn. 10:14 NRS)

Since Pastor Michael Megahan and Jo Ann joined St. Paul's this past year, I have been delighted to have our very own professional Bible translator in our midst. One outcome is that I have become increasingly aware of translation issues as I read scripture. One of the biggest issues translators deal with is whether any given passage should be translated "word for word" or with "dynamic equivalence". "Dynamic equivalence" emphasizes choosing the meaning of words over their literal translation.

One good example is Luke 9: 51 (NRS) *When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*

Another translation says, *"Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem". (Lk. 9:51 NIV)*

Sometime there are metaphors in the Bible that require interpretation. When Jesus says to Peter in John 21 *"Feed my Sheep."* Jesus means *"Feed my people,"* The Greek word is *"probatone"* literally means *"sheep"* and all English translations read *"sheep."*

Let's think about how our approach to language and translation might result in different outcomes? Let me tell you a story that illustrates miscommunication over words.

In previous devotion (#116) I told the story of hearing from Rodney Hansen, a seminary classmate, that his sister Patti Hansen, was *"dating a Rolling Stone."* He was referring to a member of the

rock band, not a rock. I understood this, as dating a rock would be nonsense. At the same time, upon first hearing the story, it seemed a bit unbelievable. It was true, and Patti and Keith Richards have now been married now many years.

A few months ago I had occasion to learn from my friend Ben that his daughter had a new boyfriend. I asked, *“What’s he like?”* Ben answered, *“He’s Bob Dylan’s grandson.”*

This began months of misunderstanding. I took this literally, thinking this was very cool (like *“My Sister’s Dating a Rolling Stone”* story). What I didn’t realize until much later is that what Ben meant when he said, *“He’s Bob Dylan’s grandson,”* is that he *looked* just like a young Bob Dylan, or someone who *could be* Bob Dylan’s grandson.

Ben believed I understood this, so every time I asked if they had gotten to know more about Bob Dylan or if their daughter had met Grandpa Bob yet, he thought I was playing along with the joke.

However, I took *“He’s Bob Dylan’s grandson”* literally, word for word, when actually it was a metaphor. If this had been translated from another language, the translator could have chosen either *“He’s Bob Dylan’s grandson”* or *“He looks like he could be the son of a famous singer/songwriter,”* or possibly *“He is small, wiry, and has tousled curly hair.”*

Looking at scripture, there are certain things we must simply learn. When Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς. (Jn. 6:48 BYZ) is translated *“I am the Bread of Life,”* that is a *“word for word”* translation. But we still we need to learn what that means. Alternatively, if we translated it, *“I am like one of the main food staples required for life and good health,”* that could initially express the meaning of Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς, but that’s not how Jesus said it. In certain circumstances, learning the scriptures requires us to learn what words and expressions mean.

That can be a challenge. Pastor Michael tells the story of how hard it was for a tribe to understand the story of a man being lowered from a roof to see Jesus. In their community where all the homes were huts with thatched roof, this was non-sensical. Pastor Michael said it was necessary to include a drawing of what the house in the Bible looked like.

I have great appreciation for what Bible translators go through all the time as they are translating for the first time our sacred scriptures into a language of people who have never had a Bible in their own language. Think of the challenge to translate scripture when expressions, metaphors, and words do not have their easily identifiable counterparts in the language translators are working on.

We continue to pray for the important work of translators, and be grateful Jesus never said, *“I am Bob Dylan’s grandson,”* either literally or figuratively. (Because ... of course, everyone knows Jesus looked nothing like a curly haired Jewish Bob Dylan; we all know Jesus was tall, with medium build

and had long straight hair, right?). So let's move on to our next question: How, shall we understand Jesus as "the Son of Man?"

Let us pray.

Gracious God, we pray that you will open the scriptures for all who wish to learn about you and how you have entered into human history to show us your love and save us from our sins. We pray for clarity as we read your word and give thanks for all who open the scriptures to us. Teach us the way of Jesus, that we might follow you and trust you in all circumstances. During this most difficult year 2020 grant us all grace and hope. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I am the Bread of Life by Notre Dame Folk Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dX4uC3a7RC8>

I am the Bread of Life by St. Paul Inspirit Ensemble

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0yUdXnfC5E>

I am the Bread of Life by Jaime Thietten

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CRMbh8ViUI>

Bread of Life by Forever Be Sure

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_bZIFJ95Qs

Who Do You Say I Am by Pam Mark Hall

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2qFbcVwk3g>

Who Do You Say I Am by Anna Golden

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igCIQEhIWV4>

Who Do You Say I Am by Anointed Brown Sisters

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ef3L9Q7eNYg>

Jesus Set His Face by Roger Jones

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lst0CgfKslw>

...and imagining what Bob's grandson might look like, here's a young Bob Dylan singing *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (from movie *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* and bearing no resemblance to "Behold I Stand at the Door and Knock")

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnKblmRPhTE>

Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra (Word for Word vs. Dynamic Equivalence, Part 2)

Saul's son Jonathan set out and came to David at Horesh; there he strengthened his hand through the LORD. 17 He said to him, "Do not be afraid; for the hand of my father Saul shall not find you; you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be second to you; my father Saul also knows that this is so." 18 Then the two of them made a covenant before the LORD; David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home. (1 Sam. 23:16-18 NRS)

Continuing our thoughts about "word for word" versus "dynamic equivalence" in Bible translation...

What if someone's whole language structure communicated through cultural references and experienced history?

One of the best reviewed episodes in "Star Trek: The Next Generation" was Season 5, Episode 2, entitled "Darmok." Watching the show, we always take for granted that every alien species speaks the same language (English) but actually communication depends on a highly advanced universal translator. Usually this works fine. Once exception was with an encounter between the Star Ship *Enterprise* and a species called *Tamarians*. In their first encounter, the universal translator translated all the words properly, but communication was impossible. The Tamarian captain Dathon began with:

"Rai and Jiri at Lungha. Rai of Lowani. Lowani under two moons. Jiri of Umbaya. Umbaya of crossed roads. At Lungha. Lungha, her sky gray."

It made no sense. Likewise, the Tamarians had no way to make sense of the Federation's language translated. Desperately trying to communicate, the Tamarians beamed Captain Pickard and Captain Dathan down to a planet where they had to find a means to communicate in order to fend off a fierce predator.

In time, Picard realized the Tamarians' words were references to history or images from their culture. This came about as Picard and Dathan worked together. "Darmak and Jalad at Tanagra" referenced working together. "The river Temarc in winter" meant "Be quiet." "Shaka, when the walls fell" meant "failure." In time they understood the original greeting was a greeting between two different cultures/races.

Picard and Dathan were unable to vanquish their common foe (Dathan was killed), but they developed a beginning of a friendship between peoples, as well as achieving a common goal, as signified by a new expression: "Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel."

"Darmok" was one of *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* most interesting episodes, as it highlighted the challenge of communication between intelligent species in a most creative way. Thinking of *"Darmok"*, I wonder what translating a Bible in Tamarian Bible might look like. It would probably have to start communicating through pictures. From that, we might read,

- "Jesus in the River with John"* (baptism)
- "Jesus and Peter on the Sea,"* (calling of new disciples?)
- "Jesus, his arms wide."* (welcoming all people?)
- "The devil in wilderness"* (temptation/conflict?)
- "Judas, his eyes closed"* (betrayal)
- "Jesus on the cross at Golgatha,"* (sacrifice/forgiveness of sins)
- "Thomas, his eyes opened"* (believing)

And of course, from our Old Testament passage, showing two friends looking out for each other:
"David and Jonathan at Horesh."

But all this aside, I am grateful we have earth languages and the Bible the way we do.

Let us pray.

We thank you again O God for all those who heard your Word and made it available to be passed down to your children. We give thanks for all those who participated in oral tradition, for those who first wrote things down, for all the scribes who copied and recopied the sacred texts, and for all those who have worked faithfully to transcribe the scripture so all can understand in their native tongues. Continue to speak to us through your scriptures that we might be faithful witnesses of the gospel. In Jesus name. Amen.

P.S. Perhaps apologies are in order for all the non-*"Trekkies"* (or *"Trekks,"* as some prefer to be known). At the end of the songs I will link to a couple of scenes from *"Darmok"* to get a better sense of the episode. But first, here are some earth songs focusing on our world and God speaking to us in our world.

Lord Speak to Me That We May Speak by Sanctuary Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjlaZt6gcwU>

Lord Speak to Me That We May Speak (alt tune by Altar of Praise Chorale

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQTUSTRv-aY>

Look at the World by Advent Heralds

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUNsj2NSCJO>

Look at the World by Catholic Fellowship Jakarta
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YU8jridblwg>

Look at the Word by Smith Ensemble
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEUMsWoW8V8>

Look at the World in Chinese
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcDHA8IHNoc>

O God Beyond All Praising by Villanova Pastoral Musicians
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V-AQbKyG48>

O God Beyond All Praising by GIA Publications
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBoxFBgdFI0>

Immortal Invisible God Only Wise by Westminster Abbey
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zd0FyrzVUCM>

Immortal Invisible by Martijn de Groot
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD2e2N9NvbK>

and, in case you don't remember or hadn't see the aforementioned Star Trek episode, here's a few *Darmok* video clips

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-wzr74d7TI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANtl3bnQJr0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANvILcOTy6M>

Notes and references page: Phrases in Star Trek: The Next Generation's Darmok Episode for you major fans.

- "Children of Tama" - Tamarian
- "Darmok on the ocean" - loneliness, isolation
- "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra" - cooperation
- "Darmok and Jalad on the ocean" - new friendship and understanding gained through a shared challenge
- "The beast at Tanagra" - a problem to be overcome
- "Kadir beneath Mo Moteh" - failure to communicate/understand
- "Zima at Anzo" "Zima and Bakor" - danger/hostility arising from miscommunication/misunderstanding.

- "Kiteo, his eyes closed" - refusal to understand
- "Kiazi's children, their faces wet" - do not cry
- "Temba, his arms wide/open" - signifying a gift
- "Temba, at rest" - when a gift being offered is declined
- "Mirab, with sails unfurled" - signifying departure/engines to full/fleeing
- "Shaka, when the walls fell" - failure
- "Sokath, his eyes uncovered/opened" - understanding/realization
- "Kailash, when it rises" - a necessary loss or sacrifice
- "The river Temarc in winter" - be quiet/silence
- "Zinda, his face black, his eyes red" - anger or conflict, also can indicate pain or discomfort, possible indication of inability to survive (either self, or other party)
- "Rai and Jiri at Lunga. Rai of Lowani. Lowani under two moons. Jiri of Ubaya. Ubaya of crossroads, at Lunga. Lunga, her sky gray" - greeting between two different cultures/races
- "Uzani, his army with fists open" - to lure the enemy towards you by spreading your forces
- "Uzani, his army with fists closed" - to close rank and attack after luring the enemy
- "Chenza at court, the court of silence" - not listening
- "Kira at Bashi" - to tell a story
- "Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel" - successful first contact between two alien cultures, or to work toward a common goal

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, October 23, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #198

Names, nicknames, and name changes.

So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17 James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); (Mk. 3:16-17 NRS)

Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." (Gen. 32:28 NRS)

During my freshman year of college, I lived on a dorm floor where everyone had a nickname. My roommate's name was "Skip"; the "Riddler" lived down the hall; there was a guy nicknamed "Dago," another named "Poorfat"; the red headed guy across the hall was nicknamed "Nigerian Death;" his roommate was "The Carp." We had a "Mother Miller." I was nicknamed "Opey."

Sometimes the use of names required a special understanding. For example, whenever someone got a short haircut, it was called a "Larry haircut." I went along with that for a long time until I finally asked, "Why do we call this a "Larry Haircut?"

It had to do with "The Riddler." The Riddler had a big bushy head of hair. One weekend his brother Larry visited. Larry looked exactly like his brother the Riddler except for one thing: he had very short hair. From that time on, every time someone got a short haircut, it was called a "Larry Haircut." To this day, whenever I see someone who had just gotten a short haircut, I think, "I see you got yourself a "Larry Haircut."

And then there was "Monopoly." During my first year, before people moved on to more complex card games a favorite first year game was "Speed Monopoly." It was regular Monopoly, but just played maniacally fast. That's when I first heard veteran players always refer to "Marvin Gardens" always as "Freeguard Gardens." I went along. "Gimme Freeguard Gardens." I wanted to be cool, so for a long time I never asked "Why Freeguard Gardens?". One day I finally asked:

"So why do we call it 'Freeguard Gardens?'"

"It's because of Poorfat," came the answer.

"Why Poorfat?"

"His name, stupid!"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

*"Poorfat's name ... is **Marvin Frigard!** Poorfat Marvin Frigard! **Frigard Gardens.**"*

"Oh."

The Bible is filled with over 3,000 names. Some names change as God changes people's lives, like "Abram" to "Abraham" ("high father" to "father of many") "Sarai" to "Sarah" ("my princess" to "mother of nations") or "Jacob" to "Isaac" ("Supplanter" to "he who has the power of God.")

Some of the names are nicknames, like "Sons of Thunder." After his confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Simon (a common) became Peter, "the Rock."

Sometimes names were given to make a point, like with the prophet Hosea's children, "Jezreel" (meaning "God Sows", but associated with a place where God will sow destruction); "Lo-Ruhamah" (meaning "Not Loved", showing God withholding love for the people on account of their sins); and "Lo-Ammi" (meaning "Not My People", showing God's displeasure).

God himself has many names in the Hebrew Old Testament, including: **ELOHIM** – (My Creator), **JEHOVAH** – (My Lord God), **EL SHADDAI** – (My Supplier), **ADONAI** – (My Master), **JEHOVAH JIREH** – (My Provider), **JEHOVAH ROPHE** – (My Healer), **JEHOVAH NISSI** – (My Banner), **JEHOVAH MIKKADESH** – (My Sanctifier), **JEHOVAH TSIDKENU** – My Righteousness), **JEHOVAH SHALOM** – (My Peace), **El Olam** (Everlasting God)

In the Greek New Testament we have **Theos** (God), **Kurios** (Lord), **Abba** (Father), and of course Jesus **Christ** (Anointed One).

Think about your name. Do you know the story behind why you were given your name? If you have a nickname, how did that come about? If you were to give yourself a nickname, what might it be? What nickname would you hate to have? (Poorfat?) If you had to pick an all new name for yourself in light of your relationship with Jesus, what would you call yourself?

And perhaps most important, these two questions: 1. By whatever name you call out to God, do you believe [name] is listening? If so, then.... 2. When God calls you by name, how will you answer? **Oh?**

Let us pray.

Thank you for granting access to you as in prayer we call upon you. We are grateful that you have revealed your qualities to us through your name, and then by the name of Jesus. We thank you for calling us by name through the gospel, O God. When you call, give the wisdom and encouragement to respond, that by our names, we may praise your Name. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Shelter Your Name Notre Name Folk Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2W-P9dKo600>

Jesus, Name Above all Names by Acapeldridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxMmj7pdljM>

Jesus, Name Above all Names by Terry MacAlmon
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKBO6f7aYbY>

How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds by the NBA
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoPlwPUYWaw>

How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds by St. Peter's Hammersmith
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WnWtrFMdzc>

How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds alternate tune by Christian Hymns
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RokLXUOXZhM>

Names of God by Laurel Hubbick
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP25kCPocwg>

Holy God We Praise Thy Name by Goodcg222
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVBQYnfkiBM>

Holy God We Praise Thy Name by Singing Nuns
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC4pQJs6gmc>

Here I am, Lord by Chris Bray
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4t6mz8yoocY>

Here I Am Lord by White's Chapel UMC
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UkTlj2uPI4

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, October 26, 2020 NOT by Pastor Mark Opgrand but By Chaplain Bob Weeks #199

WAITING IN AN UNSETTLED TIME

**By
Chaplain Bob Weeks**

Christians are living in an unsettled time.

COVID-19 has caused Americans and the world to wait. We wait at least six feet apart in lines at the post office, the grocery store, the doctor's office, the dentist's office, and we are going to have to wait our turn to attend church. If we order items online, we must wait for their arrival. Once upon a time, we would go right to the store and obtain the item, but now there is a wait.

It is not easy to be tested for COVID-19. In most cases, a Medical Doctor has to decide if the person has the proper symptoms to be tested, and then the Medical Doctor has to send orders to the testing station. Next, persons must wait for their turn to be tested. There is a waiting period to hear the results of the test. As if waiting in this unsettled Covid-19 time was not enough, Americans are waiting for the results of a 2020 election.

Not only is waiting a problem for Americans, but waiting has also been a problem for God's people throughout the ages.

For example, during unsettled times:

The Israelites had problems waiting in the desert.

The Israelites following Moses had to wait for water, meat, and bread.

When the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, some of God's people were captured and had to wait to return to Jerusalem during the exile.

The prophets of the Old Testament called God's people to wait on the coming of a Messiah.

Finally, Jesus was born.

Simeon had been waiting for the Messiah a long time, and then, when Jesus was presented in the Temple, his waiting was over. (Luke 2:28)

Jesus called his disciples to be alert as they waited for the end of the Age (the second coming). And then, one day, Jesus was walking away from the Temple and his disciples asked him: "Tell us,"

they said, “when will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming, and the end of the age?” The disciples were anxiously waiting.

When Jesus answered, He really got their attention:

Matthew 23:1-37 reports Jesus mentioning seven woes that would take place before the second coming He predicted. Then, Chapter 24 reports Signs of the end of the age. To add to the disciples waiting problem Jesus says, “No one knows about the day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, not the son, but only the father.” (Matthew 24:36) Yet we are told to wait.

We Christians are a “*waiting*” people, and not just for COVID-19 to end. The end of the world and the final judgement is yet to come. We are believers waiting, between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus. We have been waiting for over 2000 years.

So what are we called to do while we wait? A few suggestions: Keeping the greatest commandment that Jesus gave us will help: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (Matthew 23:37) This is the first and greatest commandment. This commandment calls us to never stop trusting God to bring us through these times.

Keeping the second greatest commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39) As we wait, there are many people in trouble during this pandemic. The rate of suicides increases every day. People are depressed. The number of persons testing positive with COVID-19 is still increasing in North Carolina and America. While you wait, ask yourself, “Is there someone who needs my help and love?”

While we wait, we need to take the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46) seriously and remember what Jesus said, “ I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

Continue supporting the efforts of our congregation to do as Jesus commanded in Matthew 29:19 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Remember, a portion of our offerings go to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus as we wait. Continue worshipping God. Remember the Gospel of Luke reports that when Jesus ascended, the disciples worshipped Jesus. While we wait, we should avail every opportunity afforded to worship God. While we wait, we are to partake of the Lord’s Supper until Jesus comes. (Luke 22:18)

We wait, not having seen Jesus, but as Jesus told Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29 NIV) Continue to believe in Jesus.

Remember your baptism. As a believer, you have been baptized as a child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. If you have not been baptized, be baptized.

Talk to God and Jesus. Jesus gave us what is called The Lord’s Prayer. We are not just to “say” this prayer, we are to talk seriously using this prayer. And while we wait, do not forget that we can talk to God and Jesus anytime and anywhere.

We are a “waiting” people in an unsettled time. We wait, enduring whatever happens, trusting in God, between the first coming of Jesus, and the second coming of Jesus.

Prayer: Draw your church together, O God, into one great company of disciples, together following our teacher Jesus into every walk of life as we wait for His coming again. Amen.

Wait for the Lord by St. Frances de Sales Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37k20ZZ9h-A>

They That Wait On the Lord by GDLEF

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVv2z9BS4vQ>

Wait on the Lord by James Wilson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSFkQeCTAuY>

Wait on the Lord And Be Of Good Courage by the Martins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qW8U5ZkZlgs>

As You Wait On The Lord He’ll Renew Your Strength by Integrity Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRoKrv-Si3U>

We Will Wait Upon the Lord by Joshua Aaron

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6QTFXrHMjk>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, October 27, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #200

Luther's LETTERS to Women's Editors. (Haven't I heard their names somewhere?)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 1:1-2 NRS)

I scarcely paid much attention on a bookshelf to the small thin red hardback little book nestled between some old Lutheran Hymnals. But I'm looking for ideas for devotions, so I took a look.

Embossed in clear gold letters on the outside cover is this: "**Luther's LETTERS to Women.**" I remember years earlier paging through it, but since it's not one of Luther's well known "*classics*," I hadn't looked closely. This time, approaching another Reformation Day October 31, I thought it might be "meet, right, and salutary," to ponder something distinctly Martin Luther related.

When I opened the first page, looking for when this was published and by whom, I had my first "Wow!" moment. Just above the published date of 1930 by Wartburg Publishing House, were the names of the editors.

One was "*Chaplain Edwin F. Keever.*" O Wow! That's our Dr. Keever, of *Keever Hall*, who served St. Paul's as pastor from 1922-1937. My second "O Wow" came when I read the name of the other editor, "*Mary Cooper Williams, Principal in Public Schools, Wilmington, NC.*" She's the eponym of "*Mary C. Williams Elementary School!*" Ann Hutteman's wonderful St. Paul's "*Journey of Faith*" history book identifies her as active for many years in our United Church Women's group.

So how about that!

In the preface, editors Williams and Keever express their hope in compiling these letters, that, through his correspondence, a personal side of Luther might be revealed. They showed great insight into Martin Luther when they wrote:

"Like other great men, Luther combines apparently the most opposite qualities – dignity and earnestness with simplicity and playfulness, bitterness and severity with longsuffering and charity, sternness and gentleness and tenderness.

These we must reckon as merely the reaction of the same emotional nature. Great men are just like others, only they are constantly under public scrutiny. Any seeming coarseness in Luther's writing belongs to the rude candor of the age. Much modern literature may be less crude in outward form, but it is inwardly far more suggestive and vicious.

These *“Letters to Women”* show him to have been at heart and in conduct a refined gentleman. ... In the heat of his titanic conflict for human freedom and right religion against the allied Church and State this great teacher could sit down in the sanctum of his home, play the lute and amuse the children.

... On reading these Letters one must be forcibly impressed by Luther’s playfulness, which when wielded against his foes in argument became the most withering sarcasm and most stinging satire. Some of the letters are of rare devotional value.”

Well said! When we consider Luther’s many volumes of work, it is insightful to remember that Luther, like St. Paul’s himself and many throughout history, wrote letters. Here’s one I found written to Frau Goritzin, the wife of a judge in Leipzig, asking her to be a sponsor for his baby daughter Magdalene’ baptism. It is dated May 5, 1529.

“Grace to you and peace in Christ, honorable and virtuous lady. Dear friend, God having granted that a young heathen should be born to me and my dear Kate, I pray you for God’s sake to do us the kindness to help this same poor heathen to become a Christian, and to be her spiritual mother, that she may, by your service and help, throw off the old birth in Adam, and obtain the new birth in Christ, through holy Baptism. Be assured that I will return to your good offices as you may desire. Herewith, God be with you. Amen. I myself have not ventured to go out into the air. MARTINUS LUTHER, 1529.”

While this is a simple note to Magdeline’s future godmother, it reveals how much Luther both respected her and affirmed her faith. While we don’t refer to our pre-baptized little ones as “heathen,” that is consistent with how Luther recognized the transforming power of baptism to “be sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” I don’t know what “return to your good offices” refers to, but researching further, I discovered *“I have not ventured to go out into the air”* was likely referring to a current epidemic.

In 1529 in England and Europe, especially northern Germany there was an epidemic called *“English Sweating Sickness.”* Originating in England, it swept through Luther’s region. In another letter to his wife Katie that same year, Luther wrote from Marburg: *“Everyone here has become mad with fear of the “sweating sickness.” Yesterday fifty were taken ill of it, of whom one or two have died.”*

Like us, Luther and the Reformers, while trying to bring renewal to the church, had to deal with normal activities like planning baptisms but also doing their work while dealing with an epidemic. The plague had ravaged Europe a few years earlier, and now this. Apparently, there was an awareness of the importance of physical distancing and limiting exposure as much as possible. Before mentioning people *“mad with fear”* about the *“Sweating Sickness,”* Luther had spoken

positively of the conference and how, even when continuing to disagree, that they are “*bound together as brothers and members of Christ.*”

Remembering the Reformation this week, these letters provide a little window showing how Luther and the reformers lived their life in Christ during those years following the posting of the 95 Theses October 31, 1517. We discover that Luther married former nun Katharina von Bora. They had children. She brewed beer and managed their household. Luther taught, wrote, preached, worked on church documents, and wrote letters to friends. And they all tried to stay well. Approaching another Reformation Day Anniversary, we are thankful for this as we continue God’s work, while also being careful about the pandemic around us and trying to stay well.

Let us pray.

During this week of remembering the Reformation, we give thanks for Martin Luther and for all those who heard your gospel and believed. Thank you for the wisdom and insights from our Lutheran forebears. May that wisdom, and our reliance on your grace through faith, draw us close to each other as we find common cause in lifting high the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Reformation Hymn by Michael Lining (acapella)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtHCdOxatI0>

A Mighty Fortress Organ Solo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVN0ClcqRYs>

A Mighty Fortress by Christian Hymns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XUYZoguhEQ>

A Mighty Fortress by Heartsong

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT6HQ1QaU4>

A Mighty Fortress Wartburg Choir at Wittenberg

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDdHtOSHIXE>

A Mighty Fortress by Virtual Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4EoLm3_luM

Lift High the Cross by Martijn de Groot

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioukWbnP_QU

Lift High the Cross by John Birkhead

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbcBXYP4AIE>

Reformation Song by Sovereign Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osKjBaYwq5k>

Reformation Song by Bob Kauflin and Tim Chester

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if0px-drjHk>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, October 28, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #201

Why are we still talking about the coronavirus? I'm so sick of it already.

But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. (Luke 12:39 NIV)

When former Governor Chris Christie was interviewed recently after being released from the hospital following treatment for Covid-19, he expressed regret for letting his guard down and being exposed. He described how for seven months he was SO CAREFUL, following all the guidelines, wearing a mask, washing his hands, and keeping social distance. He said he let his guard down for four days and became infected. That included Presidential debate preparation and the Rose Garden event at the White House, where several became infected.

As an asthma sufferer, Christie was in the high-risk group, so after testing positive, he soon went to the hospital, where thankfully he received good care. Following a week in the ICU, he was released to continue his convalescence at home.

One of the biggest challenges with the coronavirus is that many who are infected are asymptomatic. They believe they are well, and yet can spread Covid-19 without even knowing it. Many young people fall into this category, which is why infectious disease specialists warn families with aging parents or grandparents about the risk of being with those who are positive for coronavirus but may not even know it, or imagine their mild symptoms are not dangerous for others.

Dr. Michael Osterholm, the director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota (and an active Lutheran, by the way), recently expressed *"the next six to 12 weeks are going to be the darkest of the entire pandemic."* This is due to people being indoors more, and multi-generational holiday gatherings.

Every day, we see the numbers rising, (even more so now in European countries) and yet for many the virus is still believed to be either a hoax, or at least not as dangerous as warned. We all share how tired we are of the virus and its disruption of life, but simply being tired of it won't make it go away. Being tired of it can, however, translate into people being less careful.

Doctors and frontline workers are second to bear the brunt of people not being careful. First, are those who become exposed and get sick. Some of those who will be sick are going about this very day as if nothing is going to happen to them. I pray nothing will. But when I read about people who, repeating an often-spoken phrase, *"aren't taking it seriously,"* I know some will soon be paying a grave price.

I heard about a wedding where the party and guests wore no masks and did not maintain physical distance. Many were exposed and became ill, mostly with mild symptoms. However, several beloved older family members in attendance died. What should have been a precious family memory has become a sad bitter memory. How would you ever even want to look at those photos knowing what followed those hugs and kisses?

It has been said many times that no one can be 100% protected from the coronavirus. True. But for some, this seems like an excuse to not feel the need to do anything. For our part, as a church community and family of faith, we are choosing to reduce the risk of exposure as much as possible, for the sake of the health of our brothers and sisters. Therefore, we wash hands, wear masks, and keep our distance physically (but not spiritually).

When that time comes when we are on the other side of this pandemic (and that will happen), I believe we will look back and know we did the best we could, even if some imagine we are being “*overly cautious.*”

There’s a lot of truth in what Jesus said about the thief in the night.

We may not know for sure if or when we might be exposed to thief or virus, but we’ll be as prepared as we can. If nothing will prevent us from getting sick, or getting gravely sick and passing away, we shall remember our baptism and in faith let go of this life, trusting in God to bring us safely to the next, just as God has promised.

Let us pray.

We continue to feel conflicted over the coronavirus pandemic, O God. If we are not sick, or don’t know someone who is sick, the threat seems distant. We also continue to be warned by people who have dedicated their lives to the study of deadly diseases. Help us, O God, and all your children to do everything we can to reduce risk of infection. Encourage us to keep watchful, for we know not how, when, or if we might be exposed.

Be with our front-line workers who bear so much to serve the sick. Bless our families who feel so deeply the loss of “normal” life and who want to celebrate holiday family togetherness soon. See us safely to the other side of this illness that we live without this disease and the fear of this disease. In Jesus’ Name we pray. Amen.

The Lord Bless You and Keep You by National Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-h1XL-a5EA>

The Lord Bless You by Philippine Madrigal Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pZ5NrdZ2o>

There is a Balm in Gilead by

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hp6VgQS8zU>

Psalm 20 May the Lord Answer You in Days of Trouble by Rebecca and Samuel Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFMKDlyiH-U>

Psalm 20 May the Lord Answer You by Jason Silver

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ly5IE8gEAg>

Let Not Your Hearts Be Troubled by Songs for the Masses

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dd2aa3hJZc>

Show Me the Way Psalm 143 Songs for the Masses

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryB1oLGmpSc>

Lord Help Me to Hold Out by Detroit Mass Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWazCDZI5co>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, October 29, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #202

Remembering dear Nance from Oakdale (An All Hallows Reflection, Part 1)

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. (Rev. 21:3-4 NRS)

If you have ever toured Wilmington's historic Oakdale cemetery you have likely learned the tragic story of Nancy Martin, twenty-four-year-old daughter of Silas and Margaret Martin, and sister of John. Even children are curious to learn of the sad death at sea in 1857 of "Nance," and how her father and brother, in order to preserve the body, tied Nance's body to a chair lowered into a large cask and covered with rum. This was to preserve her remains until they could come back to Wilmington months later from their voyage.

Nance was buried in the cask at the family gravesite, marked with a stone carved to resemble a wooden log cross. Written on it is "Nance."

The story has been featured many times in brochures, booklets, and various websites. And while not a ghost story, it has been featured in a book called "Coastal Ghosts", by Nancy Rhyne. What is unique to this book is that it features actual letters by Silas Martin to his wife, sharing this tragedy.

Because Halloween originally was All Hallows Eve, the night before All Hallows Day, (now called All Saints day), I thought this story might move us beyond the creepy rum cask(et) story to reflecting on the kind of grief and faith we commonly share during the tragic death of a loved one. Here are two of Silas Martin's poignant letters to Margaret, his wife.

"At Sea

May 25, 1857

My dear wife,

Behold me again at sea. With our precious daughter Nance, I shall refer to her by this our name of such affection and devotion as we have always had for our Nancy, on my one side and our son John on my other, when I sailed from Wilmington on this voyage.

I felt myself superior to depression. The present was enjoyed, and the future was anticipated with enthusiasm, But I find it my somber duty to inform you that one dreadful blow has destroyed us; reduced us to the veriest, the most sublimated wretchedness. Our Nance, on whom all rested; our daughter, our companion, our friend -- she on whom we depended to transmit down the mingled

blood of the union of ourselves -- she who was to have redeemed all your beauty and shed new glory upon our family -- that daughter always our contentment and joy, is taken from us -- is dead.

I see her dead, but my hand cannot surrender her to the watery grave. By some method of preservation, I shall return our Nance to you for burial in Wilmington and you shall see her again before she has wasted away in death. I know not of the procedure I shall use but I conceive it necessary to use all my meager talents to endure whatever process I can originate to compose her body for its return to you from thousands of miles distance.

If our son John were not with me, I would know not what path I would take to relieve myself of this burden of seeing our Nancy and death. But John is of a low state of health and he requires unusual observation and some medical attention. I have torn myself from my own agonies to perform services for our son.

Your devoted husband,
Silas H. Martin. “

It is believed that Nancy died of tuberculosis, then called “consumption. “In another letter Silas shares more of the sad details, and the effect of his sister’s loss on her brother John.

“At Sea

May 31, 1857

My dear Wife.

Behold me still at sea. I would like to see you very much. I am 6,000 miles from you I dream of you often. I am very uneasy I fear for the suffering you will endure when we meet again. Our Nance is now preserved for her return to you although I am living and faring as well as the heart could wish under the conditions. Yet it is a source of great trouble to me to have to advise you of the method which I chose to transport Nancy back to Wilmington.

It came to me as a sort of vision and surely as the only election. Keep your mind and a kind and affectionate frame as you read on. John and I took from a cabinet chair of Oak and one of strength holding her body in a seated position. We securely tied Nance to the chair then we lowered the chair holding Nance into a large cask nailed embrace so that it is immovable into the cask until Nance's head was covered.

We poured many gallons of rum the brine will impair any dehydration of the body and store the body until we reach Carolina shores. It is difficult to speak of our Nance in this way, but I expect you to depend on your faith in God as you read these words and await our return.

The ship has been rocking a good deal and John as we can deal with despondency over the loss of his sister and the drudgery of helping me get this vessel back home. He lies on his hammock pondering incessantly amid doubt impatience and fear.

Your affectionate husband,
Silas H Martin”

When I think of people annually relishing the “horror” if Halloween, reading these letters draws us into a real-life horror story. There is one line in the letters, however, that stands out. “I expect you to depend on your faith in God.”

Such faith is what always carries us through difficult times, tragic times, horrible times. And the promise of peace and healing that comes as God’s faithful.

Let us pray:

O God, you are our strength and shield, our hope and consolation. As we read the tragic loss of Nance Martin now over a hundred and sixty-three years ago, we are drawn into what every family feels when they lose a loved one, especially a child or young person. Thank you for the hope of the gospel O God, which comes to our aid as we look to you. When our sadness is unbearable, take that burden from us, Lord Jesus, and remind us that in you all will be well. In Jesus’ name. Amen,

He Will Hold Me Fast Michael Lining

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUtOIYmLF6Y>

Finally Home by Michael Lining

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBZe2nWRSjU>

Death Swallowed Up in Victory by Brian LoPiccolo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lupqrPhySc>

Be Thou My Vision by Celtic Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiukM6WHQEQ>

Be Thou My Vision by Audrey Assad

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXDhCEnM-bQ>

Be Thou My Vision by Elenyi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpSqAcLrDI>

Oh The Deep Love of Jesus by Simon Khorolskiy and Katie Gayduchik

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLTu1xv2-Us>

Nearer My God to Thee by Acapeldridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5WLZAVKB88>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, October 30, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #203

Remembering Nance's brother John from Oakdale (An All Hallows Reflection, Part 2)

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (Rev. 21:3-4 NRS)

The second part of Nancy Martin's tragic tale lacks the curious details of her body being preserved in the rum cask but is no less devastating. In Silas Martin's first letters to his wife, he shares the terrible loss of Nancy, and further describes how her brother John has become deeply despondent over this, and overcome with grief. If matters cannot be worse, on their way back to Wilmington, the ship encounters a fierce storm, and John is washed overboard, to his death. Imagine father Silas having to write this letter:

At Sea

September 28, 1857

My dear Wife,
Behold me still at sea.

I write to you this morning though I wrote to you yesterday. I trust in the Almighty that our letters reach you lest you lapse into terror that my silence might have been occasioned by some unfortunate accident. Imagine yourself the feelings of a husband who has to inform you that there has indeed been an unfortunate accident on board this vessel, and we have lost our dear son John.

Last night just after the sun disappeared a violent storm came unexpectedly from the port side. John said he would stay on deck and I returned to my cabin. Suddenly we're being tossed about in waves the size of mountains. when the storm abated, the crew and I searched everywhere but there was no John. His frail sorrow-wracked body had washed overboard. John's burial at sea was by divine choice, for I would not have been most careful and rigid in endeavoring to return his body to Wilmington for burial along with his sister.

The crew assisted most astonishingly in searching the ship from proud to stern. Every available nook and cranny was visited in the hope that John would be found. But the search brought no result. I shall attend church when we put into port and pray for John's soul. I preached in an

Episcopal Church on an island and visited a Catholic Church in Rio de Janeiro. All have been very fine but some of the strangest sermons that I have ever beheld.

Adieu, my dear Wife. I trust there will be no further difficulties before I reach home.
God bless and preserve you.

Your devoted husband
Silas H Martin

In Oakdale Cemetery, John Martin's name is inscribed on the towering Martin family marker with these words: "***Lost at Sea, September 1857.***"

All this happened a year before St. Paul's was founded in 1858, and a few years before the Civil War started in 1861. With well more than a million and a half casualties, the nation would soon experience many tragic letters written and received by grieving loved ones. Seeing the numbers, however, are much different than reading the letters, which take us into the hearts of brothers and sisters in Christ who cling to God's mercy and hope ... especially in time of suffering.

We can see Silas's faith once more not only as he recognized God's presence in John's "burial at sea," but also in attending and even preaching at an Episcopal church on an island, and in hearing "*strange sermons*" in Rio de Janeiro.

I cannot imagine the unspeakable horror of this voyage, but I can imagine a person of faith persevering in tragedy. The ability to do so is what God makes possible through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us pray.

Thank you for your lovingkindness, O God, in supporting us through all time of trouble. Give us strength along life's way that we not only persevere when tragedy strikes, but recognize the power of your presence among us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. As we approach another All Saints Day, we pray for all those who have gone before us. We thank you for the angels and the heavenly host, and all who welcomes home those, through all the storms of life, who put their trust in you. Amen.

My Anchor Holds by SE Samonte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kX42GIZ6r0o>

Will Your Anchor Hold In the Storms of Life by

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQQO8v-0VBo>

It Is Not Death To Die by the Lloyd Family

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e59XR_iEz3w&t=84s

The Final Word is Christ by Sovereign Grace Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMYqzjExBoM>

For All the Saints by Choir of Paisley Abbey

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ktQu0BNXf8>

Be Not Afraid sung by John Michael Talbot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQr4udSiEew>

Be Not Afraid by Catholic Artists from Home

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RF0DlpFOoBg>

When the Saints Go Marching In by Louis Armstrong

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyljMBpGDA>

When the Saints Go Marching In by Bruce Springsteen (nice and slow)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izSK_fFv4tM

When the Saints God Marching In by Muffin Songs (light a candle)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ri1UApNR9yY>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, November 2, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #204

November 2nd is All Souls Day. So why have I never heard of that in my Lutheran church?

"Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; 38 for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day. 40 This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." (Jn. 6:37-40 NRS)

One simple answer is that it is "more of a Catholic thing."

According to Scott Richart of Learnreligions.com (and other sources) *All Souls Day* is a real day on the church calendar, but has often been overshadowed by the two days preceding it, Halloween, (Oct. 31) and *All Saints Day* (Nov. 1). *Halloween* originally was the night before **All Saints Day**, like **Christmas Eve** is the night before *Christmas Day* (and all through the house...) The word "*Halloween*" derives from "*All Hallows Eve.*" *All Hallows Day* means the same as *All Saints Day*. "*Hallowed*" is a form of being made holy.

"*All Souls Day*", November 2nd, follows "*All Saints Day*" but has a different focus, especially in the Roman Catholic tradition. It is a solemn celebration in the Roman Catholic Church commemorating all of those who have died and are now in *Purgatory*. *Purgatory* is considered a state between heaven and hell where some remain until a complete cleansing or purification takes place before entering the presence of God in heaven.

Martin Luther strongly believed that doctrine was exploited by the church to exhort money from the faithful in order that the time in purgatory for loved ones could be reduced. The selling of indulgences granted by the church was the means for this. Naturally, Lutherans complete reliance on the complete forgiveness of sins through the grace and mercy of God through Jesus Christ removed this as a non-biblically based doctrine of the church.

The idea behind purgatory, though, is actually rooted in a lot of hopefulness about God's mercy. Some souls, it is believed, need a little more time in the transition from this life to the next. God grants that time and is eager to welcome all into the Kingdom of Heaven.

All Souls Day is a day to remember the blessed dead, especially those who may still be in transition, according to Roman Catholic Tradition. While Lutherans focus more on the sufficiency of getting all things right with God through Justification by Faith through Grace, there is something quite merciful about God granting time to work things out for those who may not quite be ready (for whatever reason). I am perfectly fine with letting God work all this out. Happy All Souls Day!!

Let us pray.

Thank you for your promises, O God, that all who trust you and believed in Jesus Christ our Lord shall be saved. We pray for all the souls of all your beloved children. Thank you for your gospel, which we are called to share and pray that however you choose to bring us to you, that it will be so. We especially pray for those who have troubled souls, and those who are currently lost, that they shall be found and will experience your mercy and forgiveness, for that is the way of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Great is Thy Faithfulness by Take 6

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGaVpKrVLL8>

Great is Thy Faithfulness by Veritas

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2i7_X8RQis

Great is Thy Faithfulness by Anthem Lights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLWAI6KRIsQ>

For All Souls Day by Lonsdale Street Melbourne

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPe-MDmyOW4>

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go by Elaine Hagenberg

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2cqbITDR8w>

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go by Eastward Missions

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGAPkKXBQKI>

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go by Westminster Chorus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiZ9xXoZ1Mk>

When We All Get To Heaven by Alan Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOs81eYTKeg>

When We All Get To Heaven by Vagle Brothers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwpTceQfgGw>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, November 3, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #205

Can *Birthday Wishes* determine national elections?

From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you. (Ps. 71:6 NIV)

Pre-devotion note: Today is my birthday. It is also Election Day. With these two things in mind, please receive the following devotion as my personal wish to have a little fun.

In 1845, Congress passed a federal law designating the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November as Election Day. That means persons whose birthday falls on or between November 2 to November 8 will occasionally have their birthdays on Election Day. In my lifetime this has happened eight times since I became eligible to vote in 1970.

That means I have carried the awesome responsibility of using my birthday wish carefully, as the power of that wish has provided the means to elect persons running for office.

The first few times I made a wish for a candidate, the power of that wish was verified. They won! From that time on, I knew the fate of the United States' elected leaders was in my hand. You can be sure that every time I blew out the candles, it was with one breath, so as to not invalidate my wish.

You can imagine my shock when sometime later, after several decisive victories, my candidate lost. How could that be? I knew I framed the wish properly and did not blow my opportunity (only my candles).

It was when I discovered a few years ago that Assistant to the Bishop Phil Tonnesen and I shared the same birthday that I realized what was likely happening here. I had failed to take into account that others whose birthdays fell on November 3rd, like me, may have discovered the same power of this birthday wish on election day.

That means if Phil and I had wished differently, our wishes would have cancelled each other out. Another person who shares a November 3rd birthday would then be required to make the same wish for our candidate to win.

What I have learned from all this is that it appears that only persons whose birthdays fall on election day really matter. If the major parties had known this already, they could have saved a lot of advertising and campaigning money simply by targeting us November 3rd birthday boys and

girls. The candidates could also avoid the stress of the campaign trails and unnecessary exposure by making their cases before us.

Come Election Day (A.K.A our birthday), we November 3rd birthday people will make our wishes, and the candidate receiving the most wishes will win. If someone overseas seeks to interfere, their best strategy will be to invalidate wishes by flooding the party stores with those candles that can't be blown out. Another alternative will be to mount alternate advertising persuading us that we shouldn't waste our wishes on an inconsequential little old election.

As you can imagine, I've been hesitant to write about this, as it can surely become fodder for even more conspiracy theories... like "How the Birthday Boys and Girls stole the 2020 Election." Hopefully, someone will sacrifice their wish for a candidate and wish away this conspiracy theory. We'll see. And just in case you think this is all nonsense, well ... you can always take your chances... and vote.

Let us pray.

Forgive me, Lord, if I wasted what could have been a meaningful Election Day Devotion to indulge in a little wishful thinking. One behalf of all of us praying on this election day, we ask for the process to be fair, honest, and peaceful. We pray for grace both in winning and losing, realizing our needs as a nation are so pressing that we need to find the means to govern well for the sake of the nation. We pray for our nation, and all the nations that all may model the Christ-like life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. I want to dedicate our songs today to everyone who has had a birthday this past year, especially those who had no one to sing to them. Thank God for you, and your birth. May God bless you as you continue to grow in faith and love.

Happy Birthday Song by Jonny May

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sZmPHJPvZE>

Happy Birthday Orchestra by Kimberly Kay

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzLZGG4_GjY

Happy Birthday to You by the Beatles

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AY5n7_tazHk

Happy Birthday by A Capella Barbershop Quartet

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1dN8Ycqby4>

Happy Birthday by another A Capella group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4Ei6x1ofCk>

Funny Happy Birthday song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXqMmYsk0Gg>

Reggae Birthday Song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ra1Y6K7nSs>

Happy Birthday Musical Mice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UE6gzNuUKo>

Happy Birthday by Maxlyn (25 million views!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dePMU8R131s>

and just so this is not all just *Happy Birthday*, here's a good birth to death song...

John Ylvisaker's *I Was There To Hear Your Boring Cry...* sung by John Yl himself, rest his soul.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJI3NFT5T_c

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, Nov. 4, 2020 Not by Pastor Mark Opgrand but by Deacon Susan Jackson #206

“Where will God call you?”

I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. 10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41: 9-10)

Recently, I was reflecting on my call story with a close seminary classmate. Call stories help ground us and remind us why we do what we do. We all have one, regardless of our career and profession.

In my second year at Lenoir-Rhyne College, I found myself in the office of Dr. Joe Glass, the Professor of Religious Studies: Family Development. Switching majors (education to theology/philosophy), navigating the theology department, and discerning the future offered many opportunities to struggle with God’s call for me.

At the end of college, through encouragement of professors and the campus minister, I applied to a couple of seminaries, still not knowing it was the right thing, and entered the associate in ministry roster process.

Associate in Ministry Leaders, or AIM’s, are theological and liturgically trained, participate in a candidacy program of entrance, endorsement, and discernment as pastors do, and are called to congregations through the same process as pastors. In 2016, our roster name changed to “Deacon” to be more consistent with the traditions of the Church.

Deacons are called to *Word and Service Ministry*- we can preach, lead worship, but we do not administer the sacraments of Holy Communion or Baptism. Often, you find us carrying out ministry behind the scenes- connecting people, daily life, and the Church together. Ways we live out our vocations professionally might include working in nonprofit organizations or in congregations as youth directors, musicians, and even parish nurses.

Instead of choosing to attend seminary right away, I decided to go to England through the *Young Adults in Global Mission* program. This experience led me on a year of exploration, learning about God’s faithfulness, and making new friends. I met a Hillary, a close friend who introduced me to Isaiah 41: 9-10. This scripture became my mantra for the next several years, as I walked with God through daily life, ending up in places I did not expect.

In 2008, I found myself enrolled as a Master of Arts Student at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, SC. The next few years were full of wonderful opportunities and fabulous people. In fact, one family and I still laugh at how we met: my dog decided to run into the open door of a nearby apartment, thus beginning a lasting friendship, eventually turned towards us claiming one another as non-blood family.

These years were also painful: I experienced my grandfather's death, struggled with Candidacy requirements, and even afterward graduation, struggled with the call process. In 2015, I found myself in a Florida-based congregation that decided to extend a call. I was commissioned as a Deacon in April 2016.

After my first call in Florida, I found myself back in the North Carolina Synod, figuring out how God would use me next. In the fall of 2018, about a month before Hurricane Florence, I began ministry here in Wilmington, and continue to figure out, with all of you, how to best do ministry together in these strange and difficult times.

Throughout all life's joys and struggles, Isaiah 41: 9-10 has resided with me. These verses are in the middle of a chapter that is filled with words of comfort to a people who have felt like they have been rejected.

God proves to us that God is faithful, no matter where our calls lead us.

As I have been looking at Old Testament stories with our Confirmation students, I have been thinking about how God has called many through unique situations. Noah was told to build a boat to survive the flood. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Abram was told to sacrifice his flesh and blood, his son. Ruth left everything she knew to be Naomi's family. The list of people grows throughout the centuries. God called them, got their attention in one way or another, despite their own decisions and actions.

When our comfort and joy is threatened, it is easy wonder if we are truly doing what God wants us to do. While I want to listen to God, I do hope that I never end up literally in the belly of a whale, but if I do, Isaiah reminds me that I'm there because God called me to be. Even if my choices brought me to that situation, God is still with me, helping me navigate life.

How has called God you in the past? How is God calling you to proclaim the Gospel now? You do not have to end up in professional theological education to answer God's call- that just happened to be what happened in my own life.

It is scary to answer God's call. It is scary to think about who God wants us to be or what God wants us to do. Each of us is called to specific career and vocation, but we are also called to be

children of God- growing in faith, proclaiming God's Word, and participating in community together.

Remember, when life gets scary or unsettling, God calls us by name, calls us to not fear, and aids us as we navigate life together.

O God remind us of your faithfulness as you continue to call us to do your work. Continue to strengthen us, to comfort us, and to be present with us as we respond to your call across this earth. Amen.

Your Love O Lord by Third Day
<https://youtu.be/QEF7loQ3eUk>

10,000 Reasons by Celtic Worship
<https://youtu.be/7mwtxuiYfY8>

My Lighthouse by Rend Collective
<https://youtu.be/reAlJKv7ptU>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, November 5, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #207

The second day after the election.

Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD. (Ps. 31:24 NRS)

With *the* election still on everyone's minds this week, it has been challenging to form thoughts about what to share in a morning devotion. I have been working on one looking at "*election*" in the Bible. That's not the same as our elections, but worth consideration. I have also been thinking about our annual meeting coming up soon, where we will elect our own leaders for the next council term.

Mostly, I haven't gotten too far today, and I'm running out of time. But then I received an email from ELCA Pastor Angela Denker who wrote a most insightful and helpful book a year ago about the 2016 election called "*Red State Christians: Understanding the Voters Who Elected Donald Trump.*" Something jumped out of this email that I shall be thinking about a lot as we move forward, and I would like to share that with you. I'll share the whole letter, and then comment on what touched me.

Dear Friends,

Are you following the election results? Are you reliving 2016 in a variety of ways?

I'm going to invite you to take a deep breath. Hold it in a few seconds. Open your mouth. And let it out.

This is a new year. It's a different election. A lot has happened in four years. Much has stayed the same. Millions more Americans got the chance to register their votes and preferences than ever before. Thousands of other Americans volunteered their time as poll workers, and, exhaustedly today, many of them in Wisconsin and Michigan and North Carolina and Nevada and Arizona and Georgia and Pennsylvania are still counting.

Every time I see an election official on TV I feel my heart lift just for a second. Because this is it. In all its monotony and banality, this is democracy at work. Ordinary people all across America are working to make sure millions of diverse voices get the chance to be heard.

I'm not naive. I know not all voices get heard equally. I know voter suppression, particularly of Black Americans, is still rampant and real and even effective in American politics.

So there's plenty of ugliness to go around.

I guess what's on my heart mostly though today is this: that I'm seeing an overlap of a dangerous dehumanization in both the ways that we've talked about Covid as Americans and also too often in the way that we talk about elections. Voters become data points: sorted into demographic groups. And ultimately, that kind of persuasion just doesn't work. Politics at heart are about trust. Our politics are dangerously divided and entrenched in an addiction to hatred because trust has been obliterated.

Whatever happens the next few days, as my heroes: those volunteers and election officials across this nation, continue to count votes, I think we've all got to look inside ourselves, and those who we follow and support, to see what role we've played in contributing to the total lack of trust right now in America. And somehow, we've got to find a way to rebuild it. Our nation, and our lives, are at stake.

What's that have to do with [Red State Christians](#)? Well, it's part of why I wrote the book. To reclaim the humanity of people whose stories are too often untold across this vast country. To give people a chance to change the entrenched narratives, reclaim a shared humanity, and allow us to trust one another more than we trust the algorithms that have come to dominate our lives.

Thanks for reading. Keep praying.

Love,
Angela

It was this line, and the next that moved me: ***“Politics at heart are about trust. Our politics are dangerously divided and entrenched in an addiction to hatred because trust has been obliterated.”***

I'm going to be thinking about this in the months ahead, especially as our church must now have a strong role in being a place where we can encourage trust with each other. Many times we have already experienced this to be true.

When we affirm our relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ are far more valuable to our commitment to partisan politics, some deep and lasting happens. Our shared identity in Christ makes a huge positive difference.

When we are frustrated or experience despair regarding our divided nation, we shall be blessed as we renew our commitment to life in Christ and rally around our Lord Jesus who loves and heals and forgives and makes us whole. When Jesus says to the sick and suffering, “Take heart!” we know Jesus means this message for us as well. Blessings.

Let us pray.

We pray for strength and support O God as we face a nation deeply divided. Show us how to go beyond that which keeps us apart by first helping us to trust you, and then each other. Forgive us when we fail, but keep us from giving up if we feel loss, and keep us from gloating when we imagine we've won. You give us so much, gracious God. Bless us in these days ahead. Amen.

The Church's One Foundation by the NBA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jotNbcFelX4>

If Thou But Suffer God To Guide Thee by Calvin Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFfYKN6Jw1o>

Lead Me Guide Me by Elvis

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=br_4rcSDZWs

Lord Help Me To Hold Out by Marcel West

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWazCDZI5co>

Trust and Obey by Vagle Brothers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KB4KcleYiWM>

When Peace Like A River by Acapeldredge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYrL9ea1XUg>

He Leadeth Me by Fountainview Academy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVgHneowNb8>

Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer by Fron Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3NmfmVGblw>

You'll Never Walk Alone by Virtual Choir Orchestra (300 singers, 15 countries)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gpoJNv5dlQ>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, November 6, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #208

Who did God elect?

Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect. (Wis. 3:9 NRS)

With the election on everyone's mind this week, it's been hard to think about anything other than the national election. Before we get into "Who did God elect?", it might be helpful to talk about "election" in the Bible.

In the Bible, *election* is that notion that God favors some individuals and groups over others.

While it would seem to support certain religious views held today regarding "our side" being God's preferred side, or "our candidate" being God's preferred candidate, the actual idea of "election" in the Bible begins with the Old Testament's view, and supported by the New Testament, that *Israel* is God's *chosen people*, the *elect*.

Election/chosenness is quite pervasive in the Bible. We see it with recurring sibling rivalries where one sibling is especially favored (like Abel over Cain, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his brothers).

Abraham was certainly favored. Genesis 18:19 says: *"I have chosen him [Abraham], that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."*

Election is a dimension of Israel's status as a "holy nation" like in Deuteronomy 14:2, which states: *"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession."*

There is one thing that comes along with election, however, and that is a heavier responsibility than other nations and stricter standards of judgment, like in Amos 3:2 *"You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."*

Many implications of being chosen (elected) are found in Isaiah 40–66, which is a collection of postexilic writings written after Israel's exile to Babylon. Time and again they speak of God's enduring love for his beloved people and his intention to restore them once more to a flourishing life in the land of Israel.

Where Jesus comes into this for us Christians is the revelation, building on what has come before in the Old Testament, that Jesus is very specifically *God's beloved*, specially chosen, and *Son of God*.

Because of Jesus, God now *chooses/elects/includes* all the faithful in God's plan of salvation. We are not favored over someone else but called through our baptism to a kind of specialness that God desires for all people. As we are **elected** by God, there is no Christian exceptionalism.

This inclusive intention of God is amplified by Martin Luther's emphasis on being saved by grace through faith. That puts us in good company with all God's elect and celebrates our belonging.

Some wonder, of course, if the Jews lost their election by failing to cast their votes for Jesus. That will be for God to decide, but I would never want to bet against God's mercy or steadfast love and faithfulness.

During a time of great polarization and deep division, where there are implications and consequences that come from both winning and losing this current election, it will be well to consider to whom we really belong and with whom do we identify. May that be **Jesus**, for our sake and the sake of the world God so loves.

Because of even greater division now between winners and losers, and the pain so many feel being on one side or another, we who recognize our own election by God through Jesus Christ have a great responsibility to bear God's reconciling word for all. I am certain that today none of us are up to the task, but by God's grace we must be.

Let us pray.

As you have called us to faithfulness O God, we pray that you will equip us for all we need to bear your hopeful and reconciling word for all those who suffer today. We remember the sick and the sick at heart. We ask for hope amid the conflict all around us. Give us a vision of what it means to be your elect, and the courage to live that out, In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Praise My Soul The God of Heaven at Festival of Music LA 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T07DnPyFURQ>

Praise My Soul The God of Heaven at Royal Albert Hall

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJWLBqNTNSs>

Praise My Soul The God of Heaven by Emu Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-W74SzQZe0>

We Are Called We Are Chosen by David Haas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DCzqHV-Xns>

He Will Hold Me Fast by Acapella Company

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seD3wiJU6lg>

The Church of Christ in Every Age by Gross Pointe Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBUAQKGyc5A>

All My Hope on God is Founded by Martijn de Groot

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8s_JYO4ji7M

All My Hope on God is Founded by Georgia Boys Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWslwhyZS0o>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, November 9, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #209

So what *can* you believe?

When [the devil] lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?(Jn. 8:44-46 NRS)

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; 12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.(Gal. 1:11-12 NRS)

It was this year that I first started hearing about living in a “*post-truth*” world. I don’t think I ever knew or used that word before, but according to definition, “*Post-truth*” as an adjective is “*relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.*”

This goes hand in hand with something else new to me this year, “*confirmation bias.*” Simply put, “*confirmation bias*” is “*believing what you want to believe.*” and finding sources to support those beliefs. Both social media and regular media make possible widely conflicting “*evidence*” to support our belief.

Here’s the problem. When one or multiple sets of “*information*” or “*facts*” completely contradicts other sets of “*information*” or “*facts,*” the result has become a complete breakdown of trust. Who do you believe? What do you watch? Who do you read? What do you trust? Who must you distrust? When is someone telling the truth? What do you believe? When is someone lying? How do you know?

Pick a side.

Admittedly, there is comfort in picking a side where your perspective or point of view or firmly held belief is supported by others. There is comfort in believing you are on the “*right side.*” There is security in being surrounded by those who share your beliefs and values. There is satisfaction in being able to find information or resources that confirm what you believe.

The tricky part is reckoning with our own confirmation bias. We all have bias. We are all prone to “*believe what we want to believe*” whether it is true or not (but again, how do you know?).

This may resonate with our confession when we confess, “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us,*” from 1 John 1:8. In this case, “*If we say we have no confirmation bias, we deceive ourselves, and it will be hard to sort out true from false. But if we*

recognize our confirmation bias, we can test out our conclusions by looking at a wider sources of information and points of view". And to Jesus.

It's easier to pick a side and stick to it, accepting others will be dead wrong. And our enemies because of that. On the other hand, when we seek to learn about other points of view and engage in heartfelt conversation admitting our bias but wanting to broaden our understanding, we might find "others" are not "enemies", but actually "brothers and sisters" (with different views or passions, but still family)... and still loved.

This is risky but rewarding work that, without Jesus, there might be little motivation. But as we look at Jesus' life and ministry, his way of reaching out to all people, many of whom without Jesus, would never have seen themselves as brothers and sisters, there is both encouragement and hope.

This is truth to trust in a post-truth world... trust that will be verified not by what someone else has said in a podcast or tweet or newsfeed somewhere, but what is experienced in our own hearts as we look to the one who is the way, the truth, and the light, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray.

Ground us in your truth, Lord Jesus, that we can engage in your gospel work. Help us understand people with alternate views, perspectives or life experiences. Teach us to work together despite differences and biases, for your sake. Amen.

I Am the Way the Truth and Life

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whQATsfivEo>

I Am the Way by GMWA Mass Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6Tq0DOYQus>

Come to Me All Who are Weary and Heavy Burdened by Gregory Norbet

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2U6mwIjzjdk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8N0pA89Dig>

If Thou But Trust in God to Guide You by Concordia

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7AhiRmu_Zo

Trust and Obey by First UMC Houston

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcMQ0RiQrtE>

Trust and Obey A Capella

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HSD1c0Geqc>

When You Believe by One Voice Children's Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jAtB_UBWh0

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, November 10, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #210

Happy 537th Birthday, Martin Luther.

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. 13 He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:11-14 NRS)

Martin Luther was born November 10, 1483. Many scholars agree that he is one of the most influential persons in western history. Under his leadership, the Reformation would change the church and the world forever. Luther accomplished this by preaching, teaching, translating the Bible into German, and writing. It is hard not to be completely awestruck by the sheer amount of Luther's collected writings, especially when considering that everything he did was first written by hand.

Since I was in seminary forty years ago, fifty-five volumes of Luther's Works have been available in English. This includes Bible commentaries, sermons, letters, catechisms, devotions and even notes taken as Luther spoke casually around the table (called Table Talk). Two thousand sermons have been translated. I had always heard there were more untranslated works. Currently another 20 volumes are in the process of being published.

In honor of Luther's birthday, I thought it would be nice to share something Luther wrote. Here is a selection of Luther's quotable quotes, little pieces of thought that invite deeper meditation. Enjoy them like a piece of hard candy, melting slowly in your mouth.

"The first thing I ask is that people should not make use of my name, and should not call themselves Lutherans but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone...How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?"

"To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

"The Bible is a remarkable fountain: the more one draws and drinks of it, the more it stimulates thirst."

"One is not righteous who does much, but the one who, without work, believes much in Christ. The law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'Believe in this,' and everything is already done."

“A gospel that doesn't deal with the issues of the day is not the gospel at all.”

“Christianity can be summed up in the two terms faith and love...receiving from above [faith] and giving out below [love].”

“No one can believe how powerful prayer is and what it can effect, except those who have learned it by experience. Whenever I have prayed earnestly, I have been heard and have obtained more than I prayed for. God sometimes delays, but He always comes.”

“The most damnable and pernicious heresy that has ever plagued the mind of man was the idea that somehow he could make himself good enough to deserve to live with an all-holy God.”

“We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.”

“But know that to serve God is nothing else than to serve your neighbor and do good to him in love, be it a child, wife, servant, enemy, friend....If you do not find yourself among the needy and the poor, where the Gospel shows us Christ, then you may know that your faith is not right, and that you have not yet tasted of Christ's benevolence and work for you.”

“Every occupation has its own honor before God. Ordinary work is a divine vocation or calling. In our daily work no matter how important or mundane we serve God by serving the neighbor and we also participate in God's on-going providence for the human race.”

“People go through three conversions: The conversion of their head, their heart, and their pocketbook. Unfortunately, not all at the same time.”

“There is no more lovely, friendly and charming relationship, communion or company than a good marriage.”

“We can mention only one point (which experience confirms), namely, that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. No greater commendation than this can be found — at least not by us. After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word of God] through music.”

“Ah, if I could only pray the way that dog looks at meat.”

“The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.”

“Faith is the yes of the heart.”

“God delights in our temptations and yet hates them. He delights in them when they drive us to prayer; he hates them when they drive us to despair.”

“What man, if he were God, would humble himself to lie in the feedbox of a donkey or to hang upon a cross?”

“Jesus Christ never died for our good works. They were not worth dying for. But he gave himself for our sins, according to the Scriptures.”

“True humility does not know that it is humble. If it did, it would be proud from the contemplation of so fine a virtue.”

“The two chief things are faith and love. Faith receives the good; love gives the good. Faith offers us God as our own; love gives us to our neighbor as his own.”

“Scripture is the manger in which we find the Christ child.”

“What is our death but a night's sleep? For as through sleep all weariness and faintness pass away and cease, and the powers of the spirit come back again, so that in the morning we arise fresh and strong and joyous; so at the Last Day we shall rise again as if we had only slept a night, and shall be fresh and strong.”

...and lastly, a beautiful little Luther benediction:

“Unto him who is able to keep us from falling, and lift us from the dark to the bright mountain of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy, to him be power and authority for ever and ever.”

Let us pray.

Thank you, God, for Martin Luther and his witness to the gospel. Thank you for everything he said that points the way to your grace and mercy. On his birthday, we celebrate that he can still speak to us today in ways that draw us closer to you. We also know through other writings that he had a dark side and many struggles. Thank you for forgiving him, just as you forgive us all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

P.S. Since Martin Luther was also a fine musician and composer, today's songs are composed by him. Some of these were posted on Reformation Day, but did you know that our Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal (ELW) includes nineteen of Luther's hymns. Given when he wrote them, they are most definitely medieval in flavor, but even those tunes have long been sung in Lutheran worship. Here are several. Enjoy and “Happy Birthday, Martin!” Besides everything else you did for us, thanks too for the music.

Savior of the Nations Come (ELW 263)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol78eWbhE1o>

From Heaven Above (ELW 268 has nine verses)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPQlunxuKQO>

Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands (ELW 370)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=or-VprK4JHg>

Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord (ELW 395)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRrsLgTAjJA>

We All Believe in One True God (ELW 411)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td-5XxCp8gE>

In Peace and Joy I Now Depart (ELW 440)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwu9PS-NY4U>

O Lord We Praise You (ELW 499... the only recording I could find with this tune)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nD1yplz8TLw>

A Mighty Fortress In Our God (ELW 504)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0e6MeHom7I>

Lord Keep Us Steadfast In Your Word (ELW 517)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0e6MeHom7I>

Dear Christian, One and All Rejoice (ELW 594)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttuu3giOJsA>

Out of the Depths I Cry to Thee (ELW 600)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctBQw5vOYuw>

Now To the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray (ELW 743)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYCKf7LZOPA&list=RDyYCKf7LZOPA&start_radio=1

Isaiah in a Vision Did of Old (ELW 868)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAtMh2oKGwA>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, November 11, 2020 not by Pastor Mark Opgrand but by Chaplain Bob Weeks. #211

Veteran's Day.

COAT LENDERS

By

Chaplain Bob Weeks

U.S. Navy Retired

Scripture: *"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? Then the King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"* (Matthew 25:37-40 NIV)

About the year 326, there was a young soldier serving in the Roman Army in Italy. While on duty one cold day, he spied a forlorn and tattered beggar pleading for alms. Having nothing to give him but a share in his own clothing, Martin drew his sword and cut his cloak in two and wrapped the poor man who had no cloak. That night, he had a dream in which he saw that he had wrapped Christ in his cloak. Legend reports that Jesus said to him, *"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."* (Matthew 25:40 {NIV})

As a result, this young man became a devout Christian and later the Bishop of Tours. His name was Martin of Tours. Martin Luther was named for him, and Luther was baptized in a church that is named for him. In addition, Martin Luther was baptized on the Feast of Martin of Tours (November 11, 1483). Martin of Tours became known as The Cappella Lender or Coat Lender. It is from this term that the word Chaplain originated.

Today is the *Feast Day of Martin, Bishop of Tours*, and is also celebrated as *Veterans' Day* in America. Today, Chaplains are speaking at Veteran Day Ceremonies reminding the gatherings of the sacrifices made by veterans who have been killed in action, and in most cases, are having prayers for fallen veteran families. They are lending their knowledge and experience of God's Word to these groups.

There are 160 ELCA Pastors who serve in the Federal Chaplaincy Ministries. Endorsed by their church and employed by the government, ELCA Federal Chaplains serve in the U.S. Military, Veterans Affairs Medical Centers and Correctional Institutions. While these places might sometimes be dangerous, remote, or isolated, Chaplains are present there, sharing the gospel and bringing messages of hope, forgiveness, and healing.

For the 27 ELCA Chaplains at Veterans Administration Centers, their role can include not just care for the veteran, but also for their families and sometimes the medical staff that cares for the veterans. These Chaplains deal with everything from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), hospice, mental health, and intensive and acute care. Their ministry is totally veteran-led.

The largest number of ELCA Federal Chaplains serve in the military, with 136 men and women in the Army, Navy (includes Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and the Merchant Marines), and Air Force. Even though they wear rank insignia, these Chaplains typically work across ranks, ministering and counseling with service members of all levels. These Chaplains are required to serve in a civilian parish for four years before applying for a commission. They become Reserve Chaplains first after being endorsed by the ELCA Federal Chaplaincy.

Our benevolence offerings go, in part, to support the ELCA Federal Chaplaincy. Materials are provided the Chaplains for distribution to active duty personnel as well as veterans and retreats are sponsored for Chaplains on both coasts and overseas. A special video entitled *“Caring for Returning Veterans”* (a daylong workshop) is available for ELCA Congregations.

Mother Theresa said, when asked what she thought of Military Chaplains, “Special is the country that allows the word of God into the rooms of war.”

Ask any veteran if he or she remembers a Chaplain. Most likely the answer will not only be “yes,” but the name of the Chaplain will be mentioned. Veterans had Coat Lenders.

Today, we remember military persons who have given their life for our freedom, and all veterans who have served. All who served gave something for our free nation. And today in America, we need to thank God that all of these persons had Coat Lenders.

Prayer: Almighty God, we pray for all veterans, their spouses, their children, and their loved ones. Especially we thank you for those who laid down their lives for our protection and for our freedom. Cause us to remember their sacrifice today. We pray for all those who have fought in any war or connection on behalf of America, whose spirits and bodies are scarred by war, whose nights are sometimes haunted by memories too painful to be dismissed. We pray for those who are serving now, especially those in harm’s way. Shield them from danger, give them the courage they need this hour, and at last bring them home. Please turn the hearts and minds of our leaders to the work of justice and a harvest of peace. Spare, we pray, those innocent persons in the midst

of war. Remind us that the peace we enjoy this day is not free, but has been paid for by the sacrifice of many veterans. In the Name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria by Marty Haugen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHjNNiyGUIQ>

Eternal Father Strong to Save

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BicSpCSUjdk>

When Did We See You Hungry Lord by Fr. J. Roel Lungay

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cr5-CByHac>

Feed My Sheep by Don Francisco

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1bctHCywlk>

Cover Me With Your Presence

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKb9uLwN4iw>

Mansions of the Lord by West Point Glee Club

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jccNoxn1HoU>

We Thank You For Your Service

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emk67KZm3tk>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, November 12, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #212

Remembering Marianne and the "It-icillin." (Bullying, Part 1)

My dear friend, never follow a bad example, but keep following the good one; whoever does what is right is from God, but no one who does what is wrong has ever seen God. (3 Jn. 1:11 NJB)

What I remember about Marianne and the "It-icillin" is this: When I was in fifth grade in Medford, Oregon, hyperactive Marianne had warts on her hands. I was part of a group of 10-year-old boys who pretty much treated her like she was a leper.

"Don't let 'it' touch you," we would shout. "Run!" "Ewww. Marianne touched me." "Quick ... get the "It-icillin!"

"It-icillin" was an imaginary compound that would inoculate you against "it." We made a fake hypodermic needles out of a pencil and those little page hole reinforcers that were about the size of "Life Saver" candies. By putting a short pencil through a stack of these, it became an imaginary hypo. When Marianne touched you, you ran to be "vaccinated."

I suppose some of this began because of an imagined fear of catching warts. Mostly it was "boys will be boys" bad behavior, that looking back, is inexcusable. I wish I could claim that none of this was my idea, because I was a "good kid." Nevertheless, I participated. I went along with it. I wanted to fit in with the cool guys, and one way was to make fun of Marianne.

Marianne was not a pushover, however. She'd get in your face with her warty hands. She was defensive. She'd run after us, especially when we called her "It ... the thing from beyond outer space."

Still... what a contemptible thing to call her.

Even back then, I knew this was really wrong. Yet I did nothing to make the situation any better. I went along. I think Marianne was pretty much friendless. She was from a poor family. You could tell she didn't bathe often. She did not have nice clothes. Her long curly red hair was always a mess. Yes, she was treated like a leper.

After moving to Portland in 1962, might not have ever thought of Marianne again. But I sure do remember the conversation with my mother in early 1963. when I was a freshman in high school.

My mother had been talking on the telephone with her friend Louise and learned of a terrible car crash that made the local Medford news. It was a carload of boys along with fifteen-year-old Marianne that ran off the road and hit a tree, killing everyone. Alcohol was involved.

“Do you remember Marianne Hedgpeth?” my mother asked. “Wasn’t she in elementary school with you?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “I remember her.”

Mom continued. *“She was killed in a terrible car crash along with several older boys she had been drinking with. Louise told me she had fallen in with a bad crowd.”*

Fifty-seven years later, I wonder if anyone thinks about Marianne.

Do any of us “good boys” making fun of Marianne ever wonder if our treatment of Marianne was something that drove her to persons who would accept her. Does anyone remember?

I remember.

If God is merciful, and I hope he is, one of the things I pray might happen in heaven is finding Marianne (or other people I have hurt) so I could say “I’m sorry”. Really sorry. I know I was “just” child, but everyone deserves better than to be treated like a leper, or ridiculed, or bullied, or hurt. I recently heard this quote: *“For evil to succeed all is necessary is for good persons to do nothing.”*

When we are honest with ourselves, I am sure we all have done something we are not proud of. Or maybe done things we deeply regret. How about you? Ever do something you wish you could “take back?”

One of the greatest gifts of the gospel is that we can face these things, remember these things, and confess these things, trusting that Jesus loves us despite it all, and is determined to forgive and make all things new. We must never undervalue the grace of this merciful God.

So with that hope, and by the grace of God, I’ll be seeing you, Marianne. With a happy forgiven heart, I’ll be seeing you. If you don’t remember me, that would be fine too (maybe added relief).

Let us pray.

When we confess our sins, O God, we pray for those things done, and those things we failed to do. Please forgive us for all those times we hurt someone, either by action or inaction. Please make things right especially for those who have been victims of cruel actions. Heal our wounds, we pray, and bring reconciliation to those who have suffered through estrangement. Grant us peace, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Amazing Grace/ My Chains are Gone by Pentatonix

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Obp-9BEZe1c>

Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling by Kristyn Getty, Vince Gill, Ellie Holcomb, Sierra Hull
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck58d3BMBX0>

Love Divine All Loves Excelling by Riverside Church
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BF8jG9U3r5w>

Love Divine All Loves Excelling by Madeline Robinson
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pZGeCUwCDM>

There's a Wideness In God's Mercy by Catholic Kids Media
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DR2GMPnWha4>

There's a Wideness In God's Mercy Nate Macy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5LN1ZvwWfs>

Shelter Me by Spiritu
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3KifN7Jfpc>

... and with this hope.... *Someday* by Voctave A Capella
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPToHsMHYil>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, November 13, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #213

Darrel "Denver" Cravens and Why I Hate Rogerian Counseling Techniques (Bullying, Part 2).

"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. (Lk. 6:27-29 NRS)

It was midway through my freshman year of high school when Darrell "Denver" Cravens transferred into my science class. He called himself "Denver" because he came from Denver. Sitting behind me, it took no time before he whispered all manner of insults and threats my direction. On the way to our lockers after class he would regularly bump into me or trip me.

We knew well enough back then not to complain to a teacher or administrator. That would just make it worse. Everyone knew this unspoken rule, and no one messed with Denver Cravens. I endured all the insults and "I'm going to kill you" threats until the school year ended, (much to my relief).

That summer, I looked forward to summer school band and a chance to learn typing. What I failed to realize is that people like Denver, who fail courses like science, must take them over during summer school.

Whenever I would see Denver I kept my distance, turning another direction whenever possible. Sometimes he would see me and yell something. One time I didn't see him in time and got ambushed. That was the time with insults he actually spat in my face. "I'll kill you," he said as he pushed me to the ground.

Another thing I did that summer was volunteer for a program that provided special aptitude, IQ, interest, and personality tests that were supposed to better prepare you for college and figuring out what you wanted to do with your life.

What it mostly was, however, was a training program for teachers preparing to become school guidance counselors. That included one-on-one counseling, where they practiced their training with us volunteers (guinea pigs?).

These counselors were eager to draw out real problems, so they could apply their training. That was my first experience with "Rogerian Style" counseling, where the counselor repeats back what the student is sharing. "What I think I hear you saying...." is a familiar mantra of this "active listening." "So what you are saying is ..." "It sounds like...."

Initially, I was glad to have someone with whom I could confidentially share my problem. But when I said, *“I am being threatened by a real bully. And I don’t know what to do,”* they replied, *“So what I hear you saying is that you feel you are being threatened by a bully, and you don’t know what to do. How do you feel about that?”* Stuff like that.

I wanted help, advice, and options. I was scared. What can I do? What was I going to do? At least no one said, like they do in the movies, *“Just fight him, then, so he’ll leave you alone.”*

One day the problem became solved, but not by anything I said or did. I learned that Denver had been arrested for assault with a deadly weapon. He nearly killed someone with a hunting knife. He was sent to a juvenile detention center in another part of the state and I never heard of him again.

In this case, it appears it was the Bible, more than Rogerian psychology, that saved me. By “turning the other cheek,” I did not escalate a situation where I might have been on the receiving end of a knife attack. To be honest, though, I wasn’t really thinking about the Bible. I was just too scared to do anything else. In this case it turned out to be the right thing.

Recalling this experience, I wish I could have found someone safe who might have been helpful. While I can’t say what that might have looked like in my struggle, I sure hope those school counselors had some more advanced courses.

I know this: Every one of our Stephen Ministers who has ever trained and practiced at St. Paul’s is way better than what I experienced. Our Stephen Ministers are trained in listening, and while they taught not to give “advice”, they also are trained and keenly aware of when to urge professional help when a person’s situation or need is urgent or desperate.

As people of faith, it is important for every one of us to be sensitive to those who are threatened or do not feel safe. Being married to an elementary school principal I know that bullying is taken very seriously in our schools. In our church we are also committed at every level to watch and listen so that everyone will be safe and supported. And yes, thank you, that is what you hear me saying. Blessings.

Let us pray.

We pray for your love, mercy, and healing power, O God, for both those who are, or have been bullied. We also pray for the bullies. So often hurtful behavior happens when we are young, and yet ill effects from that follow us throughout our days. We pray for healing from the trauma of being bullied, and that such memories will become distant. We pray for those who bully others so their hearts might be changed by your love so they might love and not do harm. Keep us all safe from harm, we pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Be Not Afraid by St. John's Newburgh

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMuHl7htOh0>

Be Not Afraid (another version) by Stonebriar Community Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMUXfimmLMc>

I Run to Christ by ZBBC Seminary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ALwRtkqtXE>

Precious Lord Take My Hand

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHBzl_Jb-o4

You O Lord Can Rescue by Matt Redman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2cWrijg-00I>

As the Deer by Robin Marks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBppKZ0eJlQ>

As The Deer Instrumental Guitar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IluQ2n4GvNA>

Our Father We Have Wandered by Augsburg

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fi88dyJVD1M>

Hope of Deliverance by Paul McCartney

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9quEmUZ3-7Y>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, November 16, 2020 not by Pastor Mark Opgrand But **By Chaplain Bob Weeks. #214**

ELECTION RESULTS

By

Chaplain Bob Weeks

Scripture: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and all your mind, and, love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Luke 10:27 {NIV})

The 2020 American Presidential Election has ended. It took a long time to count the ballots, and there is unrest. The Bible reports several elections that might give us some insight about our behavior after the 2020 Presidential Election.

The first king of Israel was Saul, chosen and anointed by Samuel. That election process is of interest.

The Biblical Book of I Samuel reports that Samuel was a judge and deliverer for the nation of Israel. During his time of judging Israel, the Elders rejected the Lord's kingship over them (I Samuel 8:7, 10:19, 12:17,19 {NIV}). Their request was to have a king like the nations around them. They thought such a king would lead them in battle and give them a sense of national security and unity. So, the Lord instructed Samuel to give the people a king ((8:7,9,22 {NIV}).

In that country, there was a man of standing named Kish (See I Samuel 9:1 – 10:1{NIV} for the story). Kish had a very impressive son named Saul. One day, donkeys belonging to Saul's father became lost. Kish told his son Saul to take a servant with him and go look for the donkeys. They looked for the donkeys and finally wound up in Zuph.

Finding no donkeys, Saul said, *“Come, let's go back, or my father will stop thinking about the donkeys and start worrying about us.”* But the servant said, *“Look, in this town there is a man of God; he is highly respected, and everything he says comes true. Let's go there now, Perhaps he will tell us what way to go.”* (The highly respected man was Samuel.)

They went to the town, and as they were entering the town, Samuel was coming toward them. The story goes that the day before, God had revealed to Samuel that a man from the land of Benjamin (referring to Saul) would be sent to him. Samuel was to anoint this man as King of Israel. Saul did not agree, saying that he was from the smallest tribe of Israel; however, after a meal with Samuel, Samuel took a flask of oil, poured it on Saul's head, kissed him, and said, *“Has not the Lord anointed you leader over his inheritance?”*

And so, Saul was elected to be the first King of Israel.

Unlike our elections, Saul did not, at first, let on that he had been chosen. He kept it a secret. In fact, Saul had hidden himself and had to be brought out by others. When he was brought out to the crowds, the people shouted, *“Long live the king!”*; however, even in that day there were troublemakers who said, *“How can this fellow save us? They despised him and brought no gifts.”* NOTE: Saul kept silent in the midst of all this protest.

As you know, later Saul disobeyed God (I Samuel 15:10 {NIV}) and had to be replaced. Samuel had that job, too.

Replacing Saul was a long election process (I Samuel 16:1-13 {NIV}). Samuel saw Eliab and thought *“Surely the Lord’s anointed stands here before the Lord.”* But the Lord said, *“Do not consider his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”*

Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, *“The Lord has not chosen this one either.”* Next Jesse had Shammah pass by Samuel, Samuel said, *“nor has the Lord chosen this one.”* During this election, Jesse had seven of his sons pass by Samuel, but Samuel said to him, *“The Lord has not chosen these.”*

Next, Samuel asked Jesse, *“Are these all the sons you have?”* Jesse said, *“There is still the youngest, but he is tending the sheep.”* Samuel asked Jesse to send for him and bring him in. He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome.

Then the Lord said to Samuel, *“Rise and anoint him; he is the one.”* David was elected; however, Saul was very jealous of David. **UNREST TOOK PLACE.** There has always been unrest among some after a political election, even one conducted by God. So much for Old Testament elections.

THEN THERE WAS A NEW TESTAMENT ELECTION THAT WAS DIFFERENT.

As you know, after Jesus was raised from the dead, and after He ascended there were only eleven disciples to carry on the ministry. Judas had betrayed Jesus and was dead. The disciples left were tasked with an election. Peter asked the group of believers (according to Acts 1:15 {NIV}, about 120 persons), may another take the place of Judas?

So the election process began.

A prerequisite was that they had to choose a person who had been with them from the time that Jesus was with them. It had to be someone who had been with them since the baptism of John. Specifically, the one chosen must become a witness to the resurrection.

So two men were nominated: Joseph called Barabbas and Matthias. They had prayer, “*Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.*”

Then they cast lots (a traditional practice used in Israel to determine the will of God – the lots could have been stones or sticks), and the lot fell to Matthias. **AS FAR AS WE KNOW, THERE WAS NO PROTEST.**

Shortly afterward, the day of Pentecost came, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, they went about the ministry of Jesus. The book of acts will fill you in on their healings, persecutions, visions, the conversion of Paul, and the spread of Christianity. The results of that election was positive and resulted in spreading the Good News about Jesus, and that is why we, members of St. Paul’s, exist today.

After the 2020 Election, let us not protest, but remember that we are blessed with the Good News of Jesus, and practice the great commandment He gave us: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and all your mind, and, love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Luke 10:27 {NIV})

Prayer: Dear God, send your Holy Spirit to guide us, that we may live these days in keeping with your will. Amen.

This is My Song by Marty Haugen and Marc Andersen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQtk5x7dhOo>

A Tribute to All Nations by Gary Feldhege

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCmdhQLtwag>

O God of Earth and Altar by Ivica Kljuce

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lSkStYYi-M>

O God of Earth and Altar by Trinity College Cambridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVqKDRR8aEA>

O Holy Spirit Enter In by Morningstar Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jyd8kvlVqrg>

O Holy Spirit Enter In (new tune) by Hannah Pendergrass and Alyssa Tyler

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMcdl7NuYC8>

Spirit Of God Descend Upon My Heart by Pearl Denham and Walter Fawcett

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4QqwDfRRWM>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, November 17, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #215

St. Paul's longest running controversial issue

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. 3 In these lay many invalids-- blind, lame, and paralyzed. (Jn. 5:1-4 NRS)

Looking at this passage, people more often pay attention to what follows these verses which describe a pool that disabled people often visited in Jerusalem.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" 7 The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." 9 At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath. (Jn. 5:5-9 NRS)

This was among many times when Jesus was controversial, in this case for healing a "lame" man on the sabbath.

Controversies are a regular part of life, we experience them at home, in neighborhoods, at school, in the workplace, and at church. In a zoom meeting for North Carolina rostered leaders not long ago, one of the questions for our breakout sessions was "What is the biggest controversy your church is facing right now?"

Prior to 2004, that would have been easy to answer. The longest running controversy in the history of St. Paul's was the construction of the handicap ramp.

It is hard to tell who or when it was first brought up in conversation or at a council meeting, but there are drawings in the archives that were put together by architect and church member John Oxenfeld decades before it a decision was finally made at the 2004 Annual Meeting to build the ramp.

Why did it take so long?

Two objections that regularly came up. One was that it would forever change the symmetry of our beautiful historic church. The other objection was expressed this way: "Why do we need a ramp? We don't have any handicapped people."

However, in the early 2000s there was an emerging consensus that constructing the ramp was the right thing.

In order to welcome all people, the church needed to be accessible to all people, and that didn't mean trying to find four strong men to help lift on those rare occasions when someone in a wheelchair came to worship (usually it was at a funeral). It was also becoming more noticeable that people recovering from surgery or walking with canes and walkers simply could not easily get up and down the original very narrow stairs at the entrance of the church.

In 2004, a resolution to build the ramp passed, but not without a lot of silent objection and personal concerns. It was finished in 2006. I knew people were going to be okay when finished the worst I heard after it was finished was "It's not that bad."

In fact, it looked pretty good, and the benefit, was immediate. Here came the wheelchairs and walkers. And now fourteen years later, not only do we hardly notice the effect on the symmetry, but its use by everyone has made building it one of the best decisions we have ever made (however controversial).

I can still remember, though, those deeply felt concerns expressed prior to and following the big vote in 2004. When the ramp was finished in 2006, I wrote about it in the newsletter. It is interesting to read now in light of its long-time acceptance and use. We remain deeply thankful for how the ramp has improved our ability to show hospitality and welcome all people, especially those with disabilities.

From Pastor Mark (April, 2006)

"If you build it, they will come."

If any of you remember that wonderful movie, *"Field of Dreams"*, you probably remember that quite. A farmer hears a mysterious voice telling him to build a baseball field in the middle of his Iowa cornfield. It was built and they did come – first Shoeless Joe Jackson, then other baseball players from "the other side," and finally die-hard fans who, in faith, could also see the apparitions and enjoy the game.

This phrase has also been used over the years to describe hopes associated with church building programs. *"If you build it, they will come."* If you build a new sanctuary, they will come; if you build a new parking lot, they will come; if you build a new activity center, they will come. I have thought of this as I have watched progress on our new handicap accessible ramp. If we build it, will they come? Will people in wheelchairs come? Will people who have mobility issues use it?

It has taken many years for us to take this particular *“leap of faith”*. I say *“leap of faith,”* because in faith we are sacrificing certain *“bricks and mortar”* that have solidly marked the entrance of our church for many years. It will change the way the entrance to St. Paul’s looks, but we are doing this in order to better welcome all people in Jesus name, particularly those with disabilities or mobility problems.

I pray the new ramp blends well with new landscaping and looks good, at least good enough to help us to accept that sacrificing our traditional entrance was a worthwhile project. Yes, it is a sacrifice. But here, too, I am reminded of something written by Christian author Frederick Buechner:

“To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love.”

We have sacrificed a portion of our architecture for love. It is as simple as that. But in doing so, we will also receive something valuable. If they will come, we will all learn better how to be the whole body of Christ -- with all its members. Furthermore, we will discover that welcoming was not just about building a ramp but building relationships with those who use it.

What a gracious opportunity God is giving us. Therefore, it is my deepest hope, that each one of us will experience encouragement and opportunities to share Christ-like love with all who will be drawn by the Holy Spirit to our church family. Blessings.

Afterword: I am thankful we experienced something so good coming out of that controversy and division. That’s not a bad thing to celebrate these days.

Let us pray.

We bless you O God, for your faithfulness in opening our hearts to welcome all people. We thank you for showing us how important accessibility is for people coming to worship. We thank you during this time of pandemic for the technological means for people to worship when unable to be at church in person, and for that good ramp ready to aid our entrance and exit. Bless all our ministries that we may be faithful to your calling and welcoming to all people. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

O God In Ages Past by St. John the Divine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPNJUa3usek>

Our Help In Ages Past arr. by Marty Parks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvVqjBgyBns>

Come to Me by Dan Forest

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bi6lZCJx3qA>

All Are Welcome by Marty Haugen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbyZQnPw-wk>

All Are Welcome (All Belong) another version by Jesse Manibusan and Jennah Manibusan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3jeK-QdOXg>

All Are Welcome

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqXZlpQIZXI>

O Shelter Me by Spiritu

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3KifN7Jfpc>

Here I Am To Worship by Church of Christ 24

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBmi171Vuz4>

Here I Am To Worship by Anthem Lights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5sID2aSKKY>

Lead Me Guide Me by Elvis

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=br_4rcSDZWs

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, November 18, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #216

Heights and depths: the wonders of stalactites, stalagmites, and a snack bar at the bottom of the world.

3 O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever;
4 who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever;
5 who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures forever;
6 who spread out the earth on the waters, for his steadfast love endures forever;
7 who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever;
8 the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures forever;
9 the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever; (Ps. 136:3-9
NRS)

On July 4, 1976, I was as high above the earth as I have ever been (except in a plane). On that Fourth of July, my Uncle Don Buesing, who worked security Minneapolis Minnesota's newest and tallest skyscraper, used his key to take us onto the roof.

The IDS tower was a wonder to behold. At 792 feet (or 56 stories), with clear blue sky above and earth far below it was an awesome way to celebrate not only the Bicentennial but an expanse of God's great landscape. It also gave me a very specific reference a few years later, when I, along with a group of college students would make our annual pilgrimage to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico.

Our United Campus Ministry group from Odessa, Texas, enjoyed fall and spring retreats every year at a Disciples of Christ retreat center not far from the caverns. During each retreat, we always went to Carlsbad Caverns. How could we not. This was a true wonder of the world. Headsets gave instruction about what we were seeing as we made our way further and further down, passing places like: "*Hall of Giants*," "*Longfellow's Bathtub*", "*Rock of Ages*", and "*Temple of the Sun*".

We never grew tired of this trek, though my first time was most marvelous, especially when I began to realize just how far below the surface the trail took us. After a three-mile hike, we were at 754 feet below the surface! That was the same depth down as my trip to the roof of the IDS center was up!! Thinking about that was breathtaking, and a glory to behold.

The public tours end up in "*The Big Room*." And it is big: This limestone chamber is almost 4,000 feet long, 625 feet wide, and 255 feet high at its highest point. But that's not all. There was one more marvel to behold I was completely surprised to see.

At the end of the Big Room, after seeing all those wonderful chambers, including amazing sculptures of stalactites and stalactites, there was a SNACK BAR! And not just a little snack bar

either. A huge snack bar. With many tables and places to sit. And the bathrooms were colosseum sized.

So here I was after three miles of dazzling natural beauty quite frankly most stunned by this huge snack bar. Everything had to be transported by elevator. How did they do that?

The Big Room became a wonderful place for an intimate worship service, where we joined hands, sang, prayed, and pondered God's good creation... giving thanks for that holy place... and the snack bar, too). When we finished, we went into the elevators for a one-minute trip to the surface and back to our normal world.

I really am thankful for such an awesome place created by God. I am also glad for all the engineers who found a way to open this to the public. I am also glad for the planners to realize that people hiking fifty-five stories below the surface people would need bathrooms and a place to rest, as well as a way to get out.

During a time when we cannot travel as easily as before, perhaps this will invite you to recall a memory of your own, where you were either in awe of God's great grandeur, or maybe just surprised by a modern marvel. Blessings.

Let us pray.

We thank you O God, for the wonders of your world, for places high above the earth and marvelous places deep below. We thank you for places we have visited that take our breath away and places that draw us deeply into your creative handiwork. During this time when so much of our attention is on getting through this pandemic, we pray that we can look forward again to making new memories celebrating the wonders of your world. Help us also be mindful of caring for your creation so that it can be enjoyed by future generations. Bless those who are working to end this pandemic and save those who are sick. Amen.

P.S. As a bonus to help you get the "picture," ... here are links to photos of Carlsbad Caverns <https://www.nps.gov/cave/learn/photosmultimedia/photogallery.htm>

and the lunchroom

<https://inspiredimperfection.com/adventures/carlsbad-caverns-underground-lunchroom/>

and the IDS Tower

http://www.fieldtripper.com/c/qajIRhvNwg4=

and let us not forget the music....

"The Meditations of My Heart" by Elaine Hagenberg

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3j9BclzI0k>

Rock of Ages by SE Samonte

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM7gt_cSxjw

Rock of Ages by Fountainview Academy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmboVILc4rw>

God Gives the Song by Craig Courtney

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GWGC77IGs8>

I'll Fly Away Nashville Jam

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp31PYP3vgg>

Holy Holy Holy by Sovereign Grace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIHD40CZY34>

How Majestic is Your Name by Studio Musicians

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nig-WNo0YE8>

Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken by Martijn de Groot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EWLNar8J9c>

Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken (Korean version)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLiqi_XJzzw

Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken Oboe and Strings Instrumental

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AXqbEUofGQ>

This is My Father's World by Chris Rice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32dsCyNCYGE>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Thursday, November 19, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #217

A Princess to Di for and a King who died for us.

[Jesus] said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. (Mk. 6:31-34 NRS)

We're coming up on *Christ the King Sunday*, and coincidentally Rebecca and I have been watching Season four of *"The Crown,"* which chronicles Queen Elizabeth II and Britain's royal family. We just finished episode six, where Prince Charles and Princess Diana made their first visit to Australia, and where Princess Di, especially, took the country by storm.

That was the beginning of multitudes falling in love with Diana, and what would begin her reign as *"The People's Princess."* *"The Crown"* included some actual footage of the enormous throngs seeking a glimpse of the Princess.

I had a glimpse of that excitement when in 1996 I had a glimpse of Princess Diana in person. My late wife Carol and I were in Chicago so she could do some research at the Newberry Library, a repository of rare books. I elected to explore the neighborhood and after walking about four blocks I noticed a rather large gathering of people in front of a hotel. When I got closer, I asked what was going on, and someone expressed that Diana was expected to arrive shortly.

Here is how watching a lot of detective show comes in handy. With that large crowd, and it being Diana, I deduced that she might not be let off at the main entrance. So I moved to a rear entrance, where just a few had gathered. We were just a few car lengths from the door.

Sure enough, after a short wait, there arrived at the rear entrance, a fancy black Rolls Royce (and security). Stepping out of the car, as regal as ever, there she was. Princess Di! Everyone cheered. She turned toward us and waved directly at me (or so I want to believe), and then went inside. I was quite shocked at how cool that experience actually was.

Diana was a princess and not a king, and certainly not a savior like Jesus Christ the King. But even from a distance, Diana had charisma that was unlike anything I had ever witnessed.

Thinking about this as we approach another *Christ the King Sunday*, I am trying to imagine what it might have been for those crowds who first experienced Jesus as charismatic preacher, teacher, and healer. Wherever Jesus travelled, the crowds followed. Many hung on his every word. Some

sought to touch him or be touched by him. Even if you could not get close, it was a thrill to be part of the hope he brought to the people.

Not everyone agreed, of course, just like not everyone in Britain's royal family embraced the idea of a "People's Princess." Some wished Jesus to be a strong earthly king who would overthrow Rome. Other's saw his witness as a threat to their historic faith.

The gospel writers portray Jesus' death on the cross as a kind of ironic coronation of a failed king. In faith, and by his resurrection, we believe Jesus was king, though not like earthly kings. Earthly kings and queens and princes and princesses would come and go. And none had the impact Jesus had as he initiated a reign of love that would know no end. Let us celebrate this wonderful gift.

Let us pray.

As we approach the end of this church year, we celebrate your sovereignty O God, through Jesus Christ our Lord and King. Make known your kingdom to us that we might be faithful servants following you. Thank you for dying for us that we might live for you. Amen.

Jesus Shall Reign Where're the Sun (Watts) by Jonwesley Barnhill

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs_x2EZvk4s

Jesus Shall Reign Where're the Sun (Remington) by Joshua McConville

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLevsV6QuoM>

Jesus Shall Reign (Watts) by St. Michael's Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ye08jflw108>

Jesus There's No One Like You by Sovereign Grace Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-d1uUPrKns>

Holy There No One Like You by Housefires

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQWgEjdCd6w>

Jesus Paid It All by Celtic Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfUNU-sPwbQ>

King of My Heart by Sarah McMillan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpgSbKYxd9Y>

... and for something completely different from my usual... "*As Long As I Got King Jesus*" by Vicki Winans

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyAMCkHOb8U>

St. Paul's In Your Home Devotion for Friday, November 20, 2020 not by Pastor Mark Opgrand but by Pastor Michael Megahan, Ph.D., Lutheran Bible Translators #218

Whom shall be sent?

Romans 10:11-15

11 As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

15 And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

God the Creator is God the Sender. Have you ever noticed how the idea of sending or being sent is central to the Bible? There is the well-known passage in Isa 6:8:

8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, *"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"* And I said, *"Here am I. Send me!"*

In John 20:21-23, Jesus tells his disciples:

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

At Christ's ascension, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit and, after receiving the Holy Spirit, at Pentecost the disciples are sent to the ends of the earth to be witnesses for Jesus.

Since the beginning until today, one of the primary events in the relation between God and humans is that of God calling and sending people to do the will and work of God throughout the world.

Perhaps because missionaries to foreign lands exhibit the greatest physical sense of being sent out into the world, they are often used as examples of being sent. But we are all sent by God. Pastors are sent to lead congregations. Church secretaries and treasurers and music directors are sent to provide support and service in administration and worship. We are sent to our schools and workplaces to be light to those who are in darkness and comfort to those who are broken and joyful support to those who are rejoicing.

For centuries, the Church has sent people into the mission field of foreign lands and men and woman have packed their bags, said their good-byes and wandered off into the distant horizons facing many unknowns: shipwreck, war, famine, sickness, as well as blessings and joys.

When we first arrived in Tanzania, some of the older missionaries had first traveled in WWII and their ship (no long-distant flights then) was torpedoed and they were captured by a German submarine crew. But thanks be to God, they survived to go on with their ministry in Africa.

But Covid-19 has suddenly placed a “**STOP! LOOK! LISTEN!**” sign in the pathway of those who are sent overseas. We suddenly are forced to ask, “*Must I, should I go?*” *Can we do our work “at home”* like so many others? It has taken a lot of innovation and change of habits, but, yes, we have discovered (at least those of us in Bible Translation), much work can be done in our home offices wearing our comfy at-home clothes and having the coffee pot at our side.

It means adjusting to time-zone differences (my projects are an average of 7 to 8 hours ahead of our local time, which means their optimum time for work is my optimum time for sleep). It means dealing with poor internet connections). Even so, work progresses, and God’s word continues to spread.

BUT there are certain features of our work that must be done, on-site, face-to-face with the language community. For example, one of my responsibilities is to start up new projects. In order to do that, I must first visit the site and do anthropological and linguistic surveys. I listen to what languages are being spoken and by whom and in what situations.

If the students are learning English or Swahili in the classroom, do they use these languages when on the playground or do they use their vernacular? Do grandparents talk with their children in the national language (Swahili) or the tribal vernacular?

What about parents and children or shopkeepers and customers or police doing investigations? Do they have a written language, or do I need to do a study to provide the material for developing a writing system? These are just a few of the questions I research, and the research can only be done on-site.

Another responsibility I have is teaching. Now some of the teaching can be done and is being done online, but there are certain practical lessons that need my presence. For example, in Bible Translation, a special computer program is used for entering the Bible translation and developing local dictionaries. It also contains resources such as commentaries, maps, and exegetical tools. Only by being with the teams and their computers can the program be taught.

So, now that borders are being opened, travel is beginning again. These trips are not taken lightly as if we were going on holiday. It takes days of planning, preparations and communications. It

takes financial support. Finally, and most importantly, prayer—lots and lots of prayer. But we are sent by God, our Creator and Savior. We are sent with a purpose. For, as quoted in the first passage above (Romans 10:11-15), God desires all people to be saved and will bring life to all who call on His name. But they can't call on His name until they hear the preaching and believe. And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Prayer: Lord, when I hear you calling in the night, "Whom shall I send?" give me the strength to answer, "Here I am, send me!" Renew in your Church a spirit of sending your servants to do your work throughout the world. Bless those who do the sending and protect those who are sent and give Life and Joy and Blessing to those who hear and believe.

From Pastor Mark: Pastor Megahan is currently in Africa doing Lutheran Bible Translation projects. For more information about this work the website is www.lbt.org.

On that site, there is an easy way to give, and also designate a gift for Michael and JoAnn Megahan's ministry from the list of list of missionaries. I've happily done this, so I recommend the process and the good ministry our contributions support.

and here are some songs requested by Michael for this devotion...

Here I Am, Lord by John Michael Talbot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZK-5v9gMTI>

Here I Am, Lord by Chris Bray

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4t6mz8yoocY>

Here I Am, Lord by Gustavus Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=endq52Jw7ag>

Lost in the Night by St. Olaf Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2_7XUdAabM

Lost In the Night by Concordia Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOunsOLf8dg>

I Love to Tell the Story by Acapeldridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kErF4tgtlJo>

I Love to Tell the Story by 844jim

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHNomEE1m_Y

I Love to Tell the Story (Instrumental Piano)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46BblwRDsoY>

Lord You Give the Great Commission by St. Mary's Speldhurst

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQ8J34NsZYY>

Lord You Give the Great Commission by St. David's Anglican Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kErF4tgtlJo>

Why we do not celebrate "Bicycle Bob the King Sunday".

Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." 38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." (Matt. 27:37-40 NRS)

In the early 1970's I worked in Minneapolis, Minnesota as a property manager/caretaker /seminary intern with two other seminarians taking care of a city block of multiple resident properties owned by Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota. This was an alternative seminary internship program with a strong social service component.

The Franklin Avenue neighborhood was an inner neighborhood with a variety of residents, including quite a number of interesting "characters." One "character" was "Bicycle Bob," the name he preferred to be called. His name originated from the three wheeled "bicycle" he drove everywhere. A car sized battery in his basket powered the many lights on it; he used a portable CB radio to communicate with various friends; he wore a regular motorcycle helmet.

Bob was determined, funny, eccentric, and with a disability that made the stability of a "three-wheeler" necessary for his travels around the neighborhood. He often stopped to talk to us.

Bob also had a big secret. One day as we were chatting, he said very matter of factly. *"I want to tell you something. And you can't tell anyone. I am the true heir to the English throne. I am the true King of England."*

He went on to say, *"Yep. They're looking for me right now. They want me back. But you know what? I don't want to go. I like it right here. So if anyone comes by looking for me, don't tell them where I am. I know they want me back, but I'm not going. I like it right here."*

All this was good-natured fun. Was he spoofing us, or did he really believe what he was saying? It was hard to say, but it was so much fun hearing *"They're looking for me right now, but I'm not going,"* that we just let it ride and enjoyed our very own neighborhood royal, "King Bicycle Bob."

The part that always made me smile, though, was how Bob, after declaring *"They want me back"* always finished with *"But I'm not going. I like it right here."* He wasn't even tempted.

There is a famous novel called *“The Last Temptation of Christ”* by Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis. In that fictionalized account of the story of Jesus Christ, Kazantzakis’s Christ succumbs to his last temptation on the cross, which is to come down from the cross and finish living his life as a normal person.

Following his coming down what happens next plays out over several chapters. Jesus enjoys a normal life where he marries and has children and grandchildren. After many years, he is discovered and confronted by decrepit and embittered former disciples. He is chastised by his failure to do what he promised and save humanity. They say he betrayed them.

As that moment of confrontation climaxes, Jesus snaps back to reality, and finds himself back on the cross where he chooses to die for us and finishes his mission. The last temptation was just that – temptation. His mission was to serve and to save, and he did it.

And that’s why we do not celebrate *“Bicycle Bob the King Sunday”*.

Let us pray.

As we have finished another church year and wait for the beginning of another, we thank you O God, for your sovereignty expressed through Jesus Christ our Lord and King. As earthly kings and kingdoms come and go, we are grateful for your benevolent rule over all people. Thank you, Jesus, for dying on the cross for us so that we might know the lengths you will go to make us your own. Draw us, we pray, into the mystery of the cross so we can trust in your goodness and sacrifice. We need trust so badly these days as we are so let down by earthly authorities. Be the One, we pray, to whom we can give our whole hearts, trusting in you alone for all we need. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

P.S. *“Crown Him With Many Crowns”* is a natural accompanying hymn today. Once I starting listening, I loved the rich variety and wonderful arrangements. That’s why we have just one hymn today performed nine ways. Enjoy.

Crown Him With Many Crowns by Martijn de Groot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=If-svStcvS8>

Crown Him With Many Crowns by Lily and River

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuMh_ept-Js

Crown Him With Many Crowns by Fountainview Academy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INo42lyvszY>

Crown Him With Many Crowns by Chris Rupp

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vbCtxbpRIM>

Crown Him With Many Crowns by Tenore
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-OqDtK6xsg>

Crown Him With Many Crowns by GTASoul
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdK4lzg8gsU>

Crown Him With Many Crowns by SE Samonte
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufzr4SqAxy0>

Crown Him With Many Crowns by St. David's Hall, Cardiff, Wales
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vWRXvWZPUQ>

Crown Him With Many Crowns Huddlesfield Choral Society
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKtVuEwd1Jk>

Crown Him instrumental piano by Kaleb Brasee)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ci0wbhATxxY>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Tuesday, November 24, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #220

"The only thing he has left is what he gave away."

You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." (2 Cor. 9:7 NLT)

We just passed another "Commitment Sunday" where people were invited to share their commitment and estimates of giving for the year 2021. The Stewardship Team has done a lot of work in lifting up our ministries as they have encouraged us to review our plans for giving.

When the pandemic struck us and began affecting our normal way of doing things, especially worship, I wondered how this challenging time would affect our worship and our ministry. One thing I will always take away from 2020 is how much the people of St. Paul's love the Lord and their church. We have adapted, doing things we never imagined earlier, like online or outdoor worship and drive through communion.

Some folks have experienced additional financial strain through the pandemic. Others had discovered they have more income simply because they are spending less. Through this time, people have continued to support St. Paul's, and for this I am deeply grateful. Thanks be to God.

Whenever giving, especially generous giving, comes up for thought or reflection, I will always remember something I experienced while serving in Odessa, Texas in the early 1980's. At that time, while much of the country suffered, Odessa was an oil-rich boom town. Oil Prices were high, employing many and supporting growth in every sector.

One person who "struck it rich" in the "boom" was Garland Jordan. He owned an oil company and was also major shareholder in a local bank. Well known for his generosity, he was regularly invited to give to many worthwhile causes and charities. He was active in his local Lutheran church, and one who could be counted on whenever there was a special need. Garland had a lot, and he also gave a lot away.

When the worldwide price of oil took a major dip, it completely crashed the local economy, and many businesses failed. Five banks also failed, including Garland's. Garland lost his oil business, his bank, and his home. But it was what his pastor told me that has stayed with me since then. After describing Garland losing everything, this is what his pastor said:

"The only thing Garland has left is what he gave away."

Garland never imagined that he would end up losing everything in the big oil bust, but I know for certain that after losing everything, he was especially thankful for everything he had done earlier

with his money (when he could). Many worthwhile people, projects, and charities had benefited from what he gave, and that joy could not be taken from him.

The story of Garland deeply affected me, especially my attitudes about giving. I “no longer think” about what I “no longer have” after I have given something away. I do not dwell on things I could have done for myself if I had instead spent the money on myself. I don’t even think about what I have given away as gone.

That’s because, like Garland, what I still have left is what I have given away. God bless you all in your giving.

Let us pray.

Thank you for all your blessings, O God. Help shape a healthy attitude in us that underscores the joy of giving. Remind us that giving is not losing what we have but gaining the rich experience of participating in ministries that leave a lasting legacy. Give us what we need, O God, and the encouragement to share. Remind us that what we give away in love, we still have. Amen.

We Give Thee But Thine Own by URC 2012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHR1PQ5YwLo>

We Give Thee But Thine Own by Parklands Ward

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ha3KLi3nKO4>

All That We Have and All That We Offer by The St Paul Spirit Ensemble

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dq8JrM09oFI>

All That We Have and All That We Offer by Catholic and Christian Choral

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dq8JrM09oFI>

All That We Have and All That We Offer by Dood Susa Stela

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahi3TEspXmg>

Happiness is Something If You Give It Away children’s song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrBowY8QPhc>

How Can I Respond by Mission House

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1JWqPcLeUk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMH7REm0y8s>

Yet Not I But Christ In Me by Selah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHJPwl1Qioo>

St. Paul's In Your Home Devotion for Wednesday, November 25, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand

Wolves and lambs together. Oh My!

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. 23 They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD-- and their descendants as well. 24 Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent-- its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD. (Isa. 65:19:23-25 NRS)

Isaiah 65 includes wonderful words of hope for the people of God, including an image of “*the wolf and the lamb*” feeding together. Most often in scriptures, wolves are presented as fierce and fearful creatures to be avoided. Here is a wonderful image of hope, an image of reconciliation and getting along nicely. I am particularly drawn these days to every hopeful passage that presents enemies as able to coexist peacefully.

We have often talked about how, if someone has never been around sheep, it is hard to understand some of the sheep imagery in the Bible. Part of our Biblical education is learning why we are described as sheep and why Jesus is described as a good shepherd.

Wolves are also named in scripture, but usually as an enemy. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus warns his disciples: “*See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.* (Matt. 10:16 NRS). In Matthew 7:15 Jesus says “*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*”

I’m encouraged by Isaiah’s positive promise about wolves, especially after visiting a rather marvelous place near Purdue University in West Lafayette called “*Wolf Park*”. It is an educational and research facility with large acreage that since 1972 has studied domesticated wolves. They are not “pets”, and not “tame,” but have been raised by humans to be not afraid, and they accept humans observing and caring for them.

Through Wolf Park’s research, much has been learned about how wolves are quite incredible creatures, despite their mostly bad reputation in the Bible. Unlike humans, all wolf behavior makes sense, and they have a very complex social structure that works for them.

Wolf Park is open to the public; one of our Purdue Lutheran Campus Ministry’s favorite little outings was attending a “*Friday Night Wolf Howl*”. We would hear updated stories about what was happening in the wolf community and then have a chance to howl along with them as the sun began to set. We quickly discovered that howling with the wolves is very good therapy after a stressful week. “*Aaaauuuullll!*”

It was also marvelous to see how wolves and humans could be in a respectful relationship with each other. The wolves learned not to be afraid, and humans learned to respect the wolves so as not to provoke them. Of course, keeping the wolves fed was an important piece of this, so as not to make them “*ravenous*” like in Matthew 7.

Given there was no “*Wolf Park*” where Jesus journeyed, it is understandable why Jesus would warn his disciples about those who appeared to be calm and peaceful but are ready to “*eat them alive.*”

These days, we seem to have a lot people ready to pounce on each other at the slightest provocation. How might we change this? I suppose some of this, as with the wolves, depends on how we were raised. As humans, much will depend on how we are motivated to believe that peaceful coexistence and cooperation is preferable to tearing each other apart.

Considering this possibility, I am thankful for Jesus as our role model. His life is a living witness to the value of building bridges. And while many would see his death as a referendum on something that was never going to work, others have seen God resurrecting him from the dead as validation that with God, all things are possible.

...And wolves and lambs can then share a meal where neither is the main course.

Let us pray.

You bless us O God with hope about living together in peace. When that seems so difficult to imagine, grant us that vision from Isaiah that makes what seems unlikely part of your divine plan for us all. During this time of national crisis, help us build trust, especially between those who imagine each other as enemies. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

All Things Bright and Beautiful by John Rutter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjbktnTuV30>

All Things Bright and Beautiful by National Taiwan University Chorus (Rutter)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVSf5QISmA8>

Look at the World by Rutter sung by Smith Family

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEUMsWoW8V8>

All Creatures of Our God and King by David Crowther

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cObXwn-EgGY>

All Creatures of Our God and King by Maranatha Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0d3gO6qDLNA>

All Creatures of Our God and King ... Horizons & Heritage concert

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0_8JnaOjSo

Wolf Howl at Wolf Park (not a song, but footage of the Wolf Howl)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ocSHUu6Yc4>

and.... a well done intro to Wolf Park

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QkcGoFU5mk>

and finally.... *The Wolves and the Ravens* by Rogue Valley (Explanation here: I picked this not only because “wolves” is in the title, but also because the female singer is the daughter of my best friend in seminary. It is also a cool song and I coincidentally grew up in the Rogue Valley).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dhfKp7MX2k>

St. Paul's In Your Home Thanksgiving Day Devotion for Thursday November 26, 2020 not by Pastor Mark Opgrand **but by Chaplain Bob Weeks #222**

GIVING THANKS

By

Chaplain Bob Weeks

In my first parish, I wanted to have a Thanksgiving Service since none had been held on Thanksgiving before. I planned a service and preached a sermon using some Thanksgiving Illustrations for my sermon. When the service ended, I thought I had done a good job. Then, a 96 year old lady, Mrs. Della, greeted me at the end of the service by saying, *"Pastor, Thanksgiving is thankful living every single day."* She obviously knew more about thanksgiving than me.

There was a Lutheran Pastor, Martin Rinkart, who can teach us much about giving thanks. Martin was born in Eilenburg, Saxony, Germany in 1586. He served churches in Eilenburg and Lutjenborf during the dreaded plague of 1637. For more than thirty years, Martin served as a pastor in a war torn and plaque distraught area. During these Thirty Years War (1618-48), he was elected by his fellow citizens to plead with the enemy commander to lower his demands for tribute money. One year, he conducted more than 4,000 funerals (40-45 a day), including his wife's, and at times food was so scarce that his family went hungry. Although he could have despaired, his faith in God remained strong, and he gave thanks continually.

Martin followed the example of the prophet Isaiah, who instructed God's people to give thanks at all times, including when they had disappointed God . . . *"I will praise you, O Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me."(Isaiah 12:1) or when enemies oppressed them. Even then, they were to thank and exalt God's name, making ". . . known among the nations what he has done."* (Isaiah 12:4).

During this COVID-19 Pandemic, Martin's example of giving thanks needs to be echoed among us, joining hearts and voices as we give praise and thanks to God for bringing us through this virus condition so far, and the promise of a vaccine.

This Thanksgiving Day we can give thanks to God by using Martin's hymn *"Nun danket alle Gott," (Now Thank We All Our God).*

Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done in whom this world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms has blest us on our way
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

Oh, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us,
and keep us all in grace, and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all harm in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
the Son, and Spirit blest, who reign in highest heaven,
the one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

Yes, as Pastor Martin Rinkart and the little 96 year old lady, Mrs. Della, in my first parish would have us to remember, Thanksgiving is thankful living every single day.

Prayer: Almighty God, this Thanksgiving Day, I give you thanks for amazing work in my life. Thanks for bringing us hope in the midst of these trying times. Amen.

Now Thank We All Our God by Michael Lining

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKNM5KD9_Q

Now Thank We All our God by Hymn Charts (contemporary)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GvSMerBDUc>

Now Thank We All Our God (unknown service in Brittain)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s99dNPKYtHk>

Praise and Thanksgiving by Distant Voices

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjRf3_QZQWE

Praise and Thanksgiving Sing for Joy Festival Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8Oo-K6gIBA>

Let All Things Now Living by SE Samonte

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjRf3_QZQWE

St. Paul's In Your Home for Friday, November 27, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #223

The time I accidentally “pantsed” the Fourth Biggest Greaser at McLaughlin Junior High: A Tale of Retribution and Forgiveness

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.13 And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt. 6:12-15 NRS)

For many years I didn't think I would ever share this personal story. Especially in a church setting. But there I was as a new pastor at Lutheran Camp Chrysalis in Kerrville, Texas, along with my youth and many middle schoolers at Confirmation Camp. Each day had a theme, and I was assigned the campfire talk around the theme of “*Forgiveness.*” Here is the following true story I shared with them that night:

When I was a seventh grader at McLoughlin Junior High in Medford Oregon, I accidentally “*pantsed*” Jim MacNicky, who had been voted McLoughlin's fourth biggest “*greaser.*” Also known as a “*hood,*” Jim was “*Number Four,*” after two ninth graders and an eighth grader named Cecil Cardwell. No one knows how the vote was taken, but no one disputed it. The four biggest greasers were feared. Their t-shirts were rolled up. Their Levi's were worn as low as they can go. They had duck tail haircuts. See the movie “*Grease,*” and you'll get the picture.

I more resembled what we would now call a “*nerd,*” just an average guy with a crew cut and black horned rimmed glasses and a menace to no one. I would never dare a confrontation with a greaser. But then it happened.

It began with my being upset at a bad test score I had just received. When class let out and I had to get my jacket out of locker. Jim was standing in front of my locker, and I swear to this day I do not know how, asking him to move while gently tugging on his pants, this caused his pants to fall completely to his ankles. Not only his pants, but his very loose boxer shorts too!

With some of the cutest girls in the school seeing it all (and all means all), Jim fell to the ground squirming to get his pants back up. They had seen everything! And mild-mannered Mark Opgrand had just “*pantsed*” McLoughlin's fourth biggest greaser.

I ran. Immediately I ran. I hid in the back of the bus. In stunned silence I feared my fate. I prayed, “*Dear God, what have I done?*” To my parents' later inquiry, “*What's the matter?*” I said nothing. I slept not a wink that night. This was not a small slight that would be forgotten.

The severity of my offence was underscored immediately after getting off the bus. *"Hey Opgrand, Macnicki's looking you."* Again I heard from another. *"Do you know MacNicky's looking for you?"* All morning, again and again and again *"MacNicky's looking for you."*

Because our school was so large (1,200 student body), I did not actually see him till lunchtime when I was out on the blacktop. I was alone, abandoned by my friends. And there, about fifty yards away, there they were. Not just MacNicky, but all four of the biggest greasers at the school. Side by side they walked slowly toward me like it was a scene right out of Western.

I knew there was no point in fleeing. I knew what I had done. I had humiliated Jim MacNicky, exposing his private parts to all those giggling girls. All I could do was tell him I was sorry and beg for mercy.

Soon we were face to face. I looked at him. And he stared at me.

"I'm so sorry", I said. "I'm so SO sorry. Please forgive me. I'm really sorry."

As I shared these words, all was quiet around the Camp Chrysalis campfire that night. I paused the narrative and reminded our young people that the theme of the day was "Forgiveness."

That's when I inquired of them. *"So do you know what he did?"*

"He forgave you?" "I heard one say. Another nodded, with that hope.

"No," I said. *"He beat the crap out of me!"* But then I quickly added, *"But wouldn't this have been a GREAT story if he had?"*

Despite my plea for mercy, I knew I deserved a beating. It was called *"getting pounded"* back then. I covered up, fell to the ground. I endured some kicks and a few bruises but thankfully didn't get bloodied or break anything. There was some grace in that.

But wouldn't it have been a GREAT STORY if, after confessing my sin, Jim had said, "You really hurt me, but I forgive you." Wouldn't it have been a WONDERFUL STORY if I could say, "And that's how, through the power of forgiveness, Jim MacNicky and I became unlikely, but best friend!" In truth, we never spoke again.

I think about Jesus.

In Jesus Christ, we don't get what we deserve. Instead Jesus got what we deserve. That's why, when Jesus forgives us, Jesus has earned the right. For us, it's all grace. Undeserved, awesome grace... and forgiveness. And this is the way the story turns out FOR US.

Let us pray.

We thank you O God, that from you, we don't get what we deserve. Thank you for your grace and love and your promises to stand with us whenever life gives us a beating. In Jesus' Amen.

Forgive Us by The Many

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SU1Q9zULTwQ>

CONFESSION (FORGIVE US, LORD) (SATB Choir) - Wendy Ferguson/Sue C. Smith/Heather Sorenson

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTfT_Uw98Jc

O God Forgive Us by King and Country

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tz4toSf-xQU&list=RDtz4toSf-xQU&start_radio=1

There In God's Garden (ELW 342) Morningstar Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoeHbHNW19I>

Great God Your Love Has Called Us by Grace Lutheran Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRuMPyTLehA>

Restore In Us O God by Hudson Lourenco

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJVDmjAEJzE>

Change My Heart O God by Eddie Espinosa

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEtsHWFE6-w>

I Will Give You Rest by Misphat Ministries

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWcwqMJHiRY>

Come Unto Me by Esther Mui

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRzRrc7XEjs>

Our Father We Have Wandered by St. Joseph Choir Downer's Grove IL

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgugIcNc4zE>

**St. Paul's In Your Home
Daily Devotionals**

Volume 2, #223-

Monday November 30, 2020

to...

by Pastor Mark Opgrand

**St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church,
12 North Sixth Street
Wilmington, NC 28401**

**(With Several by
Pastor Michael Megahan, Ph.D.
and
Chaplain Robert L. Weeks, USN (Ret.)
and
Deacon Susan Jackson)**

St. Paul's In Your Home for Monday, November 30, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #224

When we should NOT call them "Advent" calendars.

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. (Jas. 5:7-8 NRS)

Before we talk about *Advent* calendars, let's talk about *Advent*.

As a season of the church, *Advent* has been around since around 336 A.C.E., when December 25th became the fixed date of Christmas. *Advent*, from the Latin word *Adventis*, is a translation of the Greek word *Parousia*, and refers both to Jesus first coming as a baby and his return at the end of the age, his second coming. The season of *Advent* reflects on this as we draw closer to Christmas.

The creation of *Advent* calendars has been one way we mark getting closer to Christmas. The first printed *Advent* Calendar was paper and developed by German Gerhard Lang in the early 20th Century and was distributed through his printing company. The calendar features little windows that were opened one by one each day as we approach Christmas.

It is still possible to find printed *Advent* calendars where little "*windows*" are opened to reveal a Bible verse and picture related to the nativity story, but these are far outnumbered now by dozens of other *Advent* calendars. The 63 best *Advent* calendars as reviewed by today.com. Others are promoted on Youtube and other websites.

These *Advent* Calendars include: Food *Advent* Calendars, Beauty *Advent* Calendars, Pet *Advent* Calendars, Lego *Advent* Calendars, Kid's Toys *Advent* Calendars, Star Wars and Harry Potter Character Calendars, Wine, Liquor, and Beer *Advent* Calendars, and Tea and Coffee *Advent* Calendars. And ...(cringe)... even a sex toy *Advent* calendar. Far down on the list are the Classic *Advent* Calendars, which depict Santas, Christmas trees, and presents.

As I said, it is still possible to find religious *Advent* calendars, but *Advent* "*Goodie Bag*" calendars offering *treats* far exceed those that related either to Jesus' first coming or his second.

For many years there has been seasonal advocacy about putting "*Christ*" back in "*Christmas*." That includes protest regarding the use of the word "*Holiday*" instead of "*Christmas*." But what about putting *Christ* back in *Advent*, especially back in *Advent* Calendars? Where is *Christ* in a Whiskey Calendar? Or in Harry Potter Lego Calendar?

I have a solution. Let's call every calendar not pointing to Jesus a "*Holiday Calendar*." Don't call them "*Advent Calendars*". I doubt the whiskey, wine, Lego, Pet, Beauty, Coffee Tea people even

have a clue about what the word “*Advent*” means? Quit using Christian faith’s word, people! You can use “*Holiday*” all you want. But save “*Advent Calendars*” for those calendars that point us to the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray.

As we now enter the season of Advent, we pray that we shall experience joy in what uniquely belongs to Advent. Bless us in our waiting and watching and anticipating. May this Advent season be one where, without material distraction, we draw deeply from the reservoir of your love being birthed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Advent of our God (Fraconia tune instrumental with words to meditate upon)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IT_lvAE-ts

The Advent of our God (St Thomas tune instrumental with words)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jndH9oUacjY>

The Advent of our God “peppy” version by Paul Marxhausen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZKYWlleXTU>

Advent Prose by The Choir of Etheldredas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gT5sIxhdpc4>

Wait for the Lord by Taize

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7GexlvX8HU>

Wait for the Lord Soundrop version of Taize chant

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBb3fjJoNvQ>

The Advent Song for Kids by Catholic Icing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZCtyhOU2gw>

Light the Advent Candle by Arianne D'Alfonso

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FQsnmZSjA>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar
for Tuesday, December 1, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #225

Today, we open our "window" for "O Come O Come Emmanuel" (LBW34, ELW 257)

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." (Matt. 1:23 NRS)

Using our imagination, I hope you can imagine these *Advent Devotions* as a kind of *Advent Song Calendar*, with each day offering the gift of an Advent hymn or carol to reflect upon, and then listen to via YouTube videos.

O Come O Come Emmanuel is a great hymn to open first, as it is arguably the most popular of all our Advent hymns. Every church sings "*O Come O Come Emmanuel*", even those who do not observe Advent as a season. The song has also been performed by thousands of artists over the years. It is printed in 474 hymnals.

The words of the hymn are based on short sentences (called antiphons) first written in Latin that go all the way back to the ninth century or even earlier. Hymn writer John Mason Neale translated the texts into English in 1851.

Neale is interesting. He was gifted in writing sacred poetry, and was very "high church," and yet through a number of twists and turns, including dealing with lung disease, ended up not rising up in the church hierarchy, but rather devoted to many social ministry causes, including assuming the "*wardenship*" of Sackville College, described as a refuge for "needy old men". From that he established the Sisterhood of St. Margaret, which ministered to the poor, sick, and suffering; he was instrumental in establishing an orphanage, a middle school for girls, and a house, described at that time as one for "fallen women." Neale was very conservative in his approach to worship, but very progressive in his approach to applying the gospel to the needs of the community.

Neale was also brilliant. It was said that he could "read, write, and think" in twenty-one different languages, and his intimate knowledge of Latin and Greek made him better equipped to translate hymns from those languages than any other. The Lutheran Book of Worship includes eighteen translations by Neale, as well as three of his original compositions.

There are eight verses in our hymnal, with the eighth repeating the first. No hymn will be popular unless it has a good tune, and certainly this hymn has been made wonderful by the tune, called VENI, EMMANUEL. The name itself sounds it was written for this text, not just the meter. However, the melody had been around for a long time before attached to these words. In fact, its origin was largely unknown until deep research in 1966 discovered the melody in a small fifteenth-century "*Processional*" that belonged to a community of French Franciscan nuns.

No matter how you look at it, this is an old hymn that continues to speak to us beautifully in both text and tune. As prayer, verse #4 particularly addresses God from us during this time of pandemic and international stress. “Emmanuel” means “God with us.” In Jesus, God is.

4 *Oh, come, blest Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death’s dark shadows put to flight.*

Refrain

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

Let us pray. *May our meditations based on Advent hymns and carols bless us and connect us with all throughout the history of the song who have lifted their voices in praise and thanks to you. O Come, Emmanuel that we might experience you with us in every aspect of our lives. Cheer our spirits amid this world’s gloom and bring us to the light of day. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

There are many wonderful versions of this song. May these lift your spirits (and let me know your favorites at mopgrand@gmail.com)

O Come O Come Emmanuel by Clare College Cambridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPV8PEBTAQ0>

O Come O Come Emmanuel by Hymns and Hers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pj6vzfk8II>

O Come O Come Emmanuel by Reawaken Hymns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQPOJsxEdPo>

O Come O Come Emmanuel by the Piano Guys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iO7ySn-Swwc>

O Come O Come Emmanuel by Choir of King’s College

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcllZpnZPgo>

O Come O Come Emmanuel by Peter Hollens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zshzkkD-NYA>

O Come O Come Emmanuel by For King and Country

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkvYR4BcHYc>

Veni Veni Emmanuel by the King’s Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wE6BzoMt0Ro>

Veni Veni Emmanuel by the Ten Tenors

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BXoDk5jz0>

O Come O Come Emmanuel by Pentatonix

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTsCC0hwL5g>

O Come O Come Emmanuel by BYU Vocal Point

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdR79P-2ewo>

O Come O Come Emmanuel by Sovereign Grace Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZggySBroc>

O Come O Come Emmanuel Traditional Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Calendar Song for Wednesday, December 2, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #226

Today, we open our "window" for "Comfort Comfort Now My People" (LBW 29, ELW 256)

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. (Isa. 40:1 NIV)

If you worship with any church that follows assigned readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, the first lesson for the 2nd Sunday in Advent, Series B, is Isaiah 40: 1-11 which begins with the verse above. Today's hymn clearly based on this scripture. But while included in the Advent section of the hymnal, it was not first written as an Advent hymn.

It was first written for the day commemorating St. John the Baptist in the church calendar, June 24. So why is it an Advent hymn? Because the immediate forerunner of Jesus was John the Baptist. In Advent, two of the four Sundays feature scripture relating to John. John's ministry also significantly fulfills this very prophecy from Isaiah chapter 40.

Comfort Comfort Now My People was originally a German hymn (*Trostet, Trostet, Meine Lieben*) to the tune *FRUE DICH SEHR*. First published 1671, it was part of a large German Hymnbook compiled by Composer Johannes Olearius. It contained 1,200 hymns with 300 by Olearius. Think of it, that's much larger our own hymnal, and when paper was also much thicker. I cannot imagine the size of the hymn racks in those medieval pews.

Olearius was a very gifted composer and writer. Besides hymns, he wrote devotional books and a commentary on the entire Bible. Coming from a musical family, his father also served as a pastor and hymnwriter himself. Since none remain of "Dad's," it was "Son" made his mark in the hymn world. I'm sure his father was proud that Johannes not only became a Lutheran pastor, but excelled in his education, receiving both B.A. in Arts and Doctor of Divinity at the University of Wittenberg (Germany's premier Lutheran University where Martin Luther also taught).

If not for a very important translator named Catherine Winkworth, however, we'd all be singing "*Trostet, Trostet, Meine Lieben.*" Born in London in 1829, Winkworth translated many of the great German hymns into English. Our own Lutheran hymnal has nineteen hymns with Winkworth's name attached as translator. "*Lord Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word*" is her translation of Luther's great hymn. When we look at the poetry of the hymns we sing in English, we often fail to give thanks for how extraordinary a translator must be to make beautiful in our language what was first written in another language.

And then there's the tune: **FRUE DICH SEHR** was adapted by a follower of reformer John Calvin named Louis Beourgeois. He doesn't even get named in our hymnal, despite adapting it from *Trente quatre Psaumes de David* (34 Psalms of David). There is also a harmonization attributed

to Claude Goudimel. The tune was originally a French Folk tune, and from Beourgeois it travelled to German where it became a funeral hymn. Certainly a hymn with the first word "*Comfort*" would make a good funeral hymn.

One interesting tidbit about Beourgeois: For fifteen years beginning in 1542, he was entrusted with writing, selecting and arranging the music for the French Psalters used in Geneva by the Calvinists. In 1551, however, he was jailed by the Calvinist city council for making unauthorized changes in some of the tunes. He should have run that by the *Worship and Music Committee*. Be careful about changing that which is sacred, even a tune. He disappeared after 1561. Like I said, be careful about changing that which is sacred, even a tune.

Now let's get to the hymn itself. With beautiful melody and deeply hopeful words, we hear an adaptation of what was said in Isaiah 40. Isaiah speaks to people facing the darkness of being in exile, the home and hearts ripped from them. Isaiah reminds them that God has not abandoned them, even though they feel crushed by sorrow's load.

Verse two contains words that connect with St. John the Baptist preparing the way for God, coming as a Savior. We know his name: It is Jesus, part of God's plan to restore us from brokenness, and bring us from despair to hope. These words now heard in 2020's most difficult year bear encouragement.

Verse three continues with that hope, that things will literally "*straighten out.*" As we are invited to give in to God's power and God's grace, our hearts will be true and humble, identifying us with the one who has come to save us. All these words, lifted from scripture itself, provide a wonderful window to our gracious God. And in song, the rich melody supports it.

- 1 "Comfort, comfort now my people;
tell of peace!" So says our God.
Comfort those who sit in darkness
mourning under sorrow's load.
To God's people now proclaim
that God's pardon waits for them!
Tell them that their war is over;
God will reign in peace forever.

- 2 For the herald's voice is crying
in the desert far and near,
calling us to true repentance,
since the reign of God is here.
Oh, that warning cry obey!

Now prepare for God a way.
Valleys, rise to greet the Savior;
hills, bow down in humble favor.

- 3 Straight shall be what long was crooked,
and the rougher places plain.
Let your hearts be true and humble,
as befits God's holy reign.
For the glory of the Lord
now on earth is shed abroad,
and all flesh shall see the token
that God's word is never broken.

Text: Johann G. Olearius, 1635-1711; tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1827-1878, alt.

Let us pray. *We pray for your comfort today, O God and encouragement when darkness overcomes us and we feel sorrow's load. May your words of scripture along with this joyful melody, touch our hearts today, and bring us peace. Amen.*

These tunes don't vary a lot from each other. I guess they didn't want to be jailed by Genevan Calvinists.

Comfort Comfort Now My People by Orchard Enterprises

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFltgYCHDKA>

Comfort Comfort Ye My People by St. John's Cathedral

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqRrwcYFhG8>

Comfort Comfort Now My People by First Plymouth Lincoln NE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=119C58F3dnQ>

Comfort Comfort Now My People by Cathedral Church of the Advent

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGURM_EVT8M

Comfort Comfort Now My People by The Ignation Schola

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hONtxzbUMhA>

Comfort Comfort Ye My People by Hymn Central

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmciWie6LhE>

Comfort Comfort Now My People by Richard Proulx

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFD6mwe8CWI>

Comfort Comfort Now My People by Tony Alonso

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuxox-OXDPS>

Comfort Comfort Ye My People by Concordia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wg8FTKNI5Fs>

Comfort Comfort Now My People by the great Paul Manz on organ

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5_pJa3urml

Comfort Comfort Now My People (contemporary) by Page CXVI

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYt6PWJfks>

Comfort Comfort Now My People by The Lutheran Organist

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnjOZLDEnTk>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent/Christmas Song Calendar for Thursday, December 3, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #227

Today, we open our “window” for “Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying” (LBW 31, ELW 436)

NRS Matthew 25:1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9 But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' 12 But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

(Matt. 25:1-13 NRS)

Hey. I remember this gospel lesson. It was on November 8, 2020, the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost. Why is it here? *It's because of “Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying”? The hymn is based on that very scripture.*

So why is that part of these Advent devotions? *Well... “Wake Awake” USED to be in the Advent section of the Lutheran Book of Worship (Green Hymnal).*

Where did it go in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal (the “new red” or more accurately “cranberry” one). *It went to the section called END TIME.*

Why there, and what does that have to do with Advent? *It went to END TIME because it focuses on the END TIMES, when we look forward to Jesus' return. This parable encourages us to be ready. But that is also a focus of Advent, which means “coming” when we not only celebrate Jesus coming into this world as a baby, but also look forward to his second coming.*

So “Wake, Awake for Night is Flying” is both a wonderful *Advent Hymn* and *End Times* hymn.

This is one of those rare hymns where both words and music are written by the same person. **Philipp Nicolai** was born August 10, 1575 in Germany. This was about thirty years after Martin Luther had died, so the Lutheran church was still new. Nicolai's father was a Lutheran pastor, who likely took classes from Martin Luther himself. Nicolai continued the tradition of studying at Wittenberg University.

He had his share of conflicts as a pastor. He was forced out of his first parish when Spanish troops invaded his city. They were Roman Catholic, of course. Bye bye Nicolai. In his second call he came into conflict with the Calvinists over the meaning of the Lord's Supper, and was a part of creating the Lutheran Confessional document called "Formula of Concord." Not much concord at the time, though.

More trouble happened with the Calvinists in a third call, and his city was overrun with the plague of 1597-98. This was also the time when he composed this marvelous hymn. I am sure he wondered if his own "*End Times*" were about to happen.

The hymn picks up imagery and message from Matthew 25, with all its encouragement to be watchful for when Jesus (as bridegroom) comes to meet his blessed ones. It's really verse three that touches me most, though. What an incredible vision of heaven and the glory of God. The majestic and sweeping melody supports that, and as composer of text and tune, it fits together beautifully.

But again, let us not overlook once again Catherine Winkworth's contribution as translator. We so easily take her work for granted, imagining with such wonderful prose, that Nicolai might have been English.

Look thoroughly at these words; take in this picture of God's glory and call for readiness. And then enjoy the music.

Let us pray. In this hymn we are encouraged not only to be ready for your coming, O Lord, but also through words and melody receive a glimpse of your glory. We pray for the "*joy we'll know,*" and where "*sweet delight will flow.*" Amen.

Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying

1 Wake, awake, for night is flying,
 the watchmen on the heights are crying;
 awake, Jerusalem, at last.
 Midnight hears the welcome voices,
 and at the thrilling cry rejoices:
 "Come forth, you maidens! Night is past.
 The bridegroom comes! Awake;
 your lamps with gladness take!"
 Alleluia!
 Rise and prepare the feast to share;

go, meet the bridegroom, who draws near.

- 2 Zion hears the watchmen singing,
and all her heart with joy is springing.
She wakes, she rises from her gloom.
Her dear friend comes down, all glorious,
the strong in grace, in truth victorious:
her star is ris'n; her light is come.
Now come, O Blessed One,
Lord Jesus, God's own Son.

Sing hosanna!

Oh, hear the call! Come one, come all,
and follow to the banquet hall.

- 3 Gloria! Let heav'n adore you!
Let saints and angels sing before you,
with harp and cymbal's clearest tone.
Gates of pearl, twelve portals gleaming,
lead us to bliss beyond all dreaming,
with angel choirs around your throne.
No eye has caught the light,
no ear the thund'ring might
of such glory.
There we will go: what joy we'll know!
There sweet delight will ever flow.

Text: Philipp Nicolai, 1556-1608; tr. Catherine Winkworth

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by St. Olaf Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdN7vC2q9Mc>

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by Dominican Sisters of Mary (thanks sisters for singing a
"Lutheran origin) hymn

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQVu44Md_0A

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by The Seminary Kantorei Brass Ensemble of Concordia Theological
Seminary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iolwhfwLfQQ>

Wake Awake for Night is Flying instrumental organ by Jeff Windoloski

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1cbWbSMDsM>

Bach's Cantata 140 based on this hymn by Nederlands Society (don't miss this)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqZE54i-muE>

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by Kayla and Naomi at Trinity Reformed Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IRu-RZTjYQ>

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by Hymnsite (Bach harmony)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prRYnfNwOTw>

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by Nordic Lutheran Choir at “Hour of Power.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMmSxiZZ5LA>

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by Wartburg Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRzr7t4vvD8>

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by Luther College Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRzr7t4vvD8>

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by Concordia Lutheran Choir (continuing our Lutheran battle of the bands)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVYdfCaY-do>

Wake Awake for Night is Flying by National Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srC3bEvZgxl>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent/Christmas Song Calendar for Friday, December 4, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #228

Today, we open our "window" for "Prepare the Royal Highway" (LBW 26, ELW 264)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" (Mk. 1:1-3 NRS)

Today's hymn shifts to Scandinavia for its origin, particularly Finland and Sweden. Swedish composer Frans Mikael Franzen was born in 1772 in Uleaborg, Finland. At the age of thirteen his life first showed great promise as he was accepted to the distinguished Abo Academy. His education was interrupted two years later when his father died suddenly and he continued his father's work as a salesman. In time he returned to school and received a Master's and Doctor of Philosophy.

Franzen worked as an academic librarian and history of literature professor, as well as a newspaper editor before pursuing ministry studies. He was ordained a Lutheran pastor in 1803. If that date rings a bell, it was on account of it being the beginning of the 23-year Napoleonic Wars, which caused much turmoil and shifting alliances throughout Europe. Franzen lost his first parish when Finland was conquered by Russia, and many Swedes were forced to return to Sweden. Unlike the Babylonian Exile, he never went back.

It was quite an adjustment for Franzen to move from academic life and serving in a large urban parish to a small rural parish in Sweden, but that environment also motivated him to reconnect with his love of poetry and literature and then blossom as a hymnwriter.

He also worked with another Swedish hymnwriter, Archbishop Johan Olof Wallin, (writer of Christmas hymn All Hail to You O Blessed Morn (LBW)). They worked together developing the emerging Swedish Hymnody, with Franzen contributing thirty-four hymns before being admitted to the prestigious Swedish Academy.

From there Franzen served a large church in Stockholm before becoming Bishop of the diocese of Harnosand, which extended into Lapland. He was known for his tireless work in now this "land of the midnight sun" and "northern lights," where it was six months sunny and six months dark. Worthy of note was his devotion as Bishop to working with indigenous nomadic Laplanders, many of whom struggled with alcoholism.

So here is another very interesting person I knew nothing about as I regularly sang “*Prepare the Royal Highway.*” The music, BEREDEN VAG FOR HERRAN, was included in an earlier hymnal from 1695, but its writer is unknown. It is described as a Swedish folk tune and would have been set to many possible lyrics before Franzen. The version in our hymnal was translated by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship.

One final interesting thing about this hymn is that is both well suited for Advent as we focus on John the Baptist as forerunner of Jesus, but also for Palm Sunday, as Jesus is welcomed as a King coming into Jerusalem. Because its strong melody is quickly grasped, it has become a familiar and favorite hymn of both Advent and Holy Week.

Verses one and two connect with Isaiah and St. John the Baptist’s prophecy. Verse three affirms that promise, but verse four reminds all who imagined Jesus as earthly king that his kingdom comes from heaven above, and his rule is peace and freedom and justice, truth, and love.

Prepare the Royal Highway

1 Prepare the royal highway;
the King of kings is near!
Let ev'ry hill and valley
a level road appear!
Then greet the King of glory,
foretold in sacred story:

Refrain

Hosanna to the Lord,
for he fulfills God's word!

2 God's people, see him coming:
your own eternal king!
Palm branches strew before him!
Spread garments! Shout and sing!
God's promise will not fail you!
No more shall doubt assail you! Refrain

3 Then fling the gates wide open
to greet your promised king!
Your king, yet ev'ry nation
its tribute too may bring.
All lands will bow before him;
their voices join your singing: Refrain

- 4 His is no earthly kingdom;
it comes from heav'n above.
His rule is peace and freedom
and justice, truth, and love.
So let your praise be sounding
for kindness so abounding: Refrain

Text: Frans Mikael Franzén, 1772-1847; tr. Lutheran Book of Worship
Text © 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship, admin. Augsburg Fortress.

Let us pray. *Thank you for the life of Frans Mikael Franzen and for the joy he brings us in through these wonderful words and lively Swedish melody. As we sing, may we be reminded of how you have also prepared our hearts for you. Amen.*

About the music. Well, it's no "Awake Awake for Night is Flying," That is, I could not find one Lutheran College Choir that posted it. But among Lutherans, it is very popular. Most of the recordings I found are from Lutheran musicians. Enjoy.

Prepare the Royal Highway by Timothy Shaw

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SGs_aui884

Prepare the Royal Highway by Jim Windolosky

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3a7r8-y3KE>

Prepare the Royal Highway by Bethlehem Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJZ82d7VXjg>

Prepare the Royal Highway by Gethsemane Lutheran Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OovruxWkQkU>

Prepare the Royal Highway organ preludes by Christopher Wicks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZbRPW2OF6E>

Prepare the Royal Highway another organ prelude by Charles Ore with trumpet

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3q3pgL3bi8>

Prepare the Royal Highway by Eastside Lutheran

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoZ00IS9hp4>

Prepare the Royal Highway with Handbell Choir (Concordia Publishing)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vvQX2Ch4b8>

Prepare the Royal Highway by St. John's Lutheran
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRDrkVgUh48>

Prepare the Royal Highway by Chris Teves (guitar quartet arrangement)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvPuiJldu5w>

Prepare the Royal Highway by Halifax Lutheran (jazzy version)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHXHeHcrkdU>

Prepare the Royal Highway as Jazz waltz on piano
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PCPc40UBnl>

Prepare the Royal Highway solo piano with Lucia Field
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZyY_WnkETs

**St. Paul's In Your Home Song Advent/Christmas Calendar for Monday, December 7, 2020 by
Pastor Mark Opgrand #230**

Today, we open our "window" for "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending" (ELW 435, LBW 27)

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thess. 4:16-18 NRS)

Here's a hymn originally written for the Second Sunday in Advent by Charles Wesley. With its emphasis on Jesus second coming, it is a natural fit for *Advent*. It also fits the theme of *End Times*, which is why it was moved from the *Advent* section of the Lutheran Book of Worship to the *End Times* section of Evangelical Lutheran Worship.

While not the most popular of our Advent hymns it is a beautiful hymn that lends itself well to congregational singing accompanied by pipe organ. And it has a fascinating "back story."

Charles Wesley was the nineteenth child born December 18, 1707 to parents Samuel and Susanna. The Wesleys became a famous (though some would say 'infamous) church family. His grandfather John "Wesly" was a cleric and part of what was called the "nonconformist" movement and was twice imprisoned for not using the Book of Common Prayer.

His son Samuel was also a cleric, but part of a group called "Dissenters," who disagreed with the Church of England on a number of issues. Like father, like son. Samuel was also a cleric who not only wrote religious poetry but also controversial poetry, like *"Maggots: or Poems on Several Subjects never before Handled in 1685."* This Samuel Wesley may be best known, however, for his children, especially sons John and Charles, who like father and grandfather were leaders in a spiritual renewal movement that became Methodism.

Charles, grandson of John, son of Samuel, and brother of John (I know, it's hard to keep them straight; they should have more nicknames), was best known as hymn writer extraordinaire. He has twelve hymns in our ELW hymnal, the tiniest fraction of the six thousand he wrote during his lifetime. They have long been considered the finest hymns in the English language.

Charles and his brother John were heavily involved in the Methodist movement, and deeply influenced by a revival led by George Whitfield, known in England and America as *"The Great Awakening."* Many of Wesley's hymns have a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit. He never

became the “*Methodist*” his brother was, however, as he remained a member of England’s Anglican Church until his death in 1788.

This hymn tune is called **HELMSLEY** and also has an interesting story behind it. It was written by Welsh musician Thomas Olivers. He was orphaned at four years old and grew up a rather “wild child.” He was apprenticed to a shoemaker but due to behavior described as “ungodliness,” he was compelled to leave.

Olivers was converted through the preaching of the “*Great Awakening’s*” George Whitfield and became an evangelist under John Wesley. He became close to the Wesley brothers, so there was a close collaboration between lyricist Charles and musical composer Thomas for this piece. And where, you ask, did the melody come from? It was adapted from a melody Olivers heard whistled on a street. Both writer and composer would see this work as the result of the Holy Spirit’s work. How about you?

Let us pray.

We thank you for wonderful melodies and words draw us to the promises of your scriptures. Help us appreciate the rich imagery of these hymns even more as we learn about the composers and their lives. With them, we adore you, gracious God. Amen.

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending

- 1 Lo! he comes with clouds descending,
once for our salvation slain;
thousand thousand saints attending
join to sing the glad refrain:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!
Christ the Lord returns to reign.
- 2 Now redemption, long-expected,
comes in solemn splendor near;
all the saints this world rejected
thrill the trumpet sound to hear:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!
See the day of God appear!
- 3 Yea, amen, let all adore thee,
high on thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the pow’r and glory,
claim the kingdom as thine own.
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Thou shalt reign, and thou alone!

Text: Charles Wesley, 1707-1788, alt.

The more I listened to these recordings of the hymn, the more I grew to really love that melody, especially when I thought about it first whistled on a street somewhere, then discovered by a former wayward youth who himself was converted as he heard the gospel preached, and further nurtured in faith by another great church leader and his brother.

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by Richard Jensen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=en0sv1jeDws>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by Salisbury Cathedral Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OU8idCwONak>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by Scottish Festival Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PddmTDEyu1k>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending The Choir of the Cathedral Church of the Advent

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2j3rGfoLCA>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by John Rutter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBAG0TXu2AE>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by FAPC in NYC Virtual Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Nlr2Rw2sgc>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by Wells Cathedral Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jv8B_HmMaP4

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by Christ Episcopal Church Bronxville NY

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8Aoa9NaT3A>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by organist Rob Charles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzLVmAdR5oc>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by organist Eric Burkey played on the Stahlhuth organ of the Friedenskirche in Meckenheim, Germany

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3hoJBlapMo>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending Litchfield Cathedral Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjn3fBTvBjY>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by First Plymouth Lincoln NE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1Rn-9j2NQw>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending by Koine (alternative tune in more contemporary form)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hW6P9XGVJV0>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending another nice organ solo by Ubertuba

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoHxAc7a3I4>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending piano solo by Terry O

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ofy53Fiyylk>

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending James Biery organist

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Zw-M2VBHko>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Tuesday, December 8, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #231

Today, we open our "window" for "Rejoice, Rejoice Believers" (LBW 25, ELW 244)

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' NRS Matthew 25:1-6

Here we have another Advent hymn based on Jesus' *Parable of Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids* in Matthew 25. "*Wake Awake for Night Is Flying*," was the first we reviewed. This one has a more of an emphasis on the joy of those who will be prepared for our Lord's second coming.

Researching composer Larentius Laurenti, we learn he is considered to be one of the best hymn writers of the *Pietistic Period*. Since that period was not on the top of my head, I had to do some more research. I did remember that *Pietism* in Norway became associated with lay evangelist Han Nielson Hauge, who was imprisoned for preaching without a license, and many of his followers immigrated to the United States, forming churches that were anti-hierarchical and more congregationally based.

Pietism actually had its roots in the late 1600's in Germany. It combined Biblical doctrine and emphasis on humility and living the vigorous and dedicated Christian life. Our modern day *Via de Cristo* retreat ministry includes this kind of *Pietism*. In time *Pietism* moved to the Scandanavian countries including Denmark, where *Larentius Laurenti* was born and raised. If his name doesn't sound all that Danish, it is because he Latinized it from *Lorenz Lorenzen*. In English that would be *Larry Larryson*.

Born June 8, 1660, "*Larry's*" father, a property manager, was a music lover and made sure his talented son received a good music education. He ended up a prestigious Kiel to study music, there changing his name so something presumably much more highbrow than Lorenz Lorenzen. He served many years as cantor and music director of the cathedral church in Bremen, Germany. "*Rejoice Rejoice Believers*" is considered by many to be his finest hymn.

Sarah Borthwick, the translator, is the other essential part of this becoming a great hymn for those singing in English. Born November 26, 1823, in Edinburgh, Scotland, Sarah's father was an insurance company manager (they had those then?). She married the Reverend Erick John Findlater, pastor of the Free Church of Scotland, which had withdrawn from the Church of Scotland (we see a lot of this in church history).

Along with sister Jane Borthwick, they translated *“Hymns from the Land of Luther,”* (1854). Sarah Findlater is considered nearly as accomplished as Catherine Winkworth.

HAF TRONES LAMPA FARDIG , which translates *“Keep Your Trimmed Lamps Ready”*, is also a Swedish Folk melody, and is named as the tune for Sarah Finlander’s 1901 Hymnal, but we know nothing more about the composers.

Some hymnals use the tune **LLANGLOFFAN**, a Welsh hymn of unknown origin. I will include a few of these for comparison. For these words, **LLANGLOFFAN** seems a little dreary compared to **HAF TRONES**. What do you think?

Let us pray. *With grateful hearts we pray that we shall be among those believers who rejoice in our readiness to received Jesus into our lives. Amen.*

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” Sammamish Hills Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Oeeo6QZd5I>

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” Morningstar Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMBRLq0-y9Q>

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” St. Olaf Choral Group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrNHG5JOWjg>

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” by Lutheran A Capella Choir of Milwaukee (but not a capella here)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53zKuLAeNoo>

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” Trinity Lutheran Worcester MA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAFg-4M47eQ>

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” St Paul Lutheran Austin Texas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZciSYpF1-g>

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” St. John’s Lutheran Grosse Pointe MI

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xnemxi-95ml>

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” (Llangloffan tune) Cathedral of the Divine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWIBrTQhdVQ>

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” Llangloffanon organ at St. John’s Episcopal Lafayette

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thyQENZ-yxA>

“Rejoice, Rejoice Believers” at St. John’s Episcopal NH

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCmz9zPxXGQ>

St. Paul's In Your Home for Wednesday, December 9, 2020 not by Pastor Mark Opgrand but **by Chaplain Bob Weeks #232**

We interrupt our regular *Advent Song Calendar* for this great breaking devotion from Chaplain Bob Weeks. Call it "Monday in Bob's Week with Bob Weeks!"

BROKEN PEOPLE

By
Chaplain Bob Weeks

Scripture: *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16 {NIV})

A woman from Ohio brought out her nativity set from her attic at the beginning of Advent. She was sad to discover that many of the nativity figures were broken. She reported that the angel had only one wing; the shepherd was missing a hand; a wise man had no foot; and, the donkey had only one ear. Only the baby Jesus was intact and appeared unharmed. She remarked, "*I am not sure what happened. The figures were fine when I packed them away last January.*"

Initially she thought of purchasing a new nativity set, but then she realized that maybe God had a message for her. She realized that we are all broken people.

The world of 2020 is full of broken people. COVID-19 has taken an unheard of sick and death toll all over the world. Small businesses are struggling to a breaking point. The economy is broken in many ways. Families are not able to gather in large groups. Everyone is cautioned to wear a face mask to ward off infection. Reported cases of depression, especially among young people, reveal that many young people are broken. Schools are not able to have person-to person classes. Governments are experiencing many manifestations of anger as their leaders are struggling to mend the broken ways.

The lady who unpacked her nativity set was correct, God can bring us back together and accomplish great works through us. That is, if we turn around (repent) and sincerely ask for forgiveness. Broken People lead to a Broken World. Christians are in the midst of celebrating the Advent Season.

The Advent Season reminds us that not only did Jesus come at birth, but He comes daily and presently to all who believe in Him. The birth of Jesus was all about bringing new life to a broken world. Jesus came to take on the brokenness of the world. Jesus took on the brokenness of the world by healing people, performing miracles, proclaiming God's will for people, dying on the cross for our sins (times when broken people "*missed the mark with God*"), rising from the dead to

be our eternal saviour, proclaiming the coming of the Holy Spirit to be our counselor, and promising hope for all who believe in Him.

God uses broken people. God used every broken person in the Bible. I will name a few:

- Noah became drunk (Genesis 9:21 {NIV})
- Abraham lied about his wife (Genesis 20:2 {NIV})
- Sarah laughed at God's word and then lied (Genesis 18:15 {NIV})
- Jacob was a deceiver (Genesis 27:1-29)
- Moses was a murderer and disobeyed God (Exodus 2:11-12; Numbers 20:11 {NIV})
- Rahab was a prostitute (Joshua 2:1 {NIV})
- Samson was lustful (Judges 16:1 {NIV})
- David was an adulterer and a murderer (2 Samuel 11:4, 15-17 {NIV})
- Solomon married foreign wives and embraced idolatry (1 Kings 11:1, 4-5 {NIV})
- Elijah was afraid and struggled with depression (1 Kings 19:3-4 {NIV})
- Jonah ran away from God (Jonah 1:3 {NIV})
- The disciples argued about who was the greatest (Mark 9:33-37 {NIV})
- James and John wanted the most honorable kingdom seats (Mark 10:35-45 {NIV})
- Paul had a sharp disagreement with Barnabas (Acts 15:39 {NIV})
- Peter denied Christ (Luke 22:57, 58, 60 {NIV})

Do you think we are any different from these people?

It was later that Peter realized the victorious truths that John expressed: *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the righteous one."* (1 John 2:1 {NIV}) *"... for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God."* (1 John 5:5 {NIV})

The woman continued to display her broken nativity set as a reminder of God's great love for *"broken people."* This great love of God comes to everyone who believes in Jesus. There are no unworthy people in the world. A sincere, confident belief in the power of Jesus can lead to fixing a *"broken people."* That is what Christmas is all about!

Are you and I really any different?

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for loving us so much that you sent Jesus into our broken world, and help us, as broken people, to overcome our brokenness. Amen.*

From Pastor Mark: Since the theme of this devotion was about “*brokenness*”, I thought I would attach songs about “healing”. Each of these is included in the “*Healing*” section of “*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*”, hymn numbers 610 through 617.

O Christ the Healer We Have Come (ELW 610, tune DISTRESS) organ solo
Weekly Service Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKgwISZvJeU>

O Christ the Healer We Have Come (ELW 610, tune DISTRESS) organ solo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcX00gTmcUE>

I Heard The Voice of Jesus Say (ELW 611, tune KINGSVOLD) Cambridge Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YeHsap14gg>

I Heard The Voice of Jesus Say (ELW 611, tune KINGSVOLD) by Michael Lining Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1tY90ODx0Q>

Healer of our Every Ill (ELW 612, tune HEALER OF OUR EVERY ILL) by Marty Haugen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwBewCxunL0>

Healer of our Every Ill (ELW 612, tune HEALER OF OUR EVERY ILL) by Ryan LaRue

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62ocfZVzkNA>

Thy Holy Wings (ELW 613, tune BRED DINA VIDA VINGAR) by Wartburg Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZGxrHglwkc>

Thy Holy Wings (ELW 613, tune BRED DINA VIDA VINGAR) by Deborah Liv Johnson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a695KQFluBY>

There is a Balm in Gilead (ELW 614, tune BALM IN GILEAD) by Orchard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMs3M1jdIRM>

There is a Balm in Gilead (ELW 614, tune BALM IN GILEAD) by St. Olaf Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFFmnntACpE>

There is a Balm in Gilead (ELW 614, tune BALM IN GILEAD) by Deborah Liv Johnson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BN9JALQRMb0>

In All Our Grief (ELW 615, Tune FREDERICKTOWN) BY Mary Ruth 72

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpYKmTQEabQ>

In All Our Grief (ELW 615, Tune FREDERICKTOWN) by St. Andrew’s Lutheran Virtual Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyG840GOjQo>

Jesus, Remember Me (ELW 616, REMEMBER ME) by London Fox Prairie Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3M9bX4IgzCO>

Jesus, Remember Me (ELW 616 REMEMBER ME) by Praise Prairie Hutterite Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBHh8toVV_o

We Come to You for Healing Lord (ELW 617 MARTYRDOM) by Hugh Wilson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co9ExiC5QI4>

We Come to You for Healing Lord (ELW 617 MARTYRDOM) By Weekly Service Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yaXZGF6hss>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Thursday, December 10, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #233

Today, we open our "window" for "O Lord, How Shall I Meet You" (LBW 23, ELW 241)

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thess. 4:16-17 NRS)

Question: What do Rodgers and Hammerstein, Learner and Lowe, Gershwin and Gershwin, and Gerhardt and Cruger all have in common?

Answer: They were all great writing partners in creating popular and long-lasting music.

The first three pairings (composing musicals *Sound of Music*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Porgy and Bess*), are likely more familiar than the fourth, but as far as church music composition goes, Paul Gerhardt and Johann Cruger represent one of the Lutheran church's greatest partnerships, including composition of today's Advent hymn, "O Lord, How Shall I Meet You." The text is about welcoming the incarnate God who sets us free from our gloom, thereby rejoicing.

Theirs is another very interesting story.

Paul Gerhardt (March 27, 1607-May 27, 1676) and Johann Cruger (April 9, 1598-February 23, 1662) were contemporaries and friends in the Lutheran church around a hundred years after the reformation began. Before he was ordained, Gerhardt worked as a tutor in Berlin where he met Cruger. Often time, lyricists write to fit an established hymn time. This time Cruger wrote the melody to go with Gerhardt's wonderful text. The name of the Tune, **WIE SOLL ICH DICH EMPFANGEN**, is the first line of the hymn in its original German. Catherine Winkworth was one among many who, over time, had their hand in translation.

Cruger's biography is easier to summarize than Gerhardt's. He was born in Prussia, son of an innkeeper. He studied music in Regensburg before enrolling in Wittenberg in 1620. Two years later and for the next forty years he served in Berlin as cantor of the St. Nicholas Church and director of music in the Gymnasium of the Grey Cloister, the College of St. Nicholas. We know of at least seventy-one tunes by Cruger, and had a significant role in *Praxis Peitatis Melica*, the most important hymn collection of the seventeenth century. These hymns are considered much smoother creations than Luther and his contemporaries.

So what of Gebhardt the writer? Whenever we sing a deep and tender song of God's love, we rightly focus on words and melody. We don't really need to know anything about the writer or what he or she may have gone through in their lives. At the same time, we may appreciate the words even more as we learn certain details about the author.

Paul Gerhardt was born near Wittenberg and entered the university in 1628. The was ten years after the *Thirty Years War (1618-1648)* began. With all the obstacles and traumas of that war, it took many years before he finished school in 1642 at age thirty-four.

He endured many troubles. In 1637, Swedish soldiers set fire to his hometown of Grafanhaynches, where his father had been mayor. The Gerhardt's family house, possessions, and church were destroyed. Later, while serving as a pastor in Berlin, he got crossways with the Calvinists, who had support from the local German prince, and was removed from his parish and sent to a church also not known for supporting their pastor. He served there until he died.

Gerhart also took a long time to do what was common at the time, that is, get married and have a family. He was forty-eight when he married (1655). However, four of his five children died in infancy and his wife died in 1668, leaving a surviving six-year-old son.

In spite of these rough circumstances, Gerhardt was known for his sunny, though not superficially so, hymns. We have one hundred thirty of them and he remains one of our most important hymn writers. If Martin Luther's central theme in his hymns was "grace," Gerhardt's central theme would be the "love of God". Maybe that's splitting hairs, but certainly as we read and sing these hymns we become quickly aware of Gerhardt's rare capacity to express the depth of Christian faith in understandable and ultimately durable ways.

We see this depth of Christian faith reflected in today's thoughtful Advent hymn. We can see pain and loss in verse two, but then comes a powerful expression of hope and joy in verse four. It's a great hymn to reflect upon before singing it.

O Lord, How Shall I Meet You

1 O Lord, how shall I meet you,
how welcome you aright?
Your people long to greet you,
my hope, my heart's delight!
Oh, kindle, Lord most holy,
your lamp within my breast
to do in spirit lowly
all that may please you best.

- 2 I lay in fetters, groaning;
you came to set me free.
I stood, my shame bemoaning;
you came to honor me.
A glorious crown you give me,
a treasure safe on high
that will not fail or leave me
as earthly riches fly.
- 3 Love caused your incarnation;
love brought you down to me.
Your thirst for my salvation
procured my liberty.
Oh, love beyond all telling,
that led you to embrace
in love, all love excelling,
our lost and fallen race.
- 4 Rejoice, then, you sad-hearted,
who sit in deepest gloom,
who mourn your joys departed
and tremble at your doom.
All hail the Lord's appearing!
O glorious Sun, now come,
send forth your beams so cheering
and guide us safely home.

Text: Paul Gerhardt, 1607-1676; tr. composite

Let us pray. *We give thanks for Paul Gerhardt and Johann Cruger who engage our faith with dear composition. Thank you for how you inspired Gerhardt to write such wonderful verses despite all the hardship he faced in his life. Whenever we feel down or discouraged, keep blessing us with another song to sing. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

O Lord How Shall I Meet You (ELW 241 WIE SOLLICH DICH EMPFANGEN) by Philip Magness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSEYLD6ihLY>

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DPBN7WzS4o>

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Concordia Publishing House (sounds like a lute at the beginning)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1t1b6QxW2Q>

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Concordia Youth Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgrMg_KtFm4

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Don Beavers on piano

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fz3LcBtXma8>

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Rod Smith (includes all ten verses)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc-3wB7OI_g

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Highest Praise

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ucjr5ADrb4>

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Christian Children's Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pC1Cg9KMGUk>

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Halifax Lutheran Church (a little jazzy version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHGYwJcaTs8>

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Mark Stone on piano

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrWi831_Izg

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Christian Family Band (piano)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=154ZYFJGFh4>

Th VALET WILL ICH DIR GEBEN is an alternative tune that has often been used. Maybe you'll recognize it.

Geneva Presbyterian to "*All Glory Laud and Honor*" tune VALET WILL ICH DIR GEBEN

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_up_TRb7GI

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Music Director (that's all I know)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a55O7CbCUNk>

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by First Presbyterian Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApE27TPPHIY>

O Lord How Shall I Meet You by Paul Manz on organ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPUsrrwLoeE>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Friday, December 10, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #234

Today, we open our “window” for “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” (ELW 254, LBW 30)

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6 KJG)

And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts. (Hag. 2:7 KJG)

Most often write the words of a devotion and then delve into YouTube for musical recordings. The risk is that certain less popular songs in our ELW may not have been recorded very often or the recordings may not have been well done (anyone can put up YouTube videos). This time I looked up recordings first and found several wonderful recordings, which I quickly cut and pasted.

But then I went to the hymnal and discovered that the tune in ELW is called **JEFFERSON**. I hadn't selected *any* with that tune. There are ten times as many recordings to the tune **HYFRODOL** (better known as tune for “Love Divine All Loves Excelling,” unless you come from a tradition which uses BEECHER). Then I learned that Organist Bill Remele's favorite tune for this hymn is “**STUTTGART**.” As my Minnesotan Norwegian neighbors say, “Uff Da!”

Thankfully, the words are the same, again by the noted English composer Charles Wesley. One fun fact that Wesley originally wrote this as a *Christmas* hymn and not an *Advent* Hymn. Another fun fact is that while many hymns over time need to be modified to make them more understandable or inclusive, this hymn has remained intact, except the word “*release*” instead of “*relieve*”. Whew. I'm relieved. Or do I mean released?

The words are inspiring. They cover a lot of ground, drawing from Isaiah 9:6, “*For unto us a child is born...*” and Haggai 2:7, “*the desire of every nation.*” The words emphasize Christ's redemptive and liberating rule from prophecy through the Incarnation; the hymn goes from present sovereignty to final triumph; it includes individual, communal and cosmic proportions. Like I said, that covers a lot of ground (and sky).

We discussed Composer Wesley's background in a previous devotion (“*Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending*”). It is worth repeating that Charles Wesley is widely considered the most important English hymn writer, (and maybe in any language) writing nine thousand hymns or poems in at least one hundred different meters (meter is what determines if the hymn can be sung with certain other texts.)

Charles Wesley is impressive. He is distinguished with his brother John as founders of Methodism, even though in “membership” he remained an Anglican. The Wesley brothers were also missionaries to Georgia in the colonies. He lived from 1707 to 1788. His children Charles Jr. (1757-1834) and Samuel (1766-1837) were musical child prodigies, with Charles Jr. becoming a church organist, harpsichordist, and composer. Samuel, a Bach enthusiast, was considered the greatest organist and composer of his period.

Now about JEFFERSON. This tune comes from the good old United States and uses just six notes of the minor scale (hexatonic). When you compare this to HYFRODOL, you can see why HYFRODOL, particularly, has more options for contemporary artists (just my opinion). You can ask Bill about STUTTGART.

JEFFERSON was included in a famous American hymnal called *The Southern Harmony* (New Haven, 1835). This collection includes many southern Appalachian folk tunes that come from English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh sources. They are popular in many denomination’s hymnbooks, especially those who do not favor old German melodies from the Reformation (ha ha).

A word about HYFRODOL. It is a Welsh tune written by Rowland H Prichard (1811-1877). The name means *“delightful, beautiful, sweet, and melodious”*. No argument there. When fourteen contemporary hymnals were surveyed by the editors of the *ELW Hymnal Companion*, they found the HYFRODOL tune in each one and it was used forty-four times. The second most used tune is OLD HUNDREDTH (*“Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow”* ELW 883).

Rowland Prichard was born in North Wales, and grandson of a famous bard who taught and collected poetry. Rowland himself was a loom-tender’s assistant and became an official at the Welsh Flannel Manufacturing Company. That was his day job. His true love was music, and he spent his life working with congregations in developing choirs. He wrote HYFRODOL when he was just twenty years old and this is the only one of his tunes that remains with us. But please don’t call him a *“one hit wonder.”* *“They say”* Prichard wrote many more, but have not yet been released by anyone’s secret archives.

The hymn has just two powerful versus that draw us with joy and confidence into the safe care of Jesus. It is also a prayer. Let us then pray the words of this hymn...

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus

- 1 Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
 born to set thy people free;
 from our fears and sins release us;
 let us find our rest in thee.
 Israel's strength and consolation,

hope of all the earth thou art,
dear desire of ev'ry nation,
joy of ev'ry longing heart.

- 2 Born thy people to deliver,
born a child, and yet a king;
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal Spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all-sufficient merit
raise us to thy glorious throne.

Text: Charles Wesley, 1707-1788

I found so many wonderful recordings of this hymn, most using *Hyfrydol*, but a few with *Jefferson* and one with **Stuttgart**. I'll be curious about which one touches you most. You have the whole weekend to listen too them all (smiley face). Email me at mopgrand@gmail.com

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus (Jefferson ELW 254, LBW 30) by Andrew Remillard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2vU5mS2WbM>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus (Jefferson) folk rock version

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeUF8iO4UQ8>

The Dark Open Mic of the Soul (Jefferson)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JMTqWtfCwU>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Wayne Warren (Jefferson)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIV3-vR_XPY

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Erik Khiss on organ (Jefferson)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DcOZD_hkV8

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Grosse Pointe Virtual choir (Hyfrydol)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAolkjPVh64>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus by Page CXVI (Hyfrydol)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSOAWCzHlr8&list=OLAK5uy_ILHgmiFwRl6m-hHjJHGwprnHAsfkNtsAg&index=2

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Laura Penna at Lutheran Church of Hope (Hyfrydol)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxpKrmXgFG4>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus by Red Mountain Music (Hyfrydol)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRAFQCOKjgE>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus by Lexington Road Music (Hyfrydol)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8E9G763lbs>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Meredith Andrews (Hyfrydol)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOxJFN-9_vs

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus also Meredith Andrews (Hyfrydol)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGImcXqCWNA>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus by Fernando Ortega (Hyfrydol)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dmO8UPIWoo>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus 20Schemes Music (Hyfrydol)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkZFhzNbp8k>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus by Lifepointe Church Smyrna, TN (Hyfrydol)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laFsuoHWt6Q>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus by Reawaken Hymns (Hyfrydol)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeWO13aF9RY>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Art Turner on piano
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sg8OJf40LJE>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Laura Story (Hyfrydol)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oK5teQGbnC>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Andrew Remillard (Hyfrydol)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eH_ejUqZpgs

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus (Hyfrydol) by Madison UMC
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqa70mco-7c>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Maranatha (Hyfrydol)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-otQTdonfw>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus (Hyfrydol) piano solo by John Michael Ogletree
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZ17HAGZxKY>

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus St. John's College Chapel (unknown tune)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEEd0uWnDGs>

and Bill's favorite *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus* (Stuttgart) by holyholyholyorgan kid
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huHEA3n1Lu8>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Monday, December 14, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #235

Today, we open our “window” for “My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” (ELW 251)

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; (Lk. 1:46-48 NRS)

Full disclosure. I have loved the old English melody KINGSFOLD from the first time I heard it introduced in the worship supplement “With One Voice.” Had I known my old green hymnal (LBW) better I might have already discovered the melody by way of LBW Hymn 391, “And Have the Bright Immensities.” But it was “With One Voice” that acquainted me with KINGSFOLD, there united with text based on the “Magnificat,” Mary’s song in Luke chapter 1. Prior to that, the most beautiful version I knew of the “Magnificat” was from the old red hymnal (SBH, 1958) the Cantic of Vespers.

“With One Voice” introduced one of scripture’s most beautiful texts perfectly paired with KINGSVOLD. It also had one very dramatic improvement from “*And Have the Bright Immensities.*” It was arranged by one of England’s greatest composers, Ralph Vaughn Williams ((1872-1958)! What’s not to love here?

Since the ELW, “*My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness*” has been regularly sung on the fourth Sunday of Advent, which focuses on Jesus’ mother Mary. Depicting Mary’s extraordinary witness and leap of faith, saying yes to God for however God will work through her, is always inspiring. Here come to life are such prophetic motifs such as dashing the proud, exposing scheming hearts and casting aside thee ruthless. It is a song of great hope.

To be sung with any melody, of course, the words of Luke 1 must be paraphrased, and for this we credit two who were commissioned by “*With One Voice*”, Martin A. Seltz (b. 1951) and Frank W. Stoldt (b. 1958). It is regrettable that ELW 251 says the text is written by With One Voice, 1995 rather than mentioning their names. At least they are mentioned in the “*ELW Hymnal Companion.*” Both Seltz and Stoldt have been active in Lutheran musician work.

While “*And Have the Bright Immensities*” (LBW 391) is set to KINGSFOLD, Ralph Vaughn Williams is not credited for the tune. When his arrangement was used later, he did receive credit. However, if not for Williams, we might not have had this tune in any hymnal as he was the first to realize this folk tune’s potential and apply it to hymnal usage. Finding it in a collection of “*English Country Songs*” (1893) he included it in “*The English Hymnal*” (1906). Seventy years later we Lutherans discovered it.

Once we Lutheran discovered KINGSFOLD, we made good use of this great tune. Besides ELW 245, *“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness,”* KINGSFOLD tune accompanies ELW 412, *“Come, Join the Dance of Trinity,”* ELW 611, *“I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say,”* and ELW 636, *“How Small Our Span of Life.”* And guess what? Nowhere to be found is the former LBW hymn *“And Have the Bright Immensities.”* Too ethereal, perhaps?

KINGSFOLD is only rivaled by HYFRODOL (*“Love, Divine All Loves Excelling,”*) in most hymns using the same tune in ELW. Interesting.

Before listening the recordings, take a moment to take in the wonderful words of this Advent hymn. *And let us give thanks for how this and other texts and melodies come together to lift our Advent spirits. Amen.*

My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness

- 1 My soul proclaims your greatness, Lord;
 I sing my Savior's praise!
 You looked upon my lowliness,
 and I am full of grace.
 Now ev'ry land and ev'ry age
 this blessing shall proclaim—
 great wonders you have done for me,
 and holy is your name.

- 2 To all who live in holy fear
 your mercy ever flows.
 With mighty arm you dash the proud,
 their scheming hearts expose.
 The ruthless you have cast aside,
 the lowly throned instead;
 the hungry filled with all good things,
 the rich sent off unfed.

- 3 To Israel, your servant blest,
 your help is ever sure;
 the promise to our parents made
 their children will secure.
 Sing glory to the Holy One,
 give honor to the Word,
 and praise the Pow'r of the Most High,
 one God, by all adored.

Text: With One Voice, 1995, based on the Magnificat
Text © 1995 Augsburg Fortress.

I hope you will enjoy these various recordings of KINGSFOLD. The “I heard the Voice of Jesus Say” had some quality recordings, so I included them.

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” (KINGSFOLD) BY Naoko Okada Hill
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcwGWtbdeM8>

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” Trinity Lutheran ELCIC
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKzdz90bHnE>

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” St. Paul’s Lutheran Church (not us)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViNdSZKndyl>

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” First Lutheran Church of Crystal with a drum and melodian
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0mQUszx0-c>

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” Valley of Peace Lutheran (piano only)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5t1wsGTTThms>

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” Susanna Foust Piano and violin
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pAliEUyr_A

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” St Paul’s Lutheran Newark De Handbell Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-nlpiOWagY>

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” Hal Leonard Concert Band
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQKSf9A3tXM>

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” that jazzy Halifax guy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nOkNkMmqeA>

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” and another jazzy version by the Halifax guy
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9ibJB1Wv0

“My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness” by Leah Schade, harpist
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeEGoRR7Alc>

Kingsfold on organ (*I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*) by Mark Dwyer
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDYxcz5dJhY>

I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say Celtic instrumental of Kingsfold
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmcunTBTvno>

I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say by Audrey Assad
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mXMQqiLW9c>

I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say by AdventNatt
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AmFu58Tk2Y>

I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say the Choir of Trinity College Cambridge
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YeHsap14qg>

I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say by Songs of Praise with nice Irish flute and strings
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqF4N7rdV-w>

kingsvold on organ (*Come Join the Dance of Trinity*) by Dr. Nancy Peterson
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_kQ9qDuw_M

.... and as a bonus, celebrating Ralph Vaughn Williams... "*Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tillis*"
performed by Toronto Symphony Orchestra
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3nxOF8wnMk>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Tuesday, December 15, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #236

Today, we open our "window" for "Come Now O Prince of Peace" (ELW 247)

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

(2 Cor. 5:17-20 NRS)

When something is described as mediocre it is sometimes said to be "So So." Such is not the case of OSOSO, the tune accompanying "Come Now, O Prince of Peace" (ELW 247). I will admit, however, that some might argue this too is only "So So," but probably because it is unfamiliar and not like our "normal" Advent Hymns. Let's take a look.

As we have been exploring Advents hymns and their origins, we have come to realize that for Lutherans, our hymnary began primarily with German hymns, and gradually spread to include Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, Danish, English and some French hymns. Later on, America's contribution included a number of folk tunes that became part of what was called "Southern Harmony."

One of the intents of the Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal was to include more songs and hymns from other Christian traditions. So now we have more hymns with Spanish or African origins, and at least one drawing from Asian hymnody, namely "Ososo, ososo, pyonghwai imgum," meaning "Come Now, O Prince of Peace." It is based on the scripture above, 2 Cor. 5:17-20) and written by Geonyong Lee (born September 30, 1947).

The hymn was composed for the opening worship service of the world conference for the peace and reunification of the Korean peninsula, held in Inchon on April 25, 1988. While hope for reunification thirty-two years later seems a distant hope, the song has passed far beyond the Korean context and has been used all over the world as a prayer for *peace* (pyonghuwa), *love* (sarang), *freedom* (chayu) and *unity* (tongil).

Lee studied music in both Korea and Germany. As he realized Asian music can often be difficult to Western audiences and singers, he intentionally wrote this hymn so it would be easier to Western audiences to follow. Using a five-note scale in triple time, it flows beautifully.

OSOSO is a beautiful Advent hymn and deeply moving prayer for the Prince of Peace. At the same time, it is virtually unknown to many. We understand. Our traditional Advent hymns already compete for those few Sundays when they can be sung, and besides this many parishioners are already impatient waiting for Christmas Carols. *“What? You want a ‘Chinese’ song we don’t even know to take the place of ‘Prepare the Royal Highway?’”*

The more I watched and listened to many videos of this song, the more it has grown on me; I believe it will grow on you too, especially as we are reminded of the common faith we have with brothers and sisters all over the world. We are united by prayer as we pray for our Lord Jesus to reconcile all people and nations.

Here are the words of this prayer:

Come Now, O Prince of Peace
Ososǒ, Ososǒ

ORIGINAL Korean

Ososǒ ososǒ pyonghwaŭi-imgŭm
uriga hanmom iruge hasosǒ.

ENGLISH

- 1 Come now, O Prince of peace, make us one body.
Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile your people.
- 2 Come now, O God of love, make us one body.
Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile your people.
- 3 Come now and set us free, O God, our Savior.
Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile all nations.
- 4 Come, Hope of unity, make us one body.
Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile all nations.

Text: Geon-yong Lee, b. 1947; tr. Marion Pope
Text © Geonyong Lee.

This first video by First Church, Plymouth NE, is quite awesome. A wide variety of other versions follow. The more I listened, the more I realized how “oh so so” beautiful this is. Enjoy and be blessed!

Come Now, O Prince of Peace by First Plymouth
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeuzN2Mz9q0>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace First-Plymouth also
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPF9nDMt8UM>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace The Hosanna Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8fE-OchXTU>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace World Council of Churches (virtual)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDS5Mh-edxl>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace Korean Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMed0oA70Nw>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace Calvin Institute
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMMxk3E4V30>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace Evangeline Dai
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3PES4b-0Qo>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace St. Cuthbert's Wells and Wookey Hole
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAMeRUdSg7Y>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace by Lo Sy Lo and Sam Connour
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bll7yljn1C4>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace Abiding Presence (with bells)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqGzvJx3NHo>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace BSMC Chancel Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j23MPHgtPRO>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace by Jazzy Halifax Lutheran guy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JwmdPDb3LE>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace Grace Presbyterian Church, Temple TX
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gn9uaQpUjrk>

Come Now, O Prince of Peace nice piano solo by Clea Abogast
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UT_opysbiQQ

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Wednesday, December 16, 2020 not by Pastor Mark Opgrand but **by Deacon Susan Jackson #237**

Today, we open our "window" for "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" (ELW 490, LBW 198)

"Be silent, all people, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling." Zechariah 2: 13

The text of *"Let All Mortal Flesh"* has a rich history that dates to the 5th century. Emerging from both Byzantine and Syrian traditions, the text has been translated from Greek prayers of two different liturgies: The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great and the Liturgy of St. James.

The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, created by Bishop and Theologian Basil of Cappadocia (today's Turkey), used the Greek text as a chant of prayer during Holy Saturday Matins, or Holy Saturday Morning Prayers.

The Liturgy of St James uses this text as a prayer hymn during the Eucharistic (Holy Communion) Celebration. When the wine and bread are brought to the table, the priest would sing a version of this, called the Cherubic Hymn, that reminded participants of the mystery in the body and blood of Christ.

The present-day text was translated by Gerald Moultrie and published in *Lyra Eucharistica* in 1864 after John Neale's prose translation in 1859. Moultrie was ordained into the Anglican Church, served parishes and St. James College while translating various hymns from their Greek, Latin, and German texts. While certain words have been edited as language changes over time, most hymnals use the original text translated by Moultrie. Popular Hymnal use spiked in the 1960's and beyond as various denominations published newer hymnals.

Some of you may be wondering why I choose this piece as an Advent Hymn. Traditionally a Holy Communion hymn and suggested for the Christmas season with its portrayal of the majesty at the Incarnation of Christ, this text lends itself to be used during any season.

Not only is it one of my favorites, but this hymn also speaks to me as it reminds me of how connected we are to the body of Saints, both past and present. The 17th Century French Folk Tune, *Picardy*, combined with the powerful lyrics make me pause and wonder at God's love for us, people who do not deserve love.

When do we not tremble and ponder God in God's full glory? When do we not celebrate the *King of Kings, born of Mary*? When does the light not descend upon the darkness?

I firmly believe that while not originally intended for Advent use, this hymn suits itself very well to the long days of waiting, expecting for joy and hope to enter the world. With the birth of Christ, God enters humanity, frailties, and all, and shows us compassion, love, and grace. God reminds us that God is the true sovereign King that wins against the darkness.

Here are the words to meditate upon:

- 1 Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descending
comes full homage to demand.
- 2 King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords in human vesture,
in the body and the blood,
he will give to all the faithful
his own self for heav'nly food.
- 3 Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way;
as the Light of light, descending
from the realms of endless day,
comes, the pow'rs of hell to vanquish,
as the darkness clears away.
- 4 At his feet the six-winged seraph,
cherubim with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry:
"Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!"

Text: Liturgy of St. James; tr. Gerard Moultrie, 1829-1885, alt.

Let us pray: *Sovereign God, as we wait for the wonderful incarnation of your love, remind us to be ever mindful of your light that vanquishes the darkness. Amen.*

Afterword by Pastor Mark: I am so thankful Deacon Susan offered to write about this beautiful hymn. Indeed it can very easily can be an Advent hymn, and Red Mountain's version is on their Advent CD. Both Susan and I looked for song links, and every single one was great (this isn't always the case, as you have discovered other days). But these are all SO GOOD that it was impossible to cull (so I didn't). And one last thing for you Star Trek fans whose favorite character is France native Jean-Luc Picard. Please note that the name of this *French* tune is "*Picardy*."

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence St. Olaf

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0toGzQtAPU>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence King's College Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNdtO-UT3-U>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Duke Chapel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmtqYfRB1wA>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence by Full of Eyes animation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hy3gP5yDc3o>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence College Church in Wheaton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUdzMtVYIZo>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Kin Collective

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWTdLD5w92c>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence LSU Chamber Singers (Gustav Holst arr.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wO2dktv85A>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Stone's Throw Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxKtiR3bUac>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence solo piano with Rick Betts

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fu3w55cJp70>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Manchester Cathedral Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n734FhluvSs>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Red Mountain Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emRLRg-swkM>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Amadeus Choral Symphony

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTzxXhwYUAA>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence John Michael Talbot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6G-9ksdnruw>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Fernando Ortega

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wl4u8lnDQs>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence OCP Session Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QU3-E5mWNg>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Singing Nuns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRclr01F0PM>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Cynthia Clausen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Of0bJrMZGul>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Aly Aleigha

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJsX-9IaeK4>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence Benedictines of St. Mary, Queen of Apostles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVTg0p3uiS4>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Thursday, December 15, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #238

Today, we open our "window" for "Awake, Awake, and Greet the New Morn" (ELW 242)

Of all the writers and composers who have contributed to our hymnal, I know more about Marty Haugen, the living composer of "Awake, Awake" than any other. Okay, maybe I know more about Martin Luther, but I have met Marty Haugen on several occasions, and we share a many mutual friends and acquaintances.

I first discovered Haugen through Holden Village friends and happened to be among those outside the Village to first learn about Haugen's amazing "Holden Vespers '86". It was written at Holden for the Holden Village Community when he was in residence the winter of 1986. "You need to hear this," my friends told me, and I quickly wrote to secure copies for our use in our campus ministry at Purdue (1984-1995).

"Holden Vespers' 86" (later retitled *"Holden Evening Prayer"*) was so well received and loved by everyone in the church that Holden gave over distribution to G.I.A. Publications in Chicago who had already discovered Haugen's talent.

It's hard to be a successful church composer, even if you are talented. With Haugen's skill and Lutheran background, you would think our Lutheran publishers would have picked him up early on. Nope. It was the Catholics through G.I.A who picked up his anthems. It was Pacific Lutheran University (my alma mater) Campus Ministry who commissioned Haugen's wonderful "Now the Feast and Celebration." liturgy. G.I.A. picked that up too. We used this service at St. Paul's for several years in the late 1990's/early 2000's.

Even though the Lutheran publishers were a bit late in coming to recognize Haugen's abilities, his reception certainly became evident with the emergence of *"Evangelical Lutheran Worship"*. Do you know who has more hymns included in this hymnal than Martin Luther (19), Catherine Winkworth (19), John Mason Neale (14) Charles Wesley (10), Fred Pratt Green (12), Johann Cruger (10), Paul Gerhardt (9), or Susan Cherwien (8)?

Answer: Marty Haugen with 20! But what is even more significant is that few of the other listed have written BOTH TEXT and MUSIC. All of Haugen's pieces (words and music) are written by him! This is quite an accomplishment.

Let's talk about *"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn."*

The ELW Hymnal companion quote Haugen explaining the origin of this hymn:

“In 1982” he says, “my family decided to exchange ‘non-material gifts for Christmas. I drew the name of my Aunt, Marie Smedsrud (whose husband Gordon, was at that time camps pastor at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa). ‘*Awake Awake*’ was written as my gift to her that Christmas.”

Haugen originally wrote it as “*a Christmas hymn*” ... but, as there is more room in our repertoire for Advent carols than Christmas carols, it soon would change. In 1986, the same year Haugen wintered at Holden, it became an Advent hymn, a call to wake up and greet the dawning of a new day. The opening words “*Rejoice, Rejoice,*” (also the name of the song) were changed to “*Awake! Awake!*” and the third line of the first stanza was changed from “*now he is born*” to “*soon he is born.*”

Haugen also intended this hymn to work well musically with organ, piano, and/or guitar. It also has wonderful words, written below for our mediation.

Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn

- 1 Awake! Awake, and greet the new morn,
 for angels herald its dawning.
 Sing out your joy, for soon he is born,
 behold! the Child of our longing.
 Come as a baby weak and poor,
 to bring all hearts together,
 he opens wide the heav'nly door
 and lives now inside us forever.

- 2 To us, to all in sorrow and fear,
 Emmanuel comes a-singing,
 his humble song is quiet and near,
 yet fills the earth with its ringing;
 music to heal the broken soul
 and hymns of lovingkindness,
 the thunder of his anthems roll
 to shatter all hatred and blindness.

- 3 In darkest night his coming shall be,
 when all the world is despairing,
 as morning light so quiet and free,
 so warm and gentle and caring.
 Then shall the mute break forth in song,
 the lame shall leap in wonder,

the weak be raised above the strong,
and weapons be broken asunder.

- 4 Rejoice, rejoice, take heart in the night,
though dark the winter and cheerless,
the rising sun shall crown you with light,
be strong and loving and fearless.
Love be our song and love our prayer
and love our endless story;
may God fill ev'ry day we share
and bring us at last into glory.

Text: Marty Haugen, b. 1950

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Let us pray. *Thank you, O God for inspiring Marty Haugen to compose this wonderful Advent/Christmas hymn. So many phrases speak to us in our Advent waiting. Help us to rejoice, take heart in the night, though dark the winter and cheerless, looking for hope in Jesus Christ our Lord. May love be our song and love our prayer and love our endless story. May you, O God fill every day we share and bring us at last into glory. Amen.*

“Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn” by Marty Haugen himself

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESCaxdB5yYw>

“Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn” by GA Virtual

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNs3vKOZyaU>

“Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn” by Sammamish Lutheran Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h75S84fUL2M>

“Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn” by St. Luke’s Lutheran Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LG2jYHNSFS0>

“Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn” Georgetown Lutheran Washington DC with Krystal Waters

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CeLuCbvApE>

“Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn” by JClarke 527 (wherever that is)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Op9Yyh_M4dk

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn" by Brent Hall on Hymns of the Brethren
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rI8aTNzpmE0>

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn" by Ruth Meyers
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyHPR3aLOwo>

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn" by Bridgton UCC
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LAN043-yoE>

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn" by St. Paul's Lutheran Church Glenside PA
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Itfv8dVprzE>

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn" by Our Savior's Lutheran Oconomowoc WI
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKxm6gQEwgQ>

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn" Salem Lutheran Cantonsville MD
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0189_wCJ70

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn" for Guitar and other instruments by Stephen Petrunak
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoPpWIWoDg0>

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn" by Contemporary Christian Music
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m520Y7DBm38>

"Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn" Mark Voris instrumental
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVUd66r-uFo>

and as a bonus, for all of you who have missed *"Holden Evening Prayer"*, here is a link to the service being done at Mayflower Church in Minneapolis led by Marty Haugen himself!!
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOIK-Ecq2ik>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Friday, December 18, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #239

Today, we open our "window" for "He Came Down." (ELW 253)

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (Jn. 6:51 NIV)

I imagine many Lutheran hymnals would have come and gone before anyone would have considered including the simple "He Came Down" in the Advent or any other section. Evangelical Lutheran Worship, however, rightfully has become more open to including hymns from traditions beyond Germany, Scandinavia, or England.

"*He Came Down*" was first discovered by John Bell (b. November 20, 1949), one of the leaders of the Iona Community, an ecumenical Christian community on the Isle of Iona in Scotland. As a place of pilgrimage and renewal, it reminds me a lot of Holden Village. Bell is a Scottish Presbyterian pastor who is also a hymn composer. His best-known hymn included in the ELW is "Will You Come and Follow Me (The Summons ELW 798), which have sung several times over the years.

Bell was at an international conference in Germany in 1986 when a group of Presbyterians from Cameroon broke into "*song and dance*," moving in a counterclockwise circle, "*using their hand to beckon Christ, as it were from heaven to earth.*" The words to the singers were "*traditional*," and the music unknown, though it is believed to be from either Cameroon or Nigeria.

Bell is credited for delivering the song to the wider church. With its simple lyrics and melody, it can be done either by small groups, large choirs, or children's choirs. It answers the simple question "Why did Jesus come down from heaven?" with clear and simple statements, but in a such a spirited way that it makes you want to sing along (and dance, too maybe?). It also lends itself well to harmony.

As we continue to draw closer to Christmas, "He Came Down" is a wonderful little Advent hymn with words and music we can easily remember. It also reminds us of our connection to brothers and sisters in Africa and that little Celtic island in Scotland.

Let us pray. *Thank you, O God, for sending us Jesus that we may have love, light, peace, and joy. May we praise you forevermore. Hallelujah! Amen.*

He Came Down

- 1 He came down that we may have love;
he came down that we may have love;
he came down that we may have love;

hallelujah forevermore.

- 2 He came down that we may have light;
he came down that we may have light;
he came down that we may have light;
hallelujah forevermore.
- 3 He came down that we may have peace;
he came down that we may have peace;
he came down that we may have peace;
hallelujah forevermore.
- 4 He came down that we may have joy;
he came down that we may have joy;
he came down that we may have joy;
hallelujah forevermore.

Text: Cameroon traditional

"He Came Down" by Concordia College Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPjdFi4wz24>

"He Came Down" by Jubilate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLLiMcxOmmE>

"He Came Down" by Cathedral Singer directed by John Bell himself

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pk1-wforsCE>

"He Came Down" Grace Women's Ensemble Edmonds WA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIAsa3fWSPk>

"He Came Down" by Gregory Morisse

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEkjA9xNXP4>

"He Came Down" by Chorus Pro Musica

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PKMuSs_OEs

"He Came Down" by Mari Reyes (also has We are Marching)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpjCB5V6Juk>

"He Came Down" Cambourne Community Gospel Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdYMDrUZQJ8>

"He Came Down" by Andy Hanson and unknown children's choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXjbptPLplg>

"He Came Down" Chet Valley Churches

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXrB500CuCg>

"He Came Down" by Grace Church Madison children's choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg1OHCl5sSk>

"He Came Down" St. Paul Lutheran Grosse Pointe Farms

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrnIftoFauA>

"He Came Down" Santa Fe Women's Ensemble

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9U-ZjHptqk>

And here's a link to a couple versions of Bell's *"The Summons,"* I think it may ring a bell.

"The Summons" (Will You Come and Follow Me?) Notre Dame Folk Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=neUZlClqYzg>

"The Summons" by Rethie van Niekerk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o469PRLdbHU>

And as a bonus, I happened upon a couple of beautiful versions of HYFRODOL, a tune written about earlier looking at the Advent hymn *"Come Thou Long Expected Jesus."*

HYFRODOL on harp by Ray Pool

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRZlzaN1csQ>

HYFRODOL on mountain dulcimer by Gwen Caeli

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOJiK_Q6G0U

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Monday, December 21, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #240

Today, we open our "window" for "Lost in the Night." (ELW 244, LBW 394)

*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. (Ps. 139:11-12 NRS)*

Happy Winter Solstice! Today is that day in the northern hemisphere when day is shortest, and night is longest. It is also the official start of winter.

Two things have drawn me to the hymn today. First are the words, beginning with verse one's *"Lost in the night do the people yet languish, longing for morning the darkness to vanquish, plaintively sighing with hearts full of anguish Will not day come soon? Will not day come soon?"* The second thing is a haunting tune unlike most other hymns.

These words speak clearly to us this year as we have been besieged not only with pandemic darkness, but also all the additional racial and political unrest. All this begs for the resolution of a new day.

If *"Lost in the Night"* seems like an unfamiliar Advent hymn, it may be in part because it had been in the *"Witness"* section of the older green hymnal. More likely it is because not many churches sing this one. Judging from YouTube searches, hardly anyone but the Lutherans have recorded it, and then it is mostly done by college or church choirs and not as a Sunday morning *"Hymn of the Day."* I imagine its serious tone is a barrier for those looking for cheerier songs before Christmas.

It was interesting to learn that the melody of this hymn originated in what was Karelia, Finland, but now is part of northeast Russia. It was first published in 1857 in a collection of Finnish Folk melodies. At that time, it was a Finnish love song (inspired by *"Romeo and Juliet,"* I wonder?).

In researching this in the *"Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship"* (Augsburg Fortress 2010), author Paul Westermeyer described the hymn like no other hymn in ELW. What he said is worth quoting, even though it is a bit technical side.

"No other tune in Evangelical Lutheran Worship starts like this one, with an upward minor sixth – which, when coupled to this text, helps to explain the haunting quality. There may be no other such hymn tune in common usage. The minor sixth comes back in the third phrase as the melody proceeds with a slight modification from the first phrase. The second phrase compresses the minor sixth to a perfect fourth and spins out of the same melodic material. It then is balanced in the last line by a fundamentally stepwise refrain-like musical conclusion that settles on the low tonic."

Now if the above description sounds boring, let me remind you of the words you already happily sing in the first verse of Leonard Cohen's extremely popular "Halleluia.".... *"Now I've heard there was a secret chord, that David played, and it pleased the Lord. But you don't really care for music, do you?... It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth, the minor falls, the major lifts, the baffled king composes Halleluia.... Halleluia... Halleluia..."*

Indeed "Lost in the Night" has a haunting melody. The deeply meaning words are well paired with the tune and come (as translations) through Olav Lee (May 29, 1859- May 22, 1943). Born in Norway, Lee came to the United States in 1877 and studied at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, Capital University (Lutheran) in Columbus, Ohio, and the University of Wisconsin. Ordained in 1886, he served as a pastor in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin before teaching at Augustana College in Canton, South Dakota, and St. Olaf in Northfield, Minnesota. In addition to writing several books, he translated hymns for the distinguished F. Melius Christiansen and the St. Olaf Choir. This is his only translation in the ELW.

We know less about the hymn composer than translator, but we know the text was first written for this tune by Olga Maria Kullgren, who said about this hymn, *"it was written for an all-Scandinavian mission meeting held in Gothenburg, Sweden, September 6-8, 1885, and printed for wider use later that year."*

Take a moment now to ponder the depth of these thoughtful words of people looking for hope during those long nights. And then enjoy the videos.

Lost in the Night

- 1 Lost in the night do the people yet languish,
 longing for morning the darkness to vanquish,
 plaintively sighing with hearts full of anguish.
 Will not day come soon? Will not day come soon?

- 2 Must we be vainly awaiting the morrow?
 Shall those who have light no light let us borrow,
 giving no heed to our burden of sorrow?
 Will you help us soon? Will you help us soon?

- 3 Sorrowing wand'ers, in darkness yet dwelling,
 dawned has the day of a radiance excelling,
 death's deepest shadows forever dispelling.
 Christ is coming soon! Christ is coming soon!

- 4 Light o'er the land of the needy is beaming;
rivers of life through its deserts are streaming,
bringing all peoples a Savior redeeming.
Come and save us soon! Come and save us soon!

Text: Nordic hymn; tr. Olav Lee, 1859-1943, alt.

Text © 1932 Augsburg Publishing House, admin. Augsburg Fortress.

Let us also pray. *We've had some pretty dark days this year, O God, even during the Summer Solstice. The global pandemic has caused such interruption to our lives and livelihoods, and has introduced so much fear and anger. That coupled with already high tensions in many other areas, and the predictions of a long winter ahead, make us long for the peace of your presence among us. Come to us now, we pray, and bring us hope for a new and better day. We pray for healing. We pray for a new determination to focus on what is most important, our life with you. We know our life with you is also in community, so we pray you will strengthen our communities, and center them, we ask in your word and witness. In Jesus' name. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.*

Lost in the Night by St Olaf Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2_7XUdAabM

Lost in the Night Christmas at St. Olaf

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=II5unZEVCM>

Lost in the Night by Resurrection Lutheran Church

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpQcB_Su0YM

Lost in the Night Concordia Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXycBHEzLno>

Lost in the Night Concordia Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOunsOLf8dg>

Lost in the Night by the Singers under Matthew Culloton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-ogSA33YGQ>

Lost in the Night Grace Lutheran Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qocu98kmJIE>

Lost in the Night by Cathedral of St. Raymond Joliet IL

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JS8U91ud520>

Lost in the Night by Maestro25

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxOB18YvU14>

Lost in the Night Fairfax Choral Society

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywd8bEWR4to>

Lost in the Night guitar and soloist by Glenn Livengood and Rachel Kibbler

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyYcQaly4c0>

Lost in the Night guitar and soloist by Ryan Chimzar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJp8RBefvfw>

Lost in the Night (contemporary) by Lutheran Church Musicians

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kqJh6d0pAs>

and *Lost in the Night* by our jazzy synthesized Halifax Lutheran guy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLvCSREoa2U>

...and as a bonus, here's a song I just discovered called "*Visitation Song*" a new version of the Magnificat by Aly Aleigha. Since we have just followed Advent 4, Mary's Sunday, I wanted to share it. Just wonderful!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjRTybbGXqQ>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Tuesday, December 22, 2020 not by Pastor Mark Opgrand **but by Deacon Susan Jackson #240**

Today, we open our "window" for "Savior of the Nations Come."

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Tuesday, December 22, 2020 by Deacon Susan Jackson #241

Today we open our window for "Savior of the Nations, Come" (ELW 263, LBW 28)

"For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2: 30-32)

Hymnody is often difficult to ascertain as texts disappear, are translated, and are rearranged to various tunes over the course of the Church's history. There are very few hymns that survive the test of time and translations like "Savior of the Nations, Come."

As one of his 12 hymns, this text is not only attributed to 4th Century Ambrose of Milan but is also one of the oldest surviving hymns of the Church. Known in Latin as "*Veni, Redemptor gentium*" (Come, Savior of the Nations), this text was written sometime after Ambrose became Bishop in 374 and was used as Gregorian chant in worship life. While Ambrose was passionate about the use of hymnody in the worship life of the Church he did not write tune/ music himself and wrote only text. His office most likely supported chant and tune but he himself did not create it.

As the Governor of Liguria and Aemilia, Ambrose was in the process of Catechesis and was not yet baptized, when elected to be the next Bishop of Milan. After baptism and installation as Bishop of Milan, Ambrose defended the Church against paganism and other controversies, tried to cultivate congregational participation in prayer and worship, and led catechesis instruction to those in the process of converting to the Church.

Hymns attributed to his time were developed into the "Old Hymnal" but it is difficult to ascertain which texts were solely written by Ambrose or attributed to other writers, such as Hilary of Poitiers. No matter the authorship of all hymns in the Old Hymnal, we know clearly that "Savior of the Nations, Come" is attributed to Ambrose due to the mentions of Augustine (372, who happened to be one of Ambrose's converts), Pope Celestine (430) and other manuscripts of writers at the time.

Translation of the text into German as *Nomm Komm Der Heiden Heiland* by Martin Luther and composition of the tune by Johann Walter gave way for various English translations to be done by Martin L. Setz and William M. Reynolds and is currently found as #263 in our *Evangelical Lutheran Book of Worship*. German and English translations changed the wording and tune, but the message still comes strong that we are inviting Jesus, the Savior of the World, to come into the world.

Ambrose's original text was a defense against erroneous claims about Jesus' nature. At the time, Arianism was running amuck in the church as people claimed that Jesus was not fully divine. As Bishop of Milan, Ambrose's text showed people where the Church stood: Jesus is both true God and true Man.

This Advent hymn takes us on Jesus' journey through birth, death, and resurrection. The "Come" portion of the title reminds us that Christ came to us as human, that one day Christ will come again, and that Christ comes to us here and now in the present.

This is a poignant Advent hymn as we wait the next couple days to celebrate the majestic awe found in the birth of a small baby boy who will one day save the world. This boy will defeat darkness, will defeat death, and will show us how light can shine brightly. For this, we can sing praise eternally!

Savior of the Nations, Come

- 1 Savior of the nations, come;
virgin's son, make here your home.
Marvel now, O heav'n and earth:
God has chosen such a birth.
- 2 Not by human flesh and blood,
but the mystic Breath of God,
was the Word of God made flesh,
fruit of woman, blossom fresh.
- 3 Wondrous birth—oh, wondrous child—
from his throne, a virgin mild!
Very God, and Mary's son,
eager now his race to run!
- 4 From God's heart the Savior speeds,
back to God his pathway leads;
out to vanquish death's command,
back to reign at God's right hand.
- 5 Now your manger, shining bright,
hallows night with newborn light.
Night cannot this light subdue;
let our faith shine ever new.
- 6 Praise we sing to Christ the Lord,
virgin's son, incarnate Word!
To the holy Trinity
praise we sing eternally!

Text: attr. Ambrose of Milan, 340-397; Martin Luther, 1483-1546; tr. hymnal version
Text © 2006 Augsburg Fortress.

Let us pray. *God, we give thanks for the many gifts you bestow to us, but especially that of a small baby boy born many years ago that grew up into a man who followed your will. Blow your spirit into our hearts with peace and love as we continue our journey of faith with you. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.*

For your listening pleasure, "Savior the Nation, Come":
by University Choir Munchen and Munich Brass
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSrl2MGtHcA>

by Concordia Publishing
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZEK58XRgUA>

St Paul Lutheran Austin
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AwBIhRM28w>

Mt. Olivette Lutheran Minneapolis
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-JMrPLQnQI>

by Cardiphonia
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol78eWbhE1o>

by Koine
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsNPi71O7FI>

by Derek Remes at St. Olaf
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3UqdNAiYWc>

St. Paul's In Your Home Advent Song Calendar for Wednesday, December 23, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #241

Today, we open our "window" for "Joy to the World" (ELW 267, LBW 39)

I heard North Carolina Bishop Tim Smith observe recently that *"Joy to the World,"* arguably one of the top ten most popular Christmas carols OF ALL TIME, has alternatively been for us an Advent hymn and Christmas hymn. In the old 1958 Red Hymnal, it was the last hymn for Advent (SBH 15). In the 1978 Green Hymnal, it was the first hymn in the Christmas section (LBW 39). In the current "Cranberry Hymnal it is back to being the last hymn in the Advent section (ELW 267).

Because Joy to the World has this Advent history, the die hard *"We can't sing Christmas hymns in Advent"* worship leaders could always select that one to appease the *"Why do we have to wait to sing our favorite Christmas carols?"* people.

Now here's today's fun fact. *"Joy to the World"* was **not** originally written for either Advent or Christmas! Yikes! Do you mean this could be sung at any time in the church year?

Yep. *"Joy to the World"* is the second half of a paraphrase of Psalm 98 from a hymnbook called *"Psalms of David"*, published in 1719 by the prolific hymn writer Isaac Watts (July 17, 1674-November 25, 1748). Watts is considered by scholars to be the *"godfather of English hymnody."* He wrote over six hundred hymns and psalm paraphrases. His *"Psalms of David,"* exemplified by *"Joy to the World"* shows he clearly interpreted the Psalms through a New Testament lens. The result is a powerful proclamation of the gospel.

Watt's work, however, was not immediately well received. He was part of a movement in England and the Americas broadly called *"Dissenters."* This included many offshoots of the Church of England. Following in his father's footsteps (who had earlier been jailed for his own dissenting views), Watts attended what was called the *"Non-conformist Academy of Stoke Newington."*

Following that period, Watts continued his hymn writing while serving as assistant and later senior minister at *"Dissenting Mark Lane Congregation"* in London. He served there for the rest of his life, writing hymns and over sixty books on a variety of topics, including astronomy, geography, and logic. So well received were his books that some were even used at Yale and Harvard Universities in the Americas.

It is hard to imagine *"Joy to the World"* sung to any other tune but the popular *"ANTIOCH."* However, more than a century passed before *"Joy to the World"* became paired with ANTIOCH. Composer Lowell Mason (January 8, 1792-August 11, 1872) crafted this piece from a variety of

sources. It drew from an emerging popular style of writing in the Americas called “*fuging tunes*.” Mason was not a big fan of this style, but it sure worked with “*Joy to the World*.”

Now, all these years later, can you imagine a Christmas Eve service without “*Joy to the World*.” It’s great for Advent, too, as it really helps “every heart prepare him room,” even when there is no room in the inn.

I am certain that of all the Advent hymns we have looked at these past weeks, this is where including lyrics is unnecessary. I will do so anyway, remembering how there is a lost tune out there before ANTIOCH. Lowell Mason let go of that tune and had only the words before him when he started putting new notes with them. Now it is such a classic that I doubt any worship leaders would ever suggest, “Oh let’s sing this to that other tune.” Nah. Antioch’s “*Joy to the World*” is sacred canon!

Joy to the World

- 1 Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her king;
let ev'ry heart prepare him room
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.
- 2 Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
Let all their songs employ,
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.
- 3 No more let sin and sorrow grow
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.
- 4 He rules the world with truth and grace
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness

and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Text: Isaac Watts, 1674-1748

Let us pray. *O Wondrous God, bring your joy to the world this Christmas. We thank you that Isaac Watts could take from Psalm 98 "Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy 9 at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity" and make such a powerful witness for the coming of Jesus Christ our Lord. This year, especially we pray for joy for the world as we celebrate the gift of Jesus among us. Bless us all, Lord Jesus, with the wonders of your love. Amen.*

Joy to the World by Celtic Women

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDmIddF7DfQ>

Joy to the World George Fox University

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oOwa0CWVVQ>

Joy to the World by Libera Irish Boys Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IH8A86FLs0>

Joy to the World Gabriel Trumpet Ensemble and Mormon Tabernacle Choir and

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r3VVMUhAxU>

Joy to the World by Acapeldredge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mnC8zMiwaQ>

Joy to the World by Pentatonix

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXAWz1jwCow>

Joy to the World Pentatonix version by Joyful 6 siblings from India (good for you, kids!)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIEaR_xeU4c

.... and a bonus from Joyful 6 (not Joy to the World but Taize Chants for hope)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lu1E96Ahm40>

Voctave (with For Unto Us A Child Is Given)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nziWgvOPj4>

Ode to Joy to the World by Piano Guys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyVEKsNFDjw>

by E Power Biggs on organ with ensemble

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgV8YwsDwkM>

Joy to the World by Home Free Live

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCWbYNeQVng>

Joy to the World by Home Free Studio Version

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCWbYNeQVng>

Joy to the World by Emmaus Road Worship, recorded yesterday in England

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mMuI962fbl>

Joy to the World Pine View Valley Handbell Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mh6vyghzmM0>

Joy to the World Global Praise Mission Handbells

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmZCS8aLbos>

Joy to the World London Brass special Christmas Concert 2020

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0zdLAor4IE>

**St. Paul's In Your Home Song Advent/Christmas Calendar for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2020
#242**

Today we open our almost finished Advent Calendar to Silent Night (ELW281, LBW 65)

Here is the hymn synonymous with Christmas Eve and the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service. *"Silent Night. Holy Night. All is Calm All is Bright"* (or *"Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht! Alles schläft, einsam wacht"* in the original German).

If you've been reading these devotions regularly (or even occasionally) by now it's Christmas Eve and I suspect you barely have time for a reflection, much less opportunity to ponder the words or listen to the links (though I will say YouTube has yielded some wonderful performances of this song).

The story of the song is well known, and actually true, though it sounds very much like it could be a legend. On Christmas Eve in 1818 St. Nikolaus Church on Oberndorf, Germany was having a crisis. The organ broke down. Joseph Mohr (December 11, 1792-December 4, 1848), the assistant priest was managing the crisis while the senior priest was ... (probably preparing his Christmas homily?)

So what do you do when your organ is out? Well, you ask the organist, *"What are we going to do, Franz?"* (if your organist is named Franz, anyway). Happily, Franz Gruber was a parish musician with many talents. He could also write music... and play guitar. Mohr asked it was possible to put something together for two voices, choir, and guitar (which Gruber played). The rest is history, and quite an amazing history at that.

It was almost *"The Little Song that Could,"* as it was not snapped up by a big publishing house anticipating two hundred years later that every Christmas Eve service and Television service would be playing it. For twenty years, it became popular as a *"Tyrolian folksong,"* with touring families and soloists performing it.

In 1838 it was at last published in the *"Katholisches Gesang-und Gebetbuch"* (Leipzig, 1838). I used Google translate to learn this means *"Catholic Chant (or song) and Prayer Book."* I had always hoped it was another great German Lutheran hymn, but all of Germany did not "go Lutheran," as we know.

No matter if this had continued simply with guitar and two voices, or with a large choir with symphonic accompaniment, *"Silent Night"* is one of Christmas's joyful treasures. Granted, it may romanticize what might not have been such an actual "silent" night, with shepherds and angels and animals in an out of the manger, but as we all join in chorus *"Son of God, love's pure light, radiant beams from your holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord, at your birth,*

Jesus, Lord, at your birth." we all take pause (with not a dry eye in the house). Look at how God has come to us!

I suspect when you ponder these words, it may be impossible to do so without the melody accompanying you. That is to be expected with this hymn. Blessings.

Silent Night, Holy Night!
Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht!

GERMAN

Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht!
Alles schläft, einsam wacht
nur das traute, hochheilige Paar.
Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,
schlaf in himmlischer Ruh,
schlaf in himmlischer Ruh.

ENGLISH

- 1 Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.
- 2 Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight;
glories stream from heaven afar,
heav'nly hosts sing, alleluia!
Christ, the Savior, is born!
Christ, the Savior, is born!
- 3 Silent night, holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
radiant beams from your holy face,
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at your birth,
Jesus, Lord, at your birth.

Text: Joseph Mohr, 1792-1849; tr. John F. Young, 1820-1885

Let us pray. *We thank you O God for the hymns and songs of Advent. For all the saints who formed words and created melodies to proclaim your good news, we give thanks. Bless your world with hope and joy, especially during these difficult times. Bless all who suffer, and bring us all healing. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Silent Night by King's Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILFUybscYvs>

Silent Night by Winchester Cathedral Boys Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRZOv31n1sY>

Silent Night by Libera Children's Choir at Royal Albert Hall

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PNzMy3lzAA>

Silent Night by Concordia College Choir Christmas Program

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_5J8UMz9fw

Silent Night by Vienna Boys Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKvKMgR8H7k>

Silent Night by Andre Rieu

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBJY3AxtHM>

Silent Night by Andrea Bocelli in Caverns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rfed6pJ8TPs>

Silent Night by John Michael Talbot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhcgdFkvgX4>

Silent Night by by Muan Valte

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORpMnk8PkVA>

Silent Night by Red Mountain Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnuGToRG4BQ>

Silent Night by Pentatonix

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sme8N2pzRx8>

Silent Night by Home Free w/ violin

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AICTG4b_teY

Silent Night by Boyce Avenue

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9N7leomAGUs>

Silent Night by Tritonia Music (violin, piano, cello)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPA3wEnNr5Y>

Crossing Community Church

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6_i6pmX0Fw

Silent Night by Martina McBride

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7x6jYKDXOQ>

Let us pray.

St. Paul's In Your Home December 25, 2020 by Pastor Mark Opgrand #243

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."(Lk. 2:10-12 NRS)

Merry Christmas! Today's the day.

Now that we've finished our Advent Song Calendar, what shall we open today?

Since Advent began, we have looked at eighteen of twenty-eight hymns from "*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*" (the "ELW.") I have most certainly enjoyed researching and pondering the ones we "opened." (and Deacon Susan too.)

So what now, of the "*Christmas Season*" hymns? If we opened one hymn each day from the hymnal's "*Christmas section*," it would take a month to review all thirty-one. We already cannot squeeze them all into the "*official*" Christmas season because it only lasts at most two Sundays and twelve days (hence the "*Partridge in a pear tree twelve days of Christmas song*".) It is probably a good thing that many, in their Christmas carol listening, have gotten an advent seasonal head start (even while not displacing our Advent hymns).

Here's my idea for today. Instead of picking one hymn to review this Christmas Day, I am going to list **all thirty-one hymns** in the ELW Christmas section, and link a recording to each. I will not be able to include history commentary, but like presents, today we are more interested in what is actually in the package rather than the story about how Aunt Beulah found it online for a great price.

So with grateful hearts for the gift of music and all the words and melodies that praise God, here are the hymns. I wonder how many you know, and how many you've never hear of.

Not surprisingly, the first one is from good old Martin Luther.

ELW 268 "*From Heaven Above.*" (words and music by M. Luther)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNx81zw6WWg> by Erin Bode

ELW 269 "*Once in Royal David's City*"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNzgeSUB4fk> by Libera

ELW 270 "*Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.*"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z67EXPODXO8> by Acapeldredge

ELW 271 *"I Am So Glad Each Christmas Eve"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiyvZcKpppE> by Marty Haugen

ELW 272 *"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3YHODperFM> by Alex Stephens

ELW 273 *"All My Heart Again Rejoices"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Qr5-GzYrew> by Heritage Church

ELW 274 *"On Christmas Night"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-TZ76wONPs>

ELW 275 *"Angels, from the Realms of Glory"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELjgFKACcdQ> The Piano Guys with David Archuleta

ELW 276 *"Infant Holy, Infant Lowly"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHGQcc4HHTU> by Chris Rupp

ELW 277 *"Away in a Manger"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjtYtBGrP6Y> by Pentatonix

ELW 278 *"Away in a Manger"* (Cradle Song version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQVVVm0xool>

ELW 279 *"O Little Town of Bethlehem"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5hHUPwjTQQ> Living Stones Quartet

ELW 280 *"Midnight Stars Make Bright the Skies"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hd36CVIJLeQ> Augsburg Fortress

ELW 281 *"Silent Night, Holy Night"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbhxZOOXLvU> by King's Singers

ELW 282 *"It Came Upon A Midnight Clear"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fv7oIH3HPAY> by Matthew Culloton

ELW 283 *"O Come All Ye Faithful"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XI2c9yptr4U> by the Five Strings

ELW 284 *"Twas in the Moon of Wintertime"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OyJJa7J-Y> by Emmanuel Shall Come to You

ELW 285 *"Peace Came to Earth"*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_WgyPllqM0 Concordia

ELW 286 *"Your Little Ones, Dear Lord"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YokRLxfJ5D4> by Matthew Culloton

ELW 287 *"Let All Together Praise Our God"*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXUv4_tiG_8 by the Elm Ensemble

ELW 288 *"Good Christian Friends Rejoice"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkCjddxp1g4> the Wissmann Family

ELW 289 *"Angels We Have Heard on High"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7MTjm6UYA> by Libera

ELW 290 *"Go Tell It on the Mountains"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udFpRMUSv6g> by MMC89VEVO

ELW 291 *"Let Our Gladness Have No End."*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udFpRMUSv6g> by Sara Groves

ELW 292 *"Love Has Come"* (tune of Bring a Torch, Jeannette Isabella.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udFpRMUSv6g>

ELW 293 *"That Boy-Child of Mary"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diDnFSG-2vM> by Augsburg

ELW 294 *"In the Bleak Midwinter"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zAgEt6sCMA> by Sissel Kyrkjebo

ELW 295 *"Of the Father's Love Begotten"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fpsj25M1Qdl> by Michael Lining

ELW 296 *"What Child is This?"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1cfCEzniEg> by Josh Groban

ELW 297 *"Jesus, What a Wonderful Child"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1cfCEzniEg> by Mariah Carey

ELW 298 *"The Bells of Christmas"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2VNSx7AlyQ> Norwegian version was the best I could find

ELW 299 *"Cold December Flies Away"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaCrEq8PWFU> by Jubilate Vocal Ensemble

ELW 300 *"The First Noel"* (Does it seem odd that the **last** Christmas hymn is The **First** Noel?)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVtNXp56kiQ> by Lady Antebellum

A final word. With a little help from my friends, I have, since March 18, 2020 sent out two hundred forty-three devotions totaling more than two hundred twenty thousand words with well over a thousand links to songs. I am grateful for all your encouragement and feedback. I intend to continue writing and posting, but I will resume after a brief twelve days of Christmas break. Look for all new devotions starting the day of Epiphany, January 6, 2021. Blessings.

And here ends Volume One.

**Volume Two begins on
The Day of Epiphany
January 6, 2021**